The New Americanist is an interdisciplinary journal publishing scholarly work on the United States and the Americas broadly considered. We are especially interested in work which includes a global perspective, introduces new critical approaches, and proposes theoretical frameworks to the study of the US. We welcome contributions from scholars from around the world and across the humanities and the social sciences.

If you are interested in contributing, please submit a 250-word abstract and 200-word biographical note to newamericanistjournal@gmail.com. Completed articles of a 6000–8000 word length based on accepted abstracts will be subjected to peer review. The New Americanist comes out twice yearly in association with the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw. Please submit previously unpublished work only. All submissions will be subject to a double-blind peer review. The New Americanist is always seeking book reviews and commentary. Please contact us if you are interested in contributing.

Printed in 150 copies
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Editorial Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Kelly Budruweit&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;A Vaccine for Bigotry: The Limits of Uncertainty in N.K. Jemisin’s Response to Omelas&lt;/i&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Benjamin D. Crace&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Hillbillies at the End of the World: An Appalachian Apocalyptic Poetic&lt;/i&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Angelica Maria DeAngelis&lt;br&gt;“I Guess I Was a Good Mother After All, Huh?”:&lt;br&gt;(Eco)Feminism’s Unfinished Work in Diane Cook’s&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;The New Wilderness&lt;/i&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>Rebecca L. Gross&lt;br&gt;‘Watchmen’ and ‘Hunters’: Reclaiming Black and Jewish Bodies in Contemporary American Superhero Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
<td>Nicole Lowman&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Trump’s American in Black and White: Palahniuk’s Not-So-Far-Fetched Ethnostates in Adjustment Day&lt;/i&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>129</td>
<td>Lois Leveen&lt;br&gt;&lt;i&gt;Black Lives Mirror: Reflections on White Anti-Racist Activism in 2020&lt;/i&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159</td>
<td>Contributors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The theme for this issue of *The New Americanist* – “Pandemic: Race. Literature. Politics.” – was conceived during the pandemic, its authors wrote their articles under the pressures produced by that pandemic, and the reviewers and staff at the journal worked under those pressures as well. In addition to highlighting these troubles, I want to heartily thank everyone who played a role in seeing this issue through. We are calling this issue “Pandemic: Race. Literature. Politics.” The pieces you will find here variously address the numerous crises and tragedies that have befallen the US in the last few years, and it is the hope at *The New Americanist* that the insights offered here will generate more critical thinking over events which are very much still active and in process. Please take the time to read them all carefully.

We are proud to report that as of 2023, *The New Americanist* will be published by Edinburgh University Press. Starting from then, all future issues of *The New Americanist* will only be available on the Edinburgh University Press platform. We will be restructuring our editorial board, and we hope with this partnership we will be able to expand our audience and continue to successfully solicit high-quality scholarship. More information will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available.
ABSTRACT
This article interprets how N.K. Jemisin’s “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” (2018) responds to Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas” (1973). Jemisin’s story addresses the present political context in the United States by treating bigotry as a disease of information, and it has a clarifying effect in relation to the political uncertainties that have enabled the dismissal of reality as “fake news.” As such, Jemisin’s work also requires a re-assessment of the literary-political value of uncertainty. The interpretation begins by re-framing the literary value of uncertainty. The next section applies this re-framing to political fantasy by appealing to Kathryn Hume’s conceptualization of fantasy as more or less certain in its responses to reality and Fredric Jameson’s statements about the necessarily uncertain politics of utopia. However, the crux of the argument depends on the ethical touchstones of Judith Butler’s The Force of Non-Violence (2020) and discussions of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism. These frameworks enable an understanding of the story as a kind of vaccine for internalized bigotry.

Key Words: N.K. Jemisin; Ursula Le Guin; utopia; Afrofuturism; politics; ethics; fantasy
We have been living in a time of uncertainty. Uncertainty in regard to truth, as well as uncertainty in regard to the future. Even prior to the beginning of the COVID pandemic, cultural commentators have continually remarked about the fracturing of society into silos of interpretive communities, information wars and a ‘post-truth’ society. In the United States, the election of Donald J. Trump heightened the awareness of an interpretive vulnerability that could be exploited through the spread of false narratives, particularly through social media.

And then COVID hit, and the possibility of certainty appeared to recede even further as unknowns multiplied. Meanwhile, the Black Lives Matter movement resurfaced with the shocking video depicting the death of George Floyd. These two situations are related. They both necessitate urgent responses to the present in a way that will protect the future. Moreover, the analogy of an ‘infection’ can also apply to information. The George Floyd video is an example, if ever there was one, of ‘going viral.’ And the notion of ‘information warfare’ also is not so different from biological warfare, even though the ‘infection’ occurs in the mind instead of the body.

Along with the analogy of infection, the notion of vaccine is also fascinating in this context. Like the viral infections they defend against, vaccines can also make one (temporarily) sick. They introduce an element similar to the virus, so that the body can recognize and defend against it.

One of my objectives in this article is to emphasize the importance of maintaining the distinction between a viral infection and a vaccine, between what sickens and what enlivens. These thoughts have been inspired by N.K. Jemisin’s “The Ones Who Stay and Fight.” Although this story was published in 2018, prior to the pandemic and the death of George Floyd, Jemisin’s work exemplifies science fiction’s weird ability to predict the present.

“The Ones Who Stay and Fight” is also an attempt to resolve the ethical conundrum of Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas” (1973), and specifically the unequal distribution of suffering that logically results from the utilitarian assumption that capitalism will maximize the greatest good for the greatest number. Instead of the single child being forced to suffer in Le Guin’s story, Jemisin limits suffering to those who are “infected” by the thought that some lives matter more than others. Furthermore, whereas in Omelas, the solution to the capitalist utilitarian bind remains up to the imagination, Jemisin’s Um-Helat insists on the ability to imagine, and to participate in creating, a world without the unnecessary suffering of bigotry.
My interpretation begins by reframing the literary value of uncertainty. The next section applies this reframing to political fantasy by appealing to Kathryn Hume’s conceptualization of fantasy as more or less certain in its responses to reality and Fredric Jameson’s statements about the necessarily uncertain politics of utopia. However, the crux of the argument relies on the ethical touchstones of Judith Butler’s The Force of Non-Violence (2020) and discussions of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism. These frameworks enable an understanding of the story as a kind of vaccine for internalized bigotry.

Reframing the Literary-Political Value of the Certainty of Uncertainty
In responding to a story from 1973, Jemisin revives the spirit of political science fiction from that period. There is a difference, however, between the two moments of publication. In terms of literary history, the political writing of the 1960s and 70s was followed by theories of postmodernism, (post)structuralism, and deconstruction. To varying degrees, these theories cast doubt on what is knowable in the process of literary interpretation.

The move towards uncertainty (or doubt) may be said to have begun in earnest with William Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), and with the incorporation of Freudian theories of the unconscious into literary criticism. Here, Empson defines ambiguity as “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.”\(^1\) This is not the same, however, as doubt or uncertainty. The last (seventh) type is taken to be the most ambiguous, but it is also the clearest form of communication as it imagines a direct correlative in the mind of the writer: “[T]he last type of the series, as it is the most ambiguous that can be conceived, occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer’s mind.”\(^2\) Empson makes these claims by drawing on Freud’s theories of dream analysis to uncover unconscious ambivalences in the minds of writers.

As Anthony Ossa-Richardon notes, this is decidedly different from deconstructionist theories. Ossa-Richardon explains that Empson placed ambiguity between the “twin poles” of doubt and plurality,\(^3\) and “the New Critics emphasized that their concern was the plenty in Empsonian ambiguity, not the doubt.”\(^4\) However, “The Anglo-American critics who absorbed deconstruction in the 1970s and 1980s” reversed the emphasis
to bring doubt to the foreground. According to Ossa-Richardson, what disappeared in this period was the regard for “the poet’s intention,” whereas, for Empson, the uncertain experiences of readers and writers do not prevent the critic from endeavoring to be certain about what is being communicated and why.

Interestingly, Ossa-Richardson also describes ambiguity as a kind of “infection” that can be corrected through the surgical intervention of analysis. He notes, “the virtue of the Empsonian scalpel is that it does not stop when it reaches live tissue; it keeps probing, lest any secret infection stay buried. It hurts in the short term—ambiguity always hurts, or it is not ambiguity, but comforts in the long,” and what emerges in the final chapter of Seven Types is “the idea of critic as comforter.” Ossa-Richardson implies that this comforting role of the critic may be important to revive given that modernity “has unfastened all certainties [...]. Over the past decade or two that plurality of perspectives has come to justify widespread political nihilism, total doubt: the truth of nothing and the permission of all, to paraphrase a line made famous by Nietzsche.”

Thus an appreciation of ambiguity in the Empsonian sense may help to avoid the certainty of political nihilism.

The infection of doubt does appear to have spread across political lines, in the sense of doubt about whether politics is possible or effective, as well as reactions against ‘the system’ from both the left and the right. In literature, these uncertainties have been counterbalanced by a faith in critique, in what Eve Sedgwick identifies as a paranoid reader’s “faith in exposure.” In my view, the problem with critique is that it places the critic in a position of mastery over the text and over culture. Instead of reproducing this position of mastery, I would like to emphasize the post-critical, pragmatic, reconstructive modes of reading that might allow for acknowledgement of the act of reading as vulnerable and open, and the need to maintain that openness when encountering texts that are curative as opposed to sickening.

Although the New Critics tended to assume a white, male, cisgender, ablest point of view, it may be possible to repurpose their tools with the aim of affirming communications that do not begin with these assumptions. As Lisa Dowdall points out, Jemisin has struggled against accusations of ‘literary affirmative action,’ and those accusations were “not a matter of taste, or even of literary value, but of overt racism.” At the same time, I would like to affirm the literary value of Jemisin’s work, and part of that affirmation involves describing what this story is trying to communicate. Moreover, I would position myself as a student and Jemisin as a teacher,
A Vaccine for Bigotry

emphasizing the didactic components of this act of communication. As a white person, there are culturally-inscribed limits to what I can see and know, and so it is curative to learn from Jemisin’s work.

“Comforting” Fantasy and the Difficulty of Imagining Utopia

If a pragmatic view of communication affords the opportunity to revise the norms associated with literary value, and especially the ones that settle on uncertainty, then fantasy provides an even further opportunity, as a location to work out the divergences in multiple approaches to reality. At a time when people seem bound up in their own private worlds, political fantasy is a space for valuing, exploring, and refining the imagination.

In 1984, Kathryn Hume described the different approaches to reality within fantasy literature. Hume describes four basic approaches, on two spectrums. I have charted them below (Fig. 1).

There is the spectrum, here represented vertically, of engagement/disengagement from reality. And then there is the horizontal spectrum of what is disturbing/comforting. In what follows, I want to focus particularly on the horizontal axis. The disturbing/comforting divide is not about an emotional feeling of consolation. Here, “comforting” refers to texts that present clear messages about reality. Meanwhile, “disturbing” implies that the meanings remain indeterminate, open-ended, ambiguous. In short, the horizontal axis represents the degree of certainty expressed by the text about how the world works or how it should work.

Fig. 1. Chart that I created based on Kathryn Hume, Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature (New York: Methuen, 1984).
Both Le Guin and Jemisin fall within the upper-righthand corner, the “literature of revision,” which includes utopian and dystopian writing (fig. 1). These texts engage with reality, and they do it in a way that offers the comfort of clear visions not only for how the world is, but also for how it should be. In Hume’s schematic, this type of literature can also be described as “didactic,” which leaves it open to critique among literary scholars. Hume points out that didactic literature “is often accused of being bad literature. It cannot afford serious ambiguity without undercutting its own aims,” and as a result, it “seems oversimple.”\textsuperscript{11} The tendency towards reductive oversimplification has also been an important question in utopian studies, which have come to be defined by the difficulty of imagining utopia and the need for multiple heterotopias.

In the context of postmodernism and late capitalism, Fredric Jameson has offered perhaps the most influential definition of utopia, not as a representation of a specific perfect world or future, but rather as a desire, a mental process that remains open. According to Jameson, utopian thought responds to the disappointed political hopes of the sixties with “a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all.”\textsuperscript{12} As such, Jameson designates utopia as a space of pure thought.

In “The Politics of Utopia,” Jameson defines utopia as “most authentic when we cannot imagine it. Its function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future...so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined.”\textsuperscript{13} As Peter Fitting notes, by “abandoning the consideration of the utopia in terms of its ability to portray an alternative, we are apparently left with only its critical and negative dimension.”\textsuperscript{14} For Jameson, the indeterminacy of utopia is the quality that enables it to function as a liberating mental operation. By negating the systems of the present, utopian thought re-opens the capacity to imagine the past and the future.

Le Guin was among the writers who, in the 1960s and 70s, began to offer “ambiguous utopias” as possible solutions. Instead of a perfect world, these authors imagined almost-perfect worlds as thought experiments. By the time Jemisin published her collection in 2018, however, the contagion of doubt had given rise to a divisive politics of individuals apparently living in entirely separate realities. And so, Jemisin is not content to have her readers simply thinking about change, nor is she concerned with preserving the idea of a “pure” utopia. Instead, Jemisin isolates the type of change that would lead to a “postcolonial utopia.”
The Complacency of Uncertainty in Le Guin
In order to illustrate this hypothesis about indeterminacy versus clarity and the pragmatism of Jemisin’s utopian thinking, I will begin with Le Guin’s original text. Omelas appears, at first, to be a perfect world where everyone is happy and free, with one flaw: The apparent harmony of this society depends on the existence of one child who must suffer alone in the dark. Thus, Le Guin exposes the framework of utilitarianism, in which the happiness of some must be dependent upon the suffering of others.

At the end of this story, there are some citizens who object to the child’s suffering and choose to “walk away from Omelas.” But the narrator leaves this alternative very open: “The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”

Critics have dealt in various ways with the ambiguity of this choice. Some interpret the story as underlining the uncertainty of an ethical choice or of utopia itself. Meanwhile, other critics tend to be divided between favoring walking away versus finding a way to help the child. However, the difficulty of helping the child implies that the ending is either indeterminant or in favor of walking away. The ending thus supports the Jamesonian notion that the specifics of utopia are less important than the idea of utopia itself, the impulse to imagine the world differently.

In Hume’s schematic, Omelas falls closer to the left-hand side of the spectrum: It is more disturbing rather than comforting in the sense that it does not offer the same degree of clarity in its messages about reality. This isn’t to say that Omelas offers no message at all. For Le Guin, imagining a world beyond capitalism requires getting beyond the idea that the happiness of some depends on the suffering of others. Insofar as it reflects on our reality, this message brings the discomfort that sparks thought without offering a new ground for where that thought should go.

However, the disturbance of the indeterminate may not last very long. There is the easy critique of what is wrong with Omelas; however, the open question of an alternative is, paradoxically, closed as an end point. It has the advantage of not imposing a political program, leaving the reader free. The dialectical critique without a synthesis may spark the desire to walk away, but without any idea of what we are walking towards, we are unlikely to get very far.
Jemisin’s Response: The Difficult Comfort of Certainty

As the title suggests, “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” is not content with the open-ended solution of walking away. Jemisin is not focused on utopia as an already-perfect place, nor even an ambiguously perfect place; instead, she is struggling to imagine how to build a more-perfect place. As with Omelas, the city of Um-Helat involves an apparent utopia where people are happy and peaceful, as well as a darker side to the utopia, a necessary sacrifice for its maintenance. However, unlike Omelas, Um-Helat is not meant to be abandoned.

In Um-Helat, diversity is embraced; people care for one another, and the idea of some people being superior to others is foreign. And instead of sacrificing a child, the sacrifice is a type of knowledge: The people of Um-Helat are not allowed to have contact with our own world, to which, “by a quirk of spacetime” they have access, lest they be “infected” with the corruption of the idea that some lives are more valuable than others.

The story engages with a reader who, the narrator assumes, is also suffering from this type of dangerous infection. The addresses to the reader here are similar to Le Guin’s, in the sense of assuming that the reader will have difficulty believing in a world that seems too perfect. However, Jemisin is also much more pointed in trying to bring the reader around to believing in that perfect world. The narrator states, “I see the incredulity in your face! The difficulty lies partly in my lack of words, and partly in your lack of understanding, because you have never seen a place like Um-Helat, and because I am myself only an observer, not yet privileged to visit. Thus I must try harder to describe it so that you might embrace it, too.”

The terms of the story here encourage a kind of trust through openness. It is like an argument that begins with, “I am going to try to convince you of the following points…”

But what are we being convinced of here? Why does the narrator assume that readers will have such trouble believing in this world? The content of the argument appears a few paragraphs later, as the narrator explains,

What have I forgotten to mention? Oh, it is the thing that will seem most fantastic to you, friend: the variety! The citizens of Um-Helat are so many and so wildly different in appearance and origin and development. People in this land come from many others, and it shows in sheen of skin and kink of hair and plumpness of lip and hip. If one wanders the streets where the workers and artisans do their work, there are slightly more people with dark
A Vaccine for Bigotry...

skin; if one strolls the corridors of the executive tower, there are a few extra
done in pale. There is history rather than malice in this, and it is still being
actively, intentionally corrected—because the people of Um-Helat are not
naive believers in good intentions as the solution to all ills. No, there are no
worshippers of mere tolerance here, nor desperate grovelers for that grudging
pittance of respect which is diversity. Um-Helatians are learned enough
to understand what must be done to make the world better, and pragmatic
enough to actually enact it.

Does that seem wrong to you? It should not. The trouble is that we have
a bad habit, encouraged by those concealing ill intent, of insisting that people
already suffering should be afflicted with further, unnecessary pain. This is
the paradox of tolerance, the treason of free speech: we hesitate to admit that
some people are just fucking evil and need to be stopped.

This is Um-Helat, after all, and not that barbaric America. This is not Omelas, a tick of a city, fat and happy with its head buried in a tortured child.
My accounting of Um-Helat is an homage, true, but there’s nothing for you
to fear, friend. 22

There is a lot in this passage that speaks to the present moment. The need
for pragmatic, intentional corrections of history recalls protests for the
replacement of Confederate monuments with those that would recognize
and disavow the violence of the past. These are necessary steps, the story
implies, in order to create a world capable of fighting off the infection
of bigotry. Moreover, the source of infection is aligned with ‘free speech,’
and it recalls the debates over hate speech on social media, as well as the
impeachment of Donald Trump for inciting violence. Of course, this
story was written prior to the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol,
but it was a year after the 2017 clashes in Charlottesville over the statue
of Robert E. Lee.

And so the phrase, “This is the paradox of tolerance, the treason of free
speech: we hesitate to admit that some people are just fucking evil and
need to be stopped,” could have one referent in Trump’s statements after-
wards, in which he claimed that there “were very fine people on both
sides” 23 in response to a question about whether he viewed the alt-left and
white supremacists as morally equivalent. The controversy over this state-
ment has led to some claims that Trump did condemn white supremacy,
which is somewhat true, in the sense that he responded to another question
about his sympathies by saying, “You’re changing history. You’re changing
culture. And you had people — and I’m not talking about the neo-Nazis and the white nationalists — because they should be condemned totally. But you had many people in that group other than neo-Nazis and white nationalists.”

This is a slippery distinction of the kind that enables some to claim that Trump is not racist although he is supported by racists. However, Trump’s appeal to a common ground between white supremacists and patriots is very dangerous. By contrast, what Um-Helat appeals for is, indeed, that history should be changed, in the sense of “corrected” to prevent the infliction of “further, unnecessary pain.”

Thus, the relationship between the narrator and the reader in this story is built on a hostile kind of trust. The narrator claims that readers will have trouble embracing Um-Helat, and the story needles us to consider a world that might be better than Omelas, that “tick” with its “head buried in a tortured child.” In order to make this embrace possible, however, it may be necessary to detach from the commitment that supports ‘free speech’ as supreme, especially where it allows tolerance of intolerance and the incitement of violence.

Another component to enabling the imagination of a world without bigotry is to give up the assumption that hierarchies are natural. Here, the narrator again speaks to the projected disbelief of the reader:

It cannot be, you say. Utopia? How banal. It’s a fairy tale, a thought exercise. Crabs in a barrel, dog-eat-dog, oppression Olympics—it would not last, you insist. It could never be in the first place. Racism is natural, so natural that we will call it “tribalism” to insinuate that everyone does it. Sexism is natural and homophobia is natural and religious intolerance is natural and greed is natural and cruelty is natural and savagery and fear and and and and. “Impossible!” you hiss, your fists slowly clenching at your sides. “How dare you. What have these people done to make you believe such lies? What are you doing to me, to suggest that it is possible? How dare you. How dare you.”

Oh, friend! I fear I have offended. My apologies.

Yet ... how else can I convey Um-Helat to you, when even the thought of a happy, just society raises your ire so? Though I confess I am puzzled as to why you are so angry. It’s almost as if you feel threatened by the very idea of equality. Almost as if some part of you needs to be angry. Needs unhappiness and injustice. But ... do you?

Do you?

25
Here again, the tone is very ambivalent towards the reader. I think it is possible that the narrator, in imagining a reader here, may also be speaking to themselves. After all, because they are from our world, the narrator would also be dealing with the infectious ideas that they are trying to point out. In any case, the sickness here is the idea that we are essentially hierarchical in an irreducible way that we do not have to answer for.

The phrase “how dare you” also appears in the context of the ending of the story. As it reaches its climax, the narration follows the format of Omelas to ask “Do you believe, friend? [...] No? Then let me tell you one more thing.” Whereas, in Omelas, that ‘one more thing’ involved the child who had to suffer so that the happiness of others might be preserved, here, the ‘one more thing’ is a child who has witnessed her father being executed. In Um-Helat, there are people the story tells us to think of as ‘social workers’ who police the flow of information from our world, through which the contagion of assumed privilege can spread. These social workers have executed a man who has given in to this contagion. And next to the dead body is a child who is upset by this “injustice.” She responds, “I’ll get back at you [...] I’ll make you die the way you made him die [...] How dare you. How dare you.” The social workers reflect that this means the girl is infected, too, but instead of executing her, they decide to help her to overcome the infection.

Both the child and the reader are placed in the position of being infected and saying “how dare you?” In order to fight this infection, the child needs to be trained to become a social worker, to learn why her father had to die. This is, perhaps, the “vaccine” that might respond to the infection. According to the narrator, “there is only one treatment for this toxin once it gets into the blood: fighting it. Tooth and nail, spear and claw, up close and brutal; no quarter can be given, no parole, no debate. The child must grow, and learn, and become another social worker fighting an endless war against an idea.” The story ends with an appeal to the reader: “So don’t walk away. The child needs you, too, don’t you see? You also have to fight for her, now that you know she exists, or walking away is meaningless. Here, here is my hand. Take it. Please. Good. Good. Now. Let’s get to work.” This is certainly not a comfortable position for readers, who have been type-cast throughout the story as disbelieving and are now assumed to be in a position of allied warfare against an idea.

In fact, the story itself is a kind of infection (or at least a contagion), which the narrator also openly admits:

And now we come to you, my friend. My little soldier. See what I’ve done?
So insidious, these little thoughts, going both ways along the quantum path. Now, perhaps, you will think of Um-Helat, and wish. Now you might finally be able to envision a world where people have learned to love, as they learned in our world to hate. Perhaps you will speak of Um-Helat to others, and spread the notion farther still, like joyous birds migrating on trade winds. It’s possible. Everyone—even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable—can matter. Do you see how just the idea of this provokes utter rage in some? That is the infection defending itself … because if enough of us believe a thing is possible, then it becomes so.¹⁰

Whereas the infection of bigotry is sickening, the ending here attempts to imagine a more positive kind of contagion. The narrator implies that the reader’s own thoughts have been infiltrated by something more like a cure or a vaccine, and further, the act of imagining this beauty and love will also lead to a kind of reparative revision of our own world.

Throughout the story, the narrator treats both themselves and the reader as being infected. So, in a sense, the blow to the man (who has been executed with a pike through the spine to give a quick, painless death) is also a blow to the reader, an attempt to fight the infection within, and to wake us up to join the fight for change. Um-Helat is a far cry from the Jamesonian view of utopia as a desire for a desire for a better world. In the context of the relationship between literature and politics, Jemisin underlines an indirect correspondence: What we are able to imagine will reflect what we are able to enact. It might or might not lead directly to change, but we nonetheless have a responsibility to imagine the world differently in order to create space for necessary changes.

What occurs in the genre of SF/F, for Jemisin, is a reflection of the world outside and of our capacity to imagine change. In discussing her writing process for “The Ones Who Stay and Fight,” Jemisin has noted, “I realized somewhere along the way that I was having difficulty imagining a world without bigotry, and I’m a science fiction writer…If I can’t figure it out, then how can I expect other people to project that vision, to move towards that vision? If we can’t speak about it, if we can’t envision it, then how do we work toward it?”¹¹ Thus, the ending is supposed to be difficult, to deal with the difficulty of imagining a world without bigotry.

**A Force against Force: Violence and Feminist Social Ethics**

All of the talk about certainty may feel disturbing to the extent that the ending of the story involves what appears to be a state-sanctioned execution. Given the rhetorical argument of the story for embracing Um-Helat,
this world is leagues away from the terrifying visions of totalitarianism that captured the minds of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Milan Kundera. Instead of fearing a centralized government, Jemisin is more concerned with what tenets, what values, can become central, and how we can fight for them. Still, the idea of state-sanctioned violence, in any form, is difficult to stomach, and I am not sure that it is what the story is arguing for. Here there remains an element of uncertainty within the framework of what certainly needs to happen (the growth beyond bigotry). It involves a difficult question: Why is the violence necessary? What does it mean?

As with fantasy and utopia, Jemisin takes part in a shift occurring in the relationship between literature and ethics. As Namwali Serpell notes, discussions of ethics in literature often return to uncertainty as a value. In Seven Modes of Uncertainty, Serpell mostly supports this. However, she also cautions that, “when criticism ascribes to literature an amorphous alterity, the argument for ethics becomes diffuse, unable to do more than assert uncertainty as a limit case or to recommend a suspension of judgment when we face its high walls.” Eventually, Serpell decides that, while uncertainty is valuable, it is also necessary to seek a variety of ethical touchstones. These ethical touchstones might supply the structures against which uncertainty comes into focus.

In what follows, I will refer to the frameworks of feminist social ethics and Afrofuturism as ethical touchstones to illuminate the ending of Jemisin’s story.

The evolution of Judith Butler’s work, for me, is further evidence of the shift from the critical to the postcritical. In Precarious Life (2004) and Frames of War (2009), Butler turns to ethics in order to seek a ground for affirmation. The ground that she recovers is shared precariousness or vulnerability, the interdependent condition of existence that requires awareness of the equal grievability of lives, primarily in the context of international warfare.

In The Force of Non-Violence (2020), Butler includes the Black Lives Matter movement among her formative examples, in order to ask how to overcome the violence that becomes invisible when some lives are framed as less grievable than others. For example, in speaking with people whom I know to be Trump voters about the recent BLM protests, their primary concern has been the threat to peace and order. The violence of police against brown and black persons remains, in this view, either invisible or a hazard of the job, and peaceful protests are conflated with violent riots. Butler adds clarity here by pointing out the necessity
of understanding who is framing violence, as well as how systemic violence becomes invisible when it is projected onto others.

But how should those who suffer violence respond? And how can they respond in a way that respects the shared vulnerability that underpins ethical behavior? Butler’s solution, “the force of non-violence,” does not entirely reduce violence or make it disappear. Indeed, she turns to Freud in order to theorize the non-reducibility of hostility and aggression within human relationships. And yet, although the response to violence might appear to be further violence from a certain perspective, it is also non-violent if it occurs in the context of stopping the original violence and avoiding unnecessary future violence.

To be sure, this is a delicate balance in which the existence of violence might appear to depend solely on the framework through which it is constituted. Nonetheless, Butler makes the affirmative move of committing to the framework of interdependency and the grievability of all lives. In response to Walter Benjamin’s theories about the need for critique, and for self-critique, in discussions of violence and the law, Butler notes “that we are obligated to make decisions that commit us to certain frameworks. As much as we cannot decide whether or not violence is justified without knowing what counts as violent, we cannot give up on the demand to decide the difference between violence and nonviolence.” In other words, the operation of critique cannot preclude commitment.

The violence at the end of Jemisin’s story appears in a very different light if one remembers the sort of violence that characterizes our present world. This is not to say that the violence at the end of the story disappears, but the execution of the man by the caretakers can be interpreted as the least violent means of preventing further violence, and thus, in effect, non-violent.

To put this in more concrete terms, one might think of the familiar ethical conundrum: Would you shoot Hitler if you had a chance? The question itself may be flawed in the sense of assuming that wiping out one individual could wipe out anti-Semitism. However, it is also instructive because Jemisin’s story poses a somewhat similar, albeit more nuanced, question: What would it mean to direct aggression only towards the source of violence, towards the idea that some lives matter more than others? How much unnecessary suffering could be prevented? Thus, the sacrifice of a corrupted individual could be symbolic in this sense: The idea needs to be aggressively rooted out.

If we shift the focus away from violence towards one corrupted individual and towards what is being protected, the caretakers also activate
A framework that is common within feminist social ethics, emphasizing the importance of interdependency, as well as the corresponding need for mutual care. For Butler, individualism and sovereignty, the ideologies of mastery of self and others, have created a false divide that misses the ethical basis for practicing non-violence. The awareness of interdependency necessitates the protection of all lives as equally grievable. The caretakers thus embody the transformation that protesters have been calling for: The investment of resources in actively taking care of communities.

As Butler notes, “The presumption of equal grievability would be not only a conviction or attitude with which another person greets you, but a principle that organizes the social organization of health, food, shelter, employment, sexual life, and civic life.” Um-Helat is a “city whose inhabitants, simply, care for one another. That is a city’s purpose, they believe—not merely to generate revenue or energy or products, but to shelter and nurture the people who do these things.” This principle of caring extends to everyone, and the notion that some lives are more grievable than others is the “infection” against which the caretakers fight.

Moreover, it is important to note that the social workers do not constitute themselves as immune or pure. As the young girl watches her father’s execution and vows revenge, “The social workers exchange looks of concern. They are contaminated themselves, of course; it’s permitted, and frankly unavoidable in their line of work. Impossible to dam a flood without getting wet.” Thus, the contagion of violence itself is never fully reduced here. Nor does the story understate the grievability of the life that the social workers take.

In other words, the social workers employ a very different logic from the one that underpins the current system. Whereas the individualist-sovereign view of the current police force “charges the invulnerable with the obligation to protect the vulnerable” relying on “a paternalistic form of power,” the social workers are here constituted as the most vulnerable to infection. They are the infected, but they are infected for the sake of fighting a greater evil. The narrator compares the social workers to “those who volunteered to work in leper colonies.” Butler refers to this sort of action, not as violence, but as the use of aggression for a better end. Within the non-violent critique, “Aggression and hatred both remain, for sure, but they are now directed against all that which imperils the organic persistence of interconnected lives.” This is a more organic “wrestling with the destruction of which we ourselves are capable, a force against force.” So, in more ways than one, Jemisin’s metaphor of the organism fighting infection is appropriate. It is not a machine that runs in
the same way throughout time, but an open system that must grow and adapt to survive.

All of this sounds great, but what about the man who is killed? Can the act of murder be justified away as somehow non-violent? Probably not; however, again, I do not think that this moment of shock is meant to be a direct solution, much less a sanctioning of murder. Read symbolically, it is an attack on an internal idea within the reader. In order to understand the basis of this attack, I will now turn to discussions of Afrofuturism as well as Afro-pessimism and social death.

A Vaccine for Internalized Bigotry

The term “Afrofuturism” has gained a lot of traction in recent years, going beyond Mark Dery’s original designation of “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.” More recently, Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek have defined the term as “a multigenerational, multi-genre aesthetic and social movement that responds to/engages social media and Web 2.0, and that includes black authors stretching back to the beginning of modernity and spanning the entire globe.”

In both cases, Afrofuturism occurs in multiple aesthetic genres, though for literary critics, there has been a particular interest in science fiction. Kodwo Eshun describes Afrofuturism as a “chronopolitical” project that combines “the critical and the utopian” in imagining new structures while recognizing the limits of current structures which presuppose a connection between race and dystopia.

While Eshun stresses that this combination of the critical and the utopian is not “naively celebratory,” some theorists prefer the term “Afropessimism.” Frank B. Wilderson uses an Afropessimist framework to emphasize the centrality of anti-blackness within modernity. According to Wilderson, “blackness is the core anxiety in the collective unconscious—because, ala Patterson, to be is to not be a slave.” In Slavery and Social Death (1982), Orlando Patterson theorized the concept of social death as a component of slavery, “a highly symbolized domain of human experience,” and one that relies on generalized dishonor, violent domination, and natal alienation, or the erasure of all social ties and existence outside of that which depends on the master. For Wilderson, antiblackness and social death are foundational elements of modern sub- jectivity. Thus, Afropessimism may be a way of recognizing the extent and depth of social death as a symbolic-linguistic-political structure.

In interpreting the Broken Earth series, Jessica FitzPatrick calls the ending of Stone Sky “a metaphorical clash between Afro-pessimism and
In this case as well, the point is not to label Jemisin as either Afrofuturist or Afropessimist, nor even as necessarily more certain than uncertain. Her work clearly involves elements of both. It is Afrofuturist in the sense of emphasizing the importance and resilience of imagining a future that is nourishing of all lives. And it is Afropessimist in recognizing the apparent intractability of ongoing legacies of violence.

As an ethical touchstone, debates about Afrofuturism and Afropessimism might offer a new way to understand the execution of the man who is ‘infected’ with dangerous knowledge. As Lewis Gordon notes in reflecting on Afro-pessimism, the choice between optimism and pessimism is a false one. Gordon begins by noting that the phrase “an antiblack world” is not identical with “the world is antiblack.” And he goes on to note,

An ironic dimension of pessimism is that it is the other side of optimism. Oddly enough, both are connected to nihilism, which is, as Nietzsche (1968) showed, a decline of values during periods of social decay. It emerges when people no longer want to be responsible for their actions. Optimists expect intervention from beyond. Pessimists declare relief is not forthcoming. Neither takes responsibility for what is valued [...] Rejecting optimism and pessimism, there is a supervening alternative: political commitment.

In this space between optimism and pessimism, it is necessary to take responsibility for one’s values without determining the outcome in advance. So, while Jemisin’s story does not resolve into either optimism or pessimism, it does reinforce the value of commitment. The foundation of that commitment involves an awareness of social death (another way of describing the viral infectiousness of bigotry) and a symbolic attempt to fight against it.

Thus, it might be fruitful to interpret the execution of the infected man as a kind of internalized reversal of the violent forces of social death. The narrator describes, “The disease has taken one poor victim, but it need not claim more. In this manner is the contagion contained ... in a moment. In a moment” (10). The repeated phrase “in a moment” is fascinating in this context. In what moment? Where? This is an imaginary death in an imaginary world, but it points to the kind of political commitment that Gordon describes above. It is an action whose values are clearly articulated—the containment of a harmful social contagion.

This moment, I think, has to be interpreted as an internalized, self-directed aggression. If it were externalized, the corresponding situation that
comes to mind could be what has come to be called “cancel culture.” But pointing toward individuals would be less effective. As Gordon notes, “societies in which antiblack racism is hegemonic are also those in which racial moralizing dominates: moralizing stops at individuals at the expense of addressing institutions the transformation of which would make immoral individuals irrelevant.”51 As nice as it would be to have an infection that is contained within a single individual, and to be able to solve a problem by eliminating that one individual, that is not the case. As it turns out, killing Hitler might not have mattered as much as one might like to think.

To return once more to the idea of this story as a vaccine, it contains some of the original life-destroying force associated with the disease, but it is formulated in a way that will enable survival. This solution remains imperfect, though understandable in the context of the violence that has gone before. The narrator offers some defense of this moment in explaining,

Ah, but they did not choose this battle, the people of Um-Helat today; their ancestors did, when they spun lies and ignored conscience in order to profit from others’ pain. Their greed became a philosophy, a religion, a series of nations, all built on blood. Um-Helat has chosen to be better. But it, too, must perform blood sacrifice to keep true evil at bay.”52

The phrase “true evil” certainly implies a clear value, but it becomes less clear if we try to articulate where that ‘true evil’ actually exists. It is within individuals, but it is also a contagion that is absorbed through culture. And, within the present “moment” of the story, this contagion is a thing of the past, a thing of the present, and (diminishingly) a thing of the future.
Bibliography


Notes

2. Empson, 192.
4. Ossa-Richardson, 12.
5. Ossa-Richardson, 13.
6. Ossa-Richardson, 18.
7. Ossa-Richardson, 398.
8. Ossa-Richardson, 2.
24. Dunn, “Fact Check.”
33 Serpell, 300.
34 Butler, 140.
35 Butler, 59.
38 Butler, 71.
40 Butler, 182.
41 Butler, 71.
45 Eshun, 298.
46 Eshun, 297.
51 Gordon, 111.
Hillbillies at the End of the World: 
An Appalachian Apocalyptic Poetic
Benjamin D. Crace

ABSTRACT
Focusing on J.D. Vance’s Hillbilly Elegy and its criticism, this paper proposes that it is possible to situate Vance’s memoir within the Southern literary tradition rather than view it as a one-off rallying post for disaffected whites prior to Trump’s election. Such a reading requires an alternative poetic, here, the Appalachian apocalyptic, constructed from elements of Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation,” and Dennis Covington’s Salvation on Sand Mountain. In turn, Elegy is re-read as an Appalachian apocalypse, with extrapolations made to the later, eponymous film by Ron Howard.

Keywords: Vance, poetics, apocalyptic, O’Connor, Southern, Covington, Dowland

Introduction
In 2016, J. D. Vance’s A Hillbilly Elegy spent twenty weeks on the New York Times Bestseller list and was even promoted by Oprah. In November 2020, a film version of the book was released, directed by Ron Howard and starring Academy Award Nominees Amy Adams and Glen Close. Clearly Vance’s memoir struck a nerve, crossing geographical, political, and racial lines. Peine and Schaff write, “Vance’s book quickly became
a cultural Rosetta Stone of sorts for making sense of the disaffection of the U.S. white working class in general, and Appalachia in particular.”

When it was initially released, Dwight Garner of The New York Times called it one of the “6 Books to Help Understand Trump’s Win,” and another review for The Economist, entitled “Why Donald Trump Speaks to So Many Americans,” claimed, “You will not read a more important book about America this year.” As its subtitle suggests, A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, Elegy’s popularity, as Steven Hahn argues, may have ultimately grown out of the “cultural voyeurism (class porn) that it encourages, enabling readers and reviewers to define their own experiences in relation to the mess that seems to envelop the white working class.”

At the most basic level, Elegy is exactly what it purports to be: a memoir. It follows, in a fairly straightforward and chronological manner, J. D. Vance’s (b. 1984) life from childhood to adulthood. In the process, he reaches backwards in time with some family history to his Appalachian roots in Jackson, Kentucky, while consistently reiterating how Jackson overshadowed the experience of his family in Middletown, Ohio. As displaced Appalachians, his family carried with it the same dysfunction as those who chose to stay in the region. And although there is a cast of characters in the memoir, his sister (Lindsay), mother (Beverly), and grandmother, “Mamaw,” (“a pistol-packing lunatic”) loom large. The latter he identifies as the one who made the biggest difference in his life. His absent and remarried father is only tangentially a part of his life but from him he gets a heavy dose of religion. After a rough childhood and difficult high school education, Vance joins the Marines, finds his manhood and respect, and, using government money, gets a degree from Ohio State. Afterwards, he graduates from Yale Law School and moves to San Francisco, a survivor and escapee from the area. As memoirs tend to be, the content of the work is largely episodic and in a reflective key, with rambling asides consisting of “research” and armchair sociological observations purporting to explain why Appalachians are the way they are. It is really these asides that have generated the most heat.

Recently, critics in and from Appalachia also formed measured responses to the book in Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy. In its manifesto-like introduction, it proclaims, “As citizens and scholars, Appalachians have been fighting against gross simplifications and stereotypes since at least the early nineteenth century, and this work should be considered only the latest effort to challenge such views.” What follows is a well-curated collection that interrogates,
responds to, and seeks to move beyond Vance’s work. Including critical essays, creative nonfiction, and poetry, as well as photography, Reckoning’s genre-crossing itself testifies to its anti-reductionistic stance. Germane for my purposes, the critical essays include such self-evident titles as “Once Upon A Time in ‘Trumpalachia’; Hillbilly Elegy, Personal Choice, and the Blame Game”; “Will the Real Hillbilly Please Stand Up?: Urban Appalachian Migration and Culture Seen through the Lens of Hillbilly Elegy”; and “What Hillbilly Elegy Reveals about Race in Twenty-First Century America.” Other contributions like “In Defense of J. D. Vance” and “Black Hillbillies Have No Time for Elegies” push the reader to consider the veridical and occluded aspects of Vance’s memoir. However, reading these contributions contiguously, one senses that these critics are more concerned with content rather than form, with what Vance says rather than how he says it. What is lacking in the criticism on Elegy is a means of analysis that transcends the cultural moment and equips the reader to move beyond the immediate experience of reading the text to the critical moves of relativizing and appreciating the text as literature. Such a means of analysis is more properly called a poetic. This article will thus seek to construct, refine, and apply such a poetic in order to demonstrate both the ongoing possibilities for further theoretical constructions and the explanatory purchase such poetics can produce to re-humanize the humanities in the face of ideological colonization and polarization.

Beyond Correlation Criticism: Dowland’s Rhetorical Analysis

Much of the criticism on Elegy could be generally categorized as correlation criticism. That is, it examines how Vance’s representation of the region and its people does or does not align with the “reality” of things. Extending from this line of reasoning, Vance’s amateur sociological analyses, backed by sometimes vague sources, sometimes named but limited, are fraught with the same perennial issues that recur in the social sciences: reductionism, normativity, and essentialism. Wider cultural considerations of Vance’s work by Appalachian scholar/insiders in Reckoning pick the work apart at this representational level while affirming the perspectivist relativism one associates with the humanities in general, i.e., “It is, after all, his experience but...” Building on correlation criticism, others have been drawn to Elegy’s putative explanatory power for Trump’s election and narrow defeat for re-election. This political appropriation of creative nonfiction, like correlation criticism, seems to be justified since Vance himself apostrophizes to the readers about how they should extrapolate general truths about his experience. And yet, such editorializing is not as frequent
in the text as it is often made to appear, suggesting that many critics find exactly what they are looking for: sites for virtue-signaling within disparate and conflicting spheres of identity politics. As noble and helpful as such critical projects may be, they fail to interpret the text in a way that makes it transcend its cultural-historical moment. This can possibly restrict the meaning of the text to its regional context, lapsing into parochialism.

One of the exceptions to the rule of correlation criticism is Douglas Dowland’s rhetorical analysis that at once takes a formal/structuralist-like approach to the text and manages to adroitly address the contemporary context. Dowland’s work is a good example of criticism that takes *Elegy* seriously as a rhetorical performance rather than as some kind of extended letter-to-the-editor together with some autobiography. In “The Politics of Resentment in J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*,” he situates *Elegy* as an extended synecdoche. He writes,

> The book’s foundational premise is that Vance’s life experiences are representative of not just one swath of the nation—the “hillbillies” who migrated to the industrial north in the 1950s—but also their succeeding generations, the struggles of the Rust Belt and blue-collar Americans more generally, their abandonment of progressive politics, and ultimately an entire nation in decline. Vance’s use of synecdoche allows him to take on multiple voices, sliding from exemplary hillbilly to concerned middle-class citizen, from atypical to typical American.⁷

Strictly speaking, Dowland somewhat accurately identifies *Elegy*’s use of synecdoche. But the expression of that synecdochalization, framed as a convention within the elegiac tradition, is more properly called prosopopeia,⁸ ventriloquizing the absent through direct quotations or what Dowland observes as “tak[ing] on multiple voices,” but here, beyond Vance’s first-person narrative persona that “slid[es] from exemplary hillbilly to concerned middle-class citizen.” It is precisely this rhetorical device that allows for and opens the door to the synecdoche unto resentment, not the other way around. For if synecdoche is limited to the authoritative voice of the narrator only, it lacks the kind of objective verifiability that all authors seek to lean into by quoting others. For Vance, his familiar, in the sense of an absent ghost that whispers secrets, is his Mamaw, a voice of another generation.

With her on his knee, shouting out bromides, threats, and blue one-liners, Vance populates his reader’s imagination with compound ghosts who teach what Dowland calls a “reading strategy.”
Elegy is both a memoir of Vance’s life and, more broadly, an outline of a reading strategy that showcases how others are to be read in order to blame them for the national predicament that conservatism perceives. And it is here where the book proves insidious: its explanatory power rests on an assumption that resentment is intuitively American.

Sidestepping the issue of authorial intention, we cannot know if Vance even knows what synecdoche or prosopopeia are nor can we know if he consciously encoded resentment as the hermeneutical key for interpreting America. But what we do have is the text and its effects. The missing link between this “showcasing how others are to be read” strategy, synecdoche, and the abovementioned prosopopeia is mimesis. It is the first-person narrative combined with prosopopeia that activates the process of mimesis whereby the reader’s own internal reading voice is aligned with Vance’s resentment. Dowland misses these two important pieces in the dialectic between text and the reader’s response, but his point above is generative. This black box referred to as “explanatory power” consists precisely in how well and through what rhetorical means the author’s voice(s) and feelings become our own. Readers and critics, too, are rightfully stirred up after reading Elegy—that is part of its affective power—as Dowland contends:

...Vance’s affects only perpetuate more resentment-producing synecdoches, which makes it impossible for anecdotes to cohere into a policy and fuels the strong affect that substitutes for narrative coherence.

However, resentment is not, as I will argue, the central affect rhetorically generated by Elegy. But before offering a corrective to Dowland’s argument above, it is first necessary to construct then apply a poetic that recognizes generic conventions. Such a process will render a clearer and less polemical affect essential not only to Elegy but other works in the Southern Gothic tradition.

O’Connor’s “Revelation” as Ur Text for an Appalachian Apocalyptic

It is axiomatic that all poetics and genres take part in wider conventions and traditions. The Appalachian apocalyptic (AA) is no different; it belongs to Southern literature, more broadly speaking, and Southern gothic/grotesque in particular. Thus, the features of those genres are also present in works under the AA rubric. These features may be as mundane as
historical continuity, location, etc., or more culturally nuanced, such as dialect or extra-regional misrepresentation. But beyond these taxonomies, I am making the case that a more specific and refined poetic and genre are necessary for a variety of reasons, the least of which is to demonstrate the robustness of a critical theory that is not consciously tied to overdone ideologies.

Some of the basic elements for an AA poetic are derived from and inspired by Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “Revelation.” In it, Mrs. Ruby Turpin (perhaps Turpin-tine, a corrosive?), a middle-class Southern socialite and landowner, takes her husband, Claud (clod?), to the doctor. He has an infection on his leg caused by being kicked by a cow. In the doctor’s office, Mrs. Turpin silently and not-so-silently judges and converses with the characters who are also waiting with her: a child, a “white trash” woman, and a gentlewoman like herself who is there with her daughter, Mary Grace. The latter is a college student who is “fat,” “ugly,” and has “bad acne.” Ultimately, she, out of what seems to be a longstanding hatred for her mother and similar snobbish ilk, attacks Mrs. Turpin. While choking her, and just before she is taken away sedated to an asylum (presumably), she insults Mrs. Turpin: “You’re a wart hog from hell.” Shattered by the sudden violence, the Turpins go home.

Once home, the Turpins take a long nap and then attend to the business of running their farm, taking care of their cows and hogs with the help of African American laborers and their families. Claud plays the role of the benevolent boss and Ruby self-righteously condescends enough to provide the workers with ice water. At one point, she seeks to gain some sympathy from them for what happened at the doctor’s office, but she receives only praise, which she receives ambivalently. While alone, spraying off the hogs, Ruby angrily prays, blaming God for making her the way she is and then sending Mary Grace to insult her for being that way, yelling, “Who do you think you are?” Then, moments later:

She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black [people] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-giv-
en wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.13

Her vision leaves her altered, changed. O’Connor ends the story with “In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”14 Here is a woman that now sees all creation as good.

Insufficient as it is, this necessarily brief recount of O’Connor’s story contains the seeds of the AA poetic I am suggesting here. Like Southern Gothic, there is the grotesque: Mary Grace is described in anything but attractive terms. The snobbish attitudes themselves are grotesque to the reader as is the claustrophobic waiting room, a cipher for and microcosm of hell itself. The “white-trash” occupants and racial stereotyping are also explicit enough to warrant “grotesque.” Hogs in a pin, being sprayed clean of their own refuse, likewise viscerally telegraph ontological pollution and uncleanliness. There is the unexpected violence that expedites Mrs. Turpin’s vision: Mary Grace not only insults and chokes her but throws a book at her face, leaving a bruise. There is the breaking in of the noumenal into the mundane, a type of epiphanic awareness that locates the subject as radically guilty but included in God’s mysterious economy; Mrs. Turpin is truly Christ-haunted. And finally, there is an apocalypse, a revelation that rushes forward to the end of all things and falls back to the present moment of transformation. This revelation necessarily includes a radical re-ordering of the given social hierarchy and understanding one’s place within the Great Shuffling. Passing through this eye of the apocalyptic needle, one emerges with the consciousness of one’s unity with Life.15

To sum up then, to this point, an AA poetic recognizes the grotesque, (redemptive) violence, near preternatural epiphanic moment, and a disclosure about ultimate reality or some primal secret that results in a greater consciousness of Life. As O’Connor was undoubtedly aware, much of her work also falls under this revised rubric of “apocalyptic.” It is not merely coincidence that the story’s title is “Revelation,” the English translation of Apocalypse, the final book of the New Testament. Nor is it coincidence that she also wrote a story called “Judgement Day.” Yet “Revelation” is and is not Appalachian. It is Appalachian in the sense that the “white trash” character clearly belongs to that segment of the
population in O’Connor’s experience that migrated down from the mountains to Milledgeville and Atlanta under the same circumstances Vance’s ancestors left Eastern Kentucky. But her divorce of the people (“white trash”) from the place (Appalachia) places “Revelation” literally outside of the AA poetic. Both Mrs. Turpin and the lower-class woman (never named) recognize the place of origin for African Americans. With this shared understanding, Mrs. Turpin suggests, “They ought to send all them... back to Africa... That’s where they come from in the first place.”

White trash are further depersonalized: they have lost both their names and origins. So, while a close reading of O’Connor’s short story provides some of the essential structural elements to an AA poetic, it is missing a crucial piece: geography.

Like the quintessentially American genre, the Western, the Appalachian apocalyptic includes geography in its constituents. In defining the Western, French critic Jean Mitry writes, “[A Western is] a film whose action, situated in the American West, is consistent with the atmosphere, the values, and the conditions of existence in the Far West between 1840 and 1900.” Transposed, then, and for my purposes, modern Appalachian literature is literature whose action is situated in the Appalachian region as demarcated by the Appalachian Regional Commission, having the atmosphere (mountainous and nonurban in terms of population density), values (family and place), and “conditions of existence” (underdeveloped or exploited economies) of that region in the mid-to-late 20th and early 21st century. For brevity’s sake, I will collapse the definition into the setting and time frame. To further qualify, the time frame is important because it denotes a shift from thinking of the region as frontier and possibility to exhausted and wasted. It is the latter, exhausted and wasted, that further draw out my sense of “apocalyptic.”

Sensitivity to the reworked definition of Appalachian above shades additional meaning into my use of apocalyptic. While O’Connor’s short story sources the connotation of transformative disclosure, perhaps from the numinous, that I want to incorporate, it does not map it fully. Appalachian apocalyptic encodes the region as exhausted and wasted; it is thus almost deterministically depicted as dystopic and, more to the point, post-apocalyptic. It stands as a type of memento mori writ large for American culture. One direction this takes in popular media and in literature from and about the region is the (apocalyptic) zombification of its populace—either through opioid/substance addiction, food deserts, or stereotypes of laziness in nonfiction and literal zombies in fiction.
of archetypal resurrection, which, in turn, relates back to the transforma-
tive (positive or negative) effect of apocalypse realized.

The relationship between the AA poetic and the considered litera-
ture is that it reveals new aspects of a text by situating it in a different
frame of reference. When this occurs, something like a memoir is no lon-\nger simply an autobiographical narrative with some commentary about
the nature and decline of a particular society. It becomes a post-apoca-
lyptic survivor’s tale. This transmutation of memoir to post-apocalyptic
survivor record charges the narrative with significance beyond a lesson
someone can learn from another person’s experience. Reading a biogra-
phy or autobiography of a famous person may inspire courage or a sense
of common humanity but reading a survivor’s tale from the apocalypse is
the literal equipping of the psyche in an uncertain age. Vance’s “memoir”
“works” because it is a message in a bottle from the End of the Age and
not just from a “poor region.” This Othering of the people and the area
seems to be so endemically reflexive that to exclude it from considera-
tion as part of my proposed poetic may make it appear inauthentic to read-
ers for whom the region has been constantly reified as Other. Besides,
to sharpen my poetic’s analytical edge, I do indeed want to play on this
Othering to destabilize attempts at levelling Appalachia as continuous
with “American” culture. In short, a reading generated by an Appalachian
apocalyptic should be itself “apocalyptic”/revelatory.

Every poetic should also name an affect which grounds it in the ex-
perience of the reader. Here I would like to gesture back to Dowland’s
move to link resentment to *Elegy*. This naming of a specific emotion gen-
erated by the rhetorical effects of *Elegy* enhances Dowland’s argument.
Following but expanding on his lead, I would like to suggest that the af-
fective dimension of my Appalachian apocalyptic poetic is *schadenfreude*:
a complex and usually subtle pleasure in witnessing another’s pain and
misfortune. O’Connor’s “Revelation” revels in exciting this emotion in
the reader and then in turning it inside out as an existential signpost that
the reader is, in fact, Mrs. Turpin—judgmental, racist, and self-righteous.
This is the revelation alluded to in the title, and, like all apocalyptic dis-
closures, it feels like the end of one’s world, transmogrifying one’s earlier
virtues and status into pig shit.

**Appalachian Apocalypse in Alabama:**

**Covington Paves the Way**

Between O’Connor and Vance, Dennis Covington’s *Salvation on Sand Mountain* is a helpful text through which to further refine and
demonstrate an Appalachian apocalyptic. Like *Elegy*, it is also a memoir by someone who grew up outside of the region but sought to hammer out his identity through his ancestral connections there—spiritual and genetic. Covington places his own work within the Southern Gothic, even quoting O’Connor’s famous essay, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction.”

Right off, *Salvation* qualifies as Appalachian, the central setting being in and around Scottsboro and Sand Mountain, AL, the tail end of the Appalachian mountain range. Covering the last two decades of the twentieth century, it fits the previously mentioned temporal window. The communities represented in the book are mostly rural and interspersed throughout the Appalachian region. In terms of conditions of existence, Covington frequently uses descriptions that remind the reader of decay, exhaustion, and waste. These descriptions, analogies, and metaphors underscore the areas beyond his native Birmingham as dystopic and post-apocalyptic.

Even as early as the Prologue, Covington begins his project of apocalypticizing the region, encouraging *schadenfreude*. The trees in rural yards are “bare.”\(^{20}\) Emphasizing the “peculiarity of Southern experience,” he asserts that it “didn’t end when the boll weevil ate up the cotton crop... [or] when Burger King came to Meridian.”\(^{21}\) The culture is “under assault” and its inhabitants are the object of “the scorn and ridicule of the nation.” Poor Southern whites, he maintains, are “the only ethnic group in America not permitted to have a story.”\(^{22}\) His first visit to a church in the region evokes surprise: “It was, in fact, a converted gas station and country store, with a fiberboard façade and a miniature steeple. The hand-painted sign spelled the preacher’s first name in three different ways: Glenn, Glen, and Glyn.”\(^{23}\) The people in it, he tells us, “had the angular, hand-me-down look of Appalachian hill people.”\(^{24}\) Even their visages are second-hand, used, wasted—their churches, hand-me-down gas stations where even the conventions of spelling have been lost. People are dressed in “the same faded overalls” he had seen them wearing earlier that week. The sanctuary is “tiny” and “its linoleum floor buckled like a cresting wave.”\(^{25}\) Nothing here is new or well-maintained. It is the last holdout of a shipwreck.

But there are multiple Scottsboros. Shortly after modernizing the town with “wide, clean streets, a thriving commercial district, and a no-nonsense county courthouse, square lined and unadorned,”\(^{26}\) he jumps to apocalyptisizing and direct characterization: “[T]here’s a third Scottsboro, a town quite different from the one fixed in history or the one portrayed in the contemporary chamber of commerce brochures. Its emblem could have been that converted store and filling station out on
Woods Cove Road.” The emblem of the town is a hand-me-down converted gas station that serves as a church, the last redoubt for religious mountain people who cannot even afford their own church building. The people who meet there, again, have been “trying to eke out a living and a sense of dignity” since WWII. What follows is as elegiac and tinged with loss as anything Vance would write two decades later:

Language and habits of mind began to be lost, as were old arts like divining water, snaking logs, and killing hogs. People stopped saying “I’ll swan” for “I’ll swear,” as their ancestors had done in North Britain for centuries. And the dead were no longer laid out with platters of salt on their stomachs, a ritual once meant to evoke the immortality of the soul… The lure of the secular and worldly in a region once characterized as the Bible Belt has left a residue of rootlessness, anxiety, and lawlessness.

The snake handlers, the main characters in the book, are then immediately described as “spiritual nomads” and “refugees from a culture on the ropes.”

Aside from these occasional moments of direct characterization in the apocalyptic mode, Covington lays out more indirect descriptions of waste and exhaustion: “It was on a quiet stretch of road beyond the railroad tracks, its only neighbor an auto repair shop and weed-choked junkyard.” Solitary buildings, quiet roads, and weed-choked junkyards—the very image of a place one might find a zombie in The Walking Dead. Other depictions have the mountain people wearing “slogans on their T-shirts years out of style.” To be fair, such apocalyptic characterization typically occurs in Salvation at those points in the narrative when Covington remains an outsider, what sociologists would call an etic position. Once he moves to narration from an emic, insider position, this type of characterization fades, replaced more with dialogue and a focus on the immediate experience of the religious rites of the snake handlers. But at different points, the apocalyptic characterization pops back up, as generic conventions do, in the expected places. So, later, Covington is asked by the snake handlers to go to a homecoming at a church in Jolo, West Virginia. Here, in the etic position, Covington defaults back to hypothesizing the apocalypse: “But in East Tennessee, the Appalachians converge in a chaos of intersecting planes. There, the mountains still look as wild and formidable as they must have to the first Europeans who entered the New World—entered it only, in ways, to become lost in it.” Again, the geography is chaotic, wild, formidable, confusing. This comment opens
up a discussion on the origins of the Appalachian people. Falling back on David Hackett Fischer’s book *Albion’s Seed*, Covington proleptically propagates the same etiological myth Vance picks up in *Elegy*, that is, mountain people are the descendants of the Scotch-Irish immigrants who “brought few material possessions with them, but they did bring their feuds, their language, and their love of music, strong drink, and sexual adventure.” Circumscribing the region’s inhabitants in this fashion simultaneously satisfies Covington’s existential “middleage” urge to find out who my people were,” but also the reader’s desire to have the trusted narrator/interlocutor assure them that historical processes have been at play in creating such a people as this.

With this myth planted firmly in the reader’s mind, Covington digetically segues from the stereotyped South to apocalyptic Appalachia as they drive to Jolo, WV:

All along the highways through Tennessee and southwest Virginia, the signs were everywhere: Crazy Joe’s Fireworks, Jack Daniel’s whiskey, drag racing, turkey shoots, and barbecue. The South they suggested was straight out of the movies—idiosyncratic, lazy, restless, and self-absorbed.

But in the mountains, civilization wanes and “[t]he last motels and hospital were at Grundy, Virginia, a mining town on the lip of a winding river between mountains so steep and irrational, they must have blocked most of the sun most of the day. It is difficult to imagine how children can grow up in such a place without carrying narrowed horizons into the rest of their lives.” Once they arrive at their destination, “[n]ear the front door of the church we could see the rusted remains of a car that lay suspended just over the edge of the ravine in a net of kudzu and sweet gum.” One quickly suspects that such a symbolic image might be less description than imagined, but as part of the text, it certainly inflates and conflates the apocalyptic imaginary of a time when nature reclaims what humans have abandoned.

Like the roads, the narrative meanders until Covington finds himself as an outsider of sorts again, approaching another church, this time on the titular Sand Mountain. The church there only cost $2000 and was not made out of rock even though it was named Rock Mountain Holiness Church. Apparently built in 1916, by 1993, it

[d]idn’t even have a back door... The green shingles on the outside were cracked, and the paint on the window sills had just about peeled off... It’d be another year, though, before [church members] could get around to putting
in a bathroom. In the meantime, there would be an outhouse for the women and a bunch of trees for the men.39

Covington again falls into a bout of *ruinenlust*, a type of aesthetic associated with the apocalyptic zeitgeist—pleasure derived from dilapidated and decaying structures. The zombified, lazy Appalachians take a year to “get around to putting in a bathroom.”

The AA poetic exposes other features of the text. The book opens with familial violence, itself a biblical “sign” of the end times. Covington begins his story with how, as a journalist, he is tasked with covering a story of how a pastor, Glenn Summerford, has tried to kill his wife, Darlene, by forcing her to get bitten by the snakes they also use in their worship services. Covington narrates her ordeal through the journalistic mode of the third person perspective with details no observer could have known: her story itself a micro survivor’s story embedded into Covington’s project. Other anecdotes of violence shade into the grotesque, such as the extended descriptions of what a snake bite feels like, people who have died from bites, and so on.

At another place, Covington exoticizes and even eroticizes a footwashing ritual, he says, “It was peculiar and intimate to touch other men like that.”40 And then, watching a boy get his feet washed:

His eyes were closed, his lips parted. His front teeth, one of which was chipped, glistened in the overhead light. And his body seemed to rock with the motion of the men’s hands on his feet. I was moved by something I could not name. It was like desire, and not like desire, a longing for something that could not be possessed.41

At one level, touching hillbillies’ “thick yellow nails and crooked toes, rough heels, tufts of hair”42 is gross and grotesque, but through the alchemy of narration, it is transubstantiated into a mystical experience that foreshadows the climax of the book: Covington’s own handling of serpents. But even here, we see something akin to Mrs. Turpin’s epiphanic moment. Jesus’ institution of footwashing where the master becomes the servant serves as the prototype for the upside-down societal structure of the apocalypse and the handlers’ ritual. Covington’s inclusion in the ritual as an outsider and his subsequent gush of emotion is as profound a disclosure of the sheer goodness of physical creation and at-one-ness as Turpin’s. So, despite this scene not being the climax, it still nonetheless resonates with apocalyptic amplitude.
Covington’s actual handling of rattlesnakes is, admittedly, an awkward climax, given the “smaller” revelations in the unexpected he experiences over the course of the narrative. In the Afterword, Covington cops to his own hesitancy about including the scene until his editor wheedled it out of him. One can sense this hesitancy and the writing of the scene feels less charged with significance than one expects since it is obviously a weird and adrenaline-inducing ritual. Still, it carries all the hallmarks of a mystical experience: compression of time and space and the loss of a sense of self:

This was the moment. I didn’t stop to think about it. I just gave in. I stepped forward and took the snake with both hands... And suddenly there seemed to be nothing in the room but me and the snake. Everything else had disappeared... The air was silent and still and filled with that strong, even light. And I realized that I, too, was fading into the white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self. It must be close to our conception of paradise, what it’s like before you’re born or after you die.43

And yet, and perhaps the reader of the quotation above felt it too, hillbillies and their problems and the pejorative caricatures of snake handlers all “fade into the white” as one is entranced by Covington’s rendering of his own mystical experience. And again, we are made to feel what he feels. That is the power of narrative; that is the power of the apocalyptic testimony of one who has held primordial death and lived to tell the tale.

**Elegy as an Appalachian Apocalypse**

Through O’Connor and Covington, I have traced out and extracted the basic elements of what I have called an Appalachian apocalyptic poetic. This poetic can now helpfully situate and illuminate overlooked aspects of Vance’s *Elegy* beyond its rhetorical contrivances, putative explanatory power for Trump’s election, and objective correlative deficiencies.44

Like *Salvation*, *Elegy* conforms to the definition of modern Appalachian literature posited earlier. And although, again, as in *Salvation*, even though the narrator is an outsider from a place beyond the ARC’s purview,
the main characters hail from the area. Both Vance’s Middletown, OH, and Jackson, KY are rural, the latter being mountainous. The time frame for the setting is right, too: post World War II, last part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In terms of values, Vance’s preoccupation with both place and family are decidedly conventional. The conditions of existence of underdeveloped or exploited economies (coal mining looms large) are also textually present. Familial violence, metonymizing again a sign of the end times, albeit not consciously, appears frequently in the work. The violence itself is grotesque, as are the numerous anecdotes of dysfunction; for example, his grandmother sets his grandfather on fire, his mother serially dates abusive boyfriends, the Vances value physical violence, implied or done, and so on.

Apocalyptically speaking, Vance also goes to great lengths to describe the area as wasted and exhausted, desperate, decaying—even going as far as to zombify his neighbors. The title itself, an “elegy” and “a culture in crisis” firmly and quickly locate the memoir in pain, aligning it with schadenfreude. On the first page, Jackson is described in stereotypical terms:

Calling it a town is a bit charitable: There’s a courthouse, a few restaurants—almost all of them fast-food chains—and a few other shops and stores. Most of the people live in the mountains... in trailer parks, in government-subsidized housing, in small farmhouses, and in mountain homesteads...  

Here the town seems to be more like a FEMA camp than an established community, even though Vance claims there are 6000 people who live there. Regardless, images of people huddled together in trailer parks or isolated in the mountains without access to nutritious food paint a dystopic scene in the reader’s mind. This is hardly upended by Vance’s nostalgia for playing outdoors. In truth, it only reinforces it; the area itself is “unfathomably beautiful” but serves as a foil to the ugliness of its people. As in any good apocalyptic tale, Nature returns where Man collapses. On a visit as an adult, Vance recalls, “Some of it was as heartbreaking as it was cliché: decrepit shacks rotting away, stray dogs begging for food, and old furniture strewn on the lawns.” The place where he spent most of his childhood, Middletown, Ohio, does not fare much better than Jackson:

Then there was the area where we lived—mostly single-family homes, with abandoned warehouses and factories within walking distance...
street from our house was Miami Park, a single city block with a swing set, a tennis court.... As I grew up, I noticed that the tennis court lines faded with each passing month, and that the city had stopped filling in the cracks or replacing the nets on the basketball courts. I was still young when the tennis court became little more than a cement block littered with grass patches.\textsuperscript{48}

The sense of abandonment, resignation, and \textit{ruinenlust} is palpable; one can almost hear the empty and rusted swings squeaking in the post-apocalypse. But it is not just the places that have declined. Echoing Covington, it is a “culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.”\textsuperscript{49} With an implied sigh, Vance notes,


Behind the drugs, and the fighting matches, and the financial struggles, these were people with serious problems, and they were hurting. Our neighbors had a kind of desperate sadness in their lives. You’d see it in how the mother would grin but never really smile, or in the jokes that the teenage girl told about her mother “smacking the shit out of her.”\textsuperscript{50}

Drugs, familial violence, and financial struggles are merely the manifestations of a deeper “spiritual” poverty, this “desperate sadness.” Hillbillies are not just sad and sociologically oppressed; they are \textit{ontologically} depressed. It is their way of being in the world. These are not the survivors of the apocalypse. These are the dead, wandering the ruins of a place that “is unquestionably beautiful, but its beauty is obscured by the environmental waste and loose trash that scatters the countryside.”\textsuperscript{51} Reified and personified, the people themselves are “white trash,” refuse.

\textit{Elegy} keeps the tension between the survivor and the “dead.” Vance’s present-status-as-writer serves as the post-apocalyptic redoubt from which to consider the Ozymandias-like nature of the past and hillbilly life: “look on My works [memoir] and despair.” \textit{Elegy}, of course, is not as pessimistic as Shelley’s harbinger; Vance escapes, activating that other element of apocalypse: transformation. Following an epiphanic moment, the survivor experiences a type of resurrection, which, for Vance, includes an ascension, that is, escape or apotheosis. For Vance, the moment, freighted with overtones of Sartre’s chestnut tree, Proust’s madeleine, Turpin’s heavenly vision and Covington’s snake is when his mother asks for a cup of clean urine from him to keep her nursing license. Although definitely not as overtly mystical as Covington’s or Turpin’s epiphanies, it nonetheless serves as the point at which Vance himself identifies as significant:
“something inside me broke that morning.” Initially refusing, he gives in after his grandmother addresses the hillbilly inside of him, the one that puts kin and blood above everything else (in the Scotch-Irish mythology): “But she’s your mother and she’s my daughter.” Sensing, it seems, that her grandson is being initiated into the same kind of inescapable dead-end life as her daughter, Mamaw takes Vance in permanently—an action which, according to narrator Vance, is what changed his life by giving him stability enough to make better decisions. Allen Johnson calls this moment “an emotional divorce” from a dysfunctional setting. But in what superficially appears to be just a passing moment when things change and a teenager’s life takes a right instead of a left, an AA poetic sensitizes and reconfigures this scene with deeper significance. Here, it is not just the social order that is upended but the fundamental and primordial relationship of mother and son. Instead of the mother generating and giving life, she demands sterile waste from her own offspring to sustain her “life.” This is “wrong” on many levels but the key of “the time is out of joint” metonymizes the episode as apocalyptic; when mothers need their sons’ piss, it is time to head for the hills, or better yet, leave the hills. On another level and similar to Mrs. Turpin’s final vision, the reordering of the social hierarchy occurs when white trash Vance earns a Yale Law degree and moves to an apartment in San Francisco; the last shall be first. Beyond locating and interpreting watershed moments embedded in modern Appalachian literature, the AA poetic suggests, too, that the voice of the survivor is also the voice of the prophet, but more importantly, the writer. Surviving the encounter with the numinous or the apocalypse endows the writer with a type of august authority to speak with Aristotle’s ethos. It is this prophetic dimension of Elegy that urges Vance to make broad and sweeping generalizations about Appalachian culture that rest not upon thorough and careful research but upon a mystic secret that is then revealed to the reader through the alchemy of reading whereby another’s experience becomes your own.

**Conclusion: The Apocalypse Imaged in Hillbilly Elegy**

Part of the strength of a good poetic in this interdisciplinary age is its ability to cross media and to generate alternative meanings other than the ones urged by the text itself. Such alternative readings empower the reader/viewer by giving choices and by illuminating possible sites of resistance. As indicated, an Appalachian apocalyptic poetic generates readings that resist reductionism and parochialism by resituating texts from and about the area into an apocalyptic frame. Such reframing aligns readings of the
texts under consideration within the Southern Gothic tradition but also transcends that tradition by hearkening back to some of the most ancient forms of literature in history.

In line with my previous analyses and theoretical apparatus, Netflix’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, directed by Ron Howard, images Appalachia as apocalyptic, using hillbilly porn to excite *schadenfreude* and *ruinenlust*, through images of waste, exhaustion and desolation—of things, places, and people.⁵⁷ A rusted old truck (à la Covington) from the 1950s and a porta-john are shown within the first seconds of the opening sequence as the camera films out of a car window in what has become a cliche way to introduce the area and its poverty. Junked vehicles in yards and a shirtless man tossing garbage bags into the back of the truck cement the setting firmly into the viewer’s imagination. Even after leaving Kentucky for supposedly more respectable Ohio, the same imaging of abandonment and poverty continue throughout the various scenes of Middletown.⁵⁸ Vance’s story fades somewhat into the background as Close and Adams compete for an Oscar by slumming it as hard-living Appalachians (performances one critic calls “human anguish turned into Oscar bait”⁵⁹). Filmed mostly with medium and close-up shots, the film lacks the sociological editorializing that made Vance the “Trump whisperer”⁶⁰ in 2016. Instead, it is relational and character-driven without overt politicizing. In short, it is a representation of a family in crisis but not so much a culture. Within this depiction, Vance’s mom, Beverly (played by Amy Adams), is zombified through drug addiction. In one particular scene, she is interrupted by her son as she tries to shoot up in a hotel bathroom. The lighting, of course, is dim fluorescent, her skin, as bluish white as a corpse. On the metaphorical plane, the family repeatedly “consumes” itself through abuse; “cannibalization,” as it were, reconfigured in terms of mother/child co-dependency and physical violence. And the whole community exists in a food waste-land; numerous friends and family members are overweight or obese. Depicted here is not just “a culture of poverty” for the vicarious thrill of voyeurism but apocalyptic dysfunction, a sign of the end of the age. It is precisely at this macrolevel of signification that Howard attempts, but Vance’s text obtains. Reading *Elegy’s* (the book’s) popularity in precisely this way, Trump’s election is less confounding; it was eschatological for an apocalyptic people.

It is the literary power of the apocalypse, too, dressed in Appalachian clothes revealed by this proposed AA poetic that drives the wider popularity of what could have been merely parochial. The bounded geographical particularity of the region and its culture allows for a fenced-in and
tamed apocalypse that artists can return to again and again to assuage its fears that civilization’s end can always be overcome, if even only by escape. The Appalachian apocalyptic poetic also suggests that there is something far deeper going on in Hillbilly Elegy (2016) than a conservative fable dressed up as a memoir. Rather, as a work of literature it does what literature should do, that is, tap into those aspects of human nature that we all share in common, both the beautiful and the ugly. In this construal, the mutability of all things and inevitable mortality are the mechanisms of the apocalyptic aesthetic, launched forward by the arousal of the conflicting affections of schadenfreude and hope. As in all good apocalypses, the end is never the end but a chance at a new beginning. Americans, perhaps of all people, are the most intoxicated by this paradox.
Bibliography


Notes


8 My understanding of this rhetorical technique is indebted to Erik Seeman, Speaking with the Dead in Early America (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).


10 Ibid., 129.


14 Ibid., 509.

15 I capitalize Life here to synthesize the traditional concept of “God,” the postmodern “heart” of “spirituality,” and the lingering Romantic senses of Nature and one’s true Self.

16 O’Connor, “Revelation,” 495.

17 Qtd. in Ed Sikov, Film Studies: An Introduction, 2 ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 149.

18 Although there is disagreement regarding the ARC’s map, it still remains a helpful tool for conceptualization purposes and is used in the text Appalachian Reckoning, mentioned earlier.

19 An interesting note here is that the popular series The Walking Dead is shot and set almost entirely in north Georgia, much of which is considered to be Appalachia by the ARC.

35 Ibid., 213.
36 Ibid., 187.
37 Ibid., 87.
38 Ibid., 89-90.
39 Ibid., 159.
40 Ibid., 119.
41 Ibid., 120.
42 Ibid., 118.
43 Ibid., 169-70.
44 My analysis here is tightly condensed and focused, but this does not necessarily confine the poetic’s ability to illuminate other episodes and sections of Vance’s text.

46 Ibid., 17.
47 Ibid., 18.
48 Ibid., 49-50.
49 Ibid., 7.
50 Ibid., 142.
51 Ibid., 21.
52 Ibid., 131.
53 Ibid.


55 I am indebted to Jeffrey Kripal’s thinking on reading/writing as mystical and occultic; see Jeffrey Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).


58 Almost all early reviews have been negative. For example, see Brian Lowry, “Hillbilly Elegy Turns J. D. Vance’s Memoir into a Dreary Movie,” CNN, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/24/entertainment/hillbilly-elegy-review/index.html.


60 Qtd. in Jacob L. Stump, “What Is the Use of the Colonial Model (or, Better yet, the Concept of Coloniality) for Studying Appalachia?” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2018): 152.
“I Guess I Was a Good Mother After All, Huh?”: (Eco)Feminism’s Unfinished Work in Diane Cook’s *The New Wilderness*
Angelica Maria DeAngelis

**ABSTRACT:**
Focusing on the role of the mother, this article will work to deconstruct the binary structure on which the text itself is built through the alternative mother and daughter narratives entitled “The Ballad of Beatrice” and “The Ballad of Agnes.” The paper argues that the binary structures explicit or implicit throughout the novel initially suggest but ultimately reject any definitive or hegemonic resolution to the narrative’s tension. For woven throughout the novel and destabilizing its binaries and hierarchies of violence are feminist narratives of resistance to patriarchal oppression, celebrations of hybridity and potentialities for survival, which are explored through a consideration of motherhood and matrophobia and contemporary understandings of ecofeminism.

**Keywords:** Speculative Fiction; Critical Ecofeminism; Motherhood and Matrophobia; *The New Wilderness*

On the maps drawn by men there is an immense white area, terra incognita, where most women live. That country is all yours to explore, to inhabit, to describe.
— Ursula LeGuin
The New Wilderness, finalist for the 2020 Booker Prize, is a novel that flirts with and skirts around many feminist and ecological tropes, the most obvious being the mother/daughter and the woman/land relationships. This demands at times that the characters and the reader pass judgment on their value, while presenting the story through overlapping yet contradictory narratives, shifting topographies and layers of (un)truthfulness that refuse to allow a definitive ruling. Is Bea good (or a bad) mother? What is the purpose of the study in which the Community participates? Do the Private Lands actually exist? How can Bea and Agnes, individually and as a family, survive? While focusing on the role of the mother, this article will work to deconstruct (in a loosely Derridean sense) the binary structure on which the text itself is built through the alternative mother and daughter narratives entitled “The Ballad of Beatrice” and “The Ballad of Agnes.” Although told through a third-person narrator, these two “Ballads” are told from the point-of-view (POV) of the character, sometimes re-telling the same event from a different perspective.

The binary structures explicit or implicit throughout the novel could be seen as Hegelian in nature (thesis–antithesis–synthesis) for that would suggest that the tension that exists on multiple levels in the text are, or at least can be, resolved. But they cannot, and that is part of the power of the narrative, that it remains in many ways just as complicated and confusing (as Agnes in the end understands) as it had at the start, and that stories need “all their complications and confusions because those complications and confusions are what make them true.” True, but not necessarily the truth, because in this postmodern? postfeminist? novel there is no one or stable or deeper truth to be uncovered (or to use Heidegger’s concept, no “primordial truth”) but rather one that is temporary and sufficient. The binaries through which humanity has imagined its existence in the novel (Beatrice vs Agnes; Community vs Ranger; Originalist vs Maverick; City vs Wilderness) are not ones that can peacefully coexist, but rather lead to “violent hierarchies” (in a loosely Derridean sense) in which one is subjugated to the other.

But woven throughout the novel and destabilizing its binaries and hierarchies of violence are feminist narratives of resistance to patriarchal oppression, celebrations of hybridity and potentialities for survival. In order to explore these narratives (resistance, hybridity and survival), I will be looking to several aspects of feminist theory. The first is the concept of motherhood, which has been identified as “the unfinished work of feminism” and remains a contentious and even some have argued, “taboo” topic. While mother–daughter relationships bookend the novel, and also
underlie many of the actions and reactions of both protagonists, this first part of the discussion will focus on the “Ballad of Beatrice” which is told from the point of view of the mother. This brief genealogy of motherhood and matrophobia in second wave feminism and Beatrice’s own matrilineal past will help articulate some of the “unfinished work” in feminist theory and in the novel.

I will then engage with ecofeminist readings of the text through “The Ballad of Agnes,” which is not only her own story, but also one told in opposition to that of her mother. While ecofeminism is seen by some as a problematic approach, I believe it is a potentially productive theoretical framework within which to consider the novel, especially given that 21st century interventions have provided more nuanced discussions and corrected for some of the vulnerabilities identified in earlier versions, such as essentializing desires and potential patriarchal cooptation of its ideology of caring. Thus the second part of my discussion will employ a re-articulated eco-feminist theory that reflects recent and serious re-evaluations by Chris Cuomo and other feminist scholars in order to “consider the ways in which the social and ecological worlds are gendered.”

This will allow for considerations of the land–woman connection that are neither masculinist nor essentializing and concepts of hybridity proposed by Donna Haraway, which reject a romantic or essential “earth goddess” ecofeminism, and resist boundaries or binaries, just as the novel itself seems to resist or undo the binaries through which it initially seems to have been written.

Cook’s speculative novel imagines a paradoxical world that offers a model of emancipation through maternal reenactment and remains hopeful despite opening with a stillborn birth and ending with the Community’s imprisonment. While Slavoj Žižek might speculate that “the lines that separate us from barbarism are drawn more and more clearly,” in this novel those lines might be drawn clearly, but they are easily and constantly transgressed. What fundamentally guides this paper is the following question: what are the possibilities for resistance and survival through the mother–child relationship in a post-capitalist, authoritarian nightmare of a future, and can a re-considered eco-feminism be of use?

Cook’s speculative novel takes place in an undetermined yet eerily familiar future of what presumably remains of the Western United States, in which over-industrialization has depleted natural resources and created an unnamed City that has reached level of toxicity that has made life impossible for many. The air pollution in the city has become unbearable, causing many and especially children to fall ill from the poor air quality.
In fact, it is in part the serious respiratory illness from which the child Agnes is suffering that spurs the family to abandon the City and start life anew in the last bit of Wilderness remaining. The family at the center of this novel is the sick child Agnes, her biological mother Beatrice, and her husband Glen, who is the child’s surrogate father, and at times her surrogate mother. The move to the Wilderness (and the regions of the unnamed country are capitalized in the novel, giving them an almost mythological or allegorical air), as mentioned above, was in part motivated by the desire to get Agnes out of the City and into the fresh air—a move seen as necessary by Glen, and at times Beatrice, in order to save the girl’s life. But it is also motivated by Glen’s involvement in “the study,” seemingly as a principal investigator as well as participant, for as a senior academic at the university interested in the study of primitive peoples, he is interested in documenting how a group of disparate people (dubbed the Community) will learn to survive when removed from civilization and left to survive (or not) on their own. Glen’s scholarly interest in the study is shared to some degree with his former student Carl, another member of the Community who seems to have joined the group for more than scholarly interests, as he thrives on the challenge of survival and a desire to rule.

Beyond the academic underpinnings to the study, there is no clear reason for it, nor for the government’s stringent oversight, unless it is because it takes place in the last remaining piece of wilderness which must, at least throughout most of the novel, be protected at all costs. This is done through the persons of the Rangers, similar in some ways to those found today in national forests in the US. But it is primarily their law enforcement responsibilities that are seen in this version of the Ranger, as their main responsibility is to ensure the Community is strictly adhering to the rules in the book-length Manual. The Rangers function as the mouthpiece of the authoritarian Administration (which changes several times over the course of the novel and is marked by a change in the color of the uniform they wear), and increasingly as they become more involved in the life of the Community, the arm or the Administration.

Motherhood, Feminism and “The Ballad of Beatrice”

According to social theorist and feminist scholar Julie Stephens: “Remembering the culture of our mothers and retelling our versions of their lives has long been a feminist preoccupation” and since Second Wave Feminism in the 1970s “the field of women’s life-writing and memoir,
personal memories of mothers have taken on a public or collective significance, in addition of course, to a personal one. But this remembering of the mother is not a simple act of retelling “herstory” as is seen in feminist narratives and theory, and also in “The Ballad of Agnes.” The editors of The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation, explain that if put in the context of a family, feminism can be seen a “mother who did not give enough” while younger generations of feminists (third wave and other contemporary feminists) have told them “that it is time for the old to let go of seventies politics, to practice a little strategic forgetfulness.” Yet the project of the book, a collection of memoirs of pioneers from second wave feminism in the 1960s, is one that stands directly against historical forgetfulness, strategic or otherwise, for as they explain “amnesia about political movements is not only an innocent effect of general forgetfulness, but is socially produced, packaged, promulgated, and perpetuated.”

While memoirs are one way of telling personal stories to a larger community, the ballad is another way. Ballads are narratives, typically anonymous poems or songs, that are told orally and passed from one generation to another. While they can be imaginary, they frequently tell the story of an historical or mythological person or event, and are a means of creating, preserving and sharing communal memory. They often come from the people and can be seen as a kind of folk history, of those marginalized or silenced by more canonical forms of literary expression, as much of women’s words have been in the past. In this novel it is women’s voices and women’s stories that are immortalized in ballads, first in that of the mother Beatrice, then her daughter Agnes, and at the end of the novel another ballad is composed by Agnes for her adopted daughter Fern. These ballads can be seen as a binary opposite of more of phallogocentric writings we see in the novel, such as the scientific study being done on the Community or the Manual, the book of man-made laws that must be obeyed. After the flood that washes away much of the Community’s material belongings, including their personal books, the only book remaining is the Manual, which is imposed on the community as a kind of religious text by the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent Administration. This cleansing of those living in the Wilderness from the contamination of the outside world has clear echoes of the biblical Flood and is perhaps an early portent of the eventual demise of the Community and the Wilderness. While the Manual might be seen as religious, the ballads are both personal and political, as the well-known second-wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” reminds. Even after Bea has fled
the Community and becomes, especially for the Newcomers who did not know her as a person, only a memory and trace, her ballad remains to give voice to her story.

A key motivation for the two protagonists in the novel, mother Beatrice and daughter Agnes, revolves around their mother–daughter relationship and in many ways Beatrice can be seen as feminism’s “mother who did not give enough” mentioned above. For Beatrice, motherhood is a “duty” that she resents and for part of the narrative rejects, resulting in her sudden departure from the Community midway through the story, as she leaves her stunned husband and traumatized daughter behind. For Agnes the filial–maternal relationship is one built on desperation and insecurity, for even before being abandoned she craves a physical and emotional attachment to her mother which her vise-like grip of her mother’s ankle when sleeping and constant mimicking of her mother’s actions when awake, are unable to satisfy. Despite her public proclamations that her mother is dead, perhaps in part to convince herself rather than others, she is unable to put her relationship with her mother, and especially the trauma caused by being abandoned, in the past. That is, she is unable to forget.

Fatherhood in the novel lacks the emotional trauma created and caused by the mother–daughter dyad. Glen is not Agnes’ biological father, as her “father had been a worker on a weekend furlough from the vast Manufacturing Zone outside the City”13—but Glen was “fatherly toward Agnes”14 something we see consistently during their time in the Wilderness. Later when Agnes and Jake, her “life mate”15 as she thinks of him, discuss having children, he shows a much stronger nurturing impulse than does Agnes at that time. They consider their future together, deciding the following: “They would make a family and rear their young, and then, at an age when it seemed their young could take care of themselves, they would send them away to find their own land to explore [and] then they’d have more young.”16 But while Jake was thinking that age would be something around sixteen or seventeen or “whatever is legal,”17 Agnes’ answer was “probably by six.”18 We do see, however, a change in Agnes’ attitude toward mothering and motherhood toward the end of the novel, which will be considered later in this discussion. We also see a difference in framing, for while Jake is basing his decision on patriarchal matters such as legal age, Agnes is clearly an alternative framework for her decision, one which later discussion will suggest is ecofeminist.

Fatherhood within the Community, at least as practiced by Glen and imagined by Jake, is a fairly straightforward relationship of love and care toward one’s child, whether biological or not. On several occasions Glen
refers to Agnes as “my girl,” causing her to beam with love for him. When she misunderstands why he never speaks of Madeline, the stillborn baby that would have been his only biological child had she survived, he smilingly tells Agnes: “You can say her name. It’s nice to hear it—I wasn’t lying.” He further explains, “I don’t talk about her because she’s not here. And you are. And you’re my girl. But if she were here, I would treat Madeline like I treat you.” And given Glen’s desire to move to the Wilderness urgently to save Agnes’ life, as well as the continuous care she shows for her the entire time they spend together in the Wilderness, it is not difficult for Agnes or for the reader to believe that what he is saying is true. Even the manner in which he expresses this, that he would treat Madeline the same way (that he already) treats Agnes makes it clear that she is the standard for his affection by whom all others will be compared. It is after this conversation that she thinks of him as “Glen, her dad” as opposed to Glen, not my real or actual dad, as she does in other places in the book. Agnes, although aware that Glen is not her “real” or biological father, shares with Glen the love and pride that he feels for her, at one point expressing her emotions in a physical way; “her chest puffing at the thought that someone like him could be her dad.” The way the word “could” here is being used is not entirely clear, for does it mean could as in he is her dad, could as in the possibility that he might be/become her dad, or could as in could have been, but is not her dad? The ambiguity of the phrase perfectly reflects the ambiguity experienced by the character herself.

In fact, the only place in the novel she calls him “Dad” is when she is scared from being caught in the sandstorm with her mother, and angry at her mother for allowing Carl to share their bed for warmth. When Glen flashes the cracked mirror looking for them after the storm had subsided, Agnes responds with by howling “‘Dad’, like she was being kidnapped [as] She usually called him Glen.” It is not her relationship with her surrogate father Glen that is troubling for Agnes, but rather with her biological mother Beatrice. In the scene discussed about Madeline, he adds that not only would he treat the two girls the same, but so would her mother, to which Agnes replies “Hmm,” for, as the narrator bluntly interprets for the reader, Agnes “was unconvinced.” As will be seen in the subsequent discussion, motherhood is a thorny and unresolved issue in feminist thinking and not just for Agnes.

Women in the Feminist Memoir Project discuss a serious doubt many had during the early days of feminism, that “one could have children and still be a feminist” and some even received condolences upon the birth
of a child, and especially upon the birth of a son. This attitude toward motherhood can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir’s proto-Second Wave Feminist ur-text *The Second Sex* in which she argued that motherhood added greatly to the “othering” of women and saw it as a kind of forced maternity that women were manipulated or coerced into by patriarchal society, as explained by Neyer and Bernardi in “Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction.” While de Beauvoir did receive criticism on the grounds that her work was ahistorical and essentializing “woman,” there was definitely a strain of later feminists who rejected motherhood, in part because they believed it had been constructed and idealized by patriarchal society as a means of delimiting women’s roles to the private sphere of home and family. It also objectified them and politicized their bodies in a public way that was the opposite of empowering, as has been seen for example throughout the decades of debate over birth control and abortion. Feminist and political theorist Carole Pateman’s 1988 *The Sexual Contract* sees motherhood as further devaluing and degrading women by making them, as well as their offspring, a kind of property of the male within the patriarchal marriage contract, as well as connecting childbearing to some kind of essentialized or natural female state. Other feminists highlighted the problematics of biological essentialism, for as Neyer and Bernardi explain, “Feminists argued that the conflation of biological and social motherhood, the association of both forms of motherhood with nature, and the idealization of mothers’ work as love meant to create, maintain, and legitimize women’s subordination.” Marxist, postcolonial, and radical feminists of the Second Wave (from the early 1960s through the 1980s), as well some as other feminist sub-groups of the time shared this resistance to the ideology of motherhood which they saw as serving to maintain the hegemony of patriarchy, capitalism and racist imperialism.

Cook’s protagonist Bea seems to be not only emerging out of this earlier feminist rejection, or at least suspicion, of motherhood, but also out others—one which emerged during Second Wave Feminism and is known as ecofeminism, and the others which are the Third and Fourth waves of feminism (1990s–2010s, and since 2012 respectively), as well as other post-feminists (who are seen as embracing neo-liberal commodification of motherhood) or anti-feminists (who often engage in a nostalgic idealizing of motherhood). Of all these it is ecofeminism that provides an interesting lens to consider the concept of motherhood and the connection of the Community to the land, as will be explored in the next section.
But first, Bea as mother, and the often-polarized binary of Beatrice and Agnes must be explored in more detail. While this is the primary parent–child relationship, the novel does open with Beatrice giving birth to the stillborn child who had been strangled in uterus by the umbilical cord. She had known for days that the baby had died inside her, for she no longer felt the “kicks and hiccups and flutters” and that was the why she had gone away from the camp in order to give birth alone. As the narrator explains; “It was the only moment they would have together. She did not want to share that. She did not want someone watching her own complicated version of grief.” Her grief is complicated not simply because she had lost the child, but because she had never wanted the baby:

Bea shooed a fly from near the baby’s eyes, which at first had looked startled over having not made it, but now seemed accusatory. The truth was Bea hadn’t wanted the baby. Not here. It would have been wrong to bring her into this world. That’s what she’d felt all along. But what if the girl had sensed Bea’s dread and died from not being wanted? Bea choked. “This is for the best,” she told her. The girl’s eyes clouded over with the clouds that rolled overhead.

Bea is clearly projecting her own guilt onto the dead baby whose eyes first looked startled then accusatory, and after burying the baby “felt foolish that she’d tried to resuscitate what she knew to be dead” because “She thought the Wilderness had cast all sentimentality from her.” She decides not to speak about this ever to anyone, not to her daughter Agnes who she thought would want to know about this sister “who never materialized” and not to her husband Glen “who she thought wanted a child of his own more than he would ever admit.” It turns out that Bea was not alone during the birth, but rather surrounded by a coyote and her kits, and by other animals and the natural landscape, which became one with the child upon its burial. But this aspect of the birth will be considered within the later discussion of ecofemism.

Bea cannot help but compare this birth to the one of her daughter Agnes “what must have been eight years ago now” and here it is not clear if this is the narrator remembering the number of years, of Bea herself. It seems strange that a mother would not remember how many years ago that would have been with more precision and confidence, given that it was her only child before Madeline, and it was because of Agnes’ illness that she and her husband Glen had made the drastic move to the
Wilderness. Then she had hated the experience of giving birth in the City, of feeling “So exposed, used, animal-like” as the doctors and nurses “stared, prodded, and pulled Agnes from her,” but not she longed for the “sterile comfort” of the hospital.

This is all within the part of the novel called “The Ballad of Beatrice,” and although the entire novel is told by a third-person narrative, except for the “Epilogue” that switches to Agnes’ first-person narrative, it is internally focalized to the character of Beatrice. That is, we are told this part of the story from her POV, and understand the actions and motivations of other characters only as far as she is able to—which we learn very early in the text she is not very proficient at concerning her husband Glen and especially her daughter Agnes. For example, the reader is told she “thought” Agnes would want to know about the baby, and she “thought” Glen desperately wanted a child of his own—but she does not seem certain. She also fails to understand what motivates her daughter to mimic her, to follow her around, and to hold onto her ankle when they sleep.

Agnes is in what Bea identifies as the mimicry stage. She knows it is natural for children, and even for animals. But with her own daughter she is unsure, for although “She’d seen it in other children … in Agnes something about it disarmed her.” She believes that she no longer understands Agnes, but that she had until recently, and she no longer knew if her daughter was normal or if she really believed that she was a wolf (which makes sense that earlier Agnes had been described as howling Dad). She knew that “Agnes had become strange to her [but] [s]he didn’t know if this fissure was just something parents went through with their children, or mothers went through with daughters, or if it was just some special hardship she and Agnes would have to endure.” When they go to bed that night, she feels Agnes’ hand wrap around her ankle like a vine, a grasp from which Bea often has to fight the urge to pull away. Later in the story she does pull it away and has to force herself to return her ankle to within her daughter’s reach. For Bea, her daughter’s hand on her ankle is not a physical manifestation of their connectedness, but rather akin to the ankle bracelet of a prisoner. She feels hampered by her small daughter’s hand (for at this time Agnes is about eight years old), just as she at times feels emotionally suffocated by her small and loving family. Before meeting and marrying Glen, Beatrice had enjoyed her unencumbered and uncomplicated life, preferring temporary sexual liaisons to permanent relationships; “Bea had liked the men on leave because they had good hands and they didn’t stick around, and she liked her life and
her job as they were." And although she claimed that “she loved Agnes fiercely” motherhood was a different story, for it “felt like a heavy coat she was compelled to put on each day no matter the weather.”

When Agnes’ health deteriorated, it is Glen who proposes they join the study and barters for three places in it—for himself, for Bea, and for the dying child Agnes. It is Glen who needs to convince Beatrice that they must leave the City to save Agnes, and that if they stay the little girl will die—and his direct comments feel like he had slapped her in the face. She resented Agnes for making her have to leave behind the cozy life she had imagined the three of them would live, her burgeoning career as an interior decorator, and also her own mother whom she needed still.

In an extended paragraph describing this scene, which also includes interior monologue in italics, Bea’s true feelings are revealed in stark contrast to those of Glen. And Bea is aware that hers are not what she is supposed to be feeling, for:

She wished that she’d had better thoughts running through her head. Thoughts like, I don’t even need to think—of course that’s what we’ll do. Like, Whatever it takes. But really she thought, So, we have to risk all our lives just to save hers? Is this the rule, or do I have a choice? She looked at Glen and he had that resolute look. That no other solution look.

Yet she seems unable to control her self-serving desires for her own needs, and even wonders; “This is motherhood?” What Beatrice does not seem to realize is that Agnes loves her fiercely. This is revealed through the binary structure of the narrative, in which “The Ballad of Agnes” echoes scenes from “The Ballad of Beatrice”—only told through the focalization of the child rather than the mother. While Bea is only thinking of herself and her own needs when she decides to keep secret the details of the birth, she neglects to consider those of her daughter who had also experienced her own loss of her baby sister. And her mother shutting her out made the loss even more painful for; “Her mother was, it had seemed to Agnes, gone, though her body remained” and “There would be a shield around her mother for days that made it impossible for Agnes to touch her until they slept, when she would cuff herself to her mother’s ankle.” Agnes had attached herself to her mother’s ankle, almost as if to convince herself her mother was really there. But Bea, in this scene and throughout the novel, never seems to understand or empathize with her daughter’s feelings and needs, although she herself often expresses the need to feel close to Agnes or how much she loves her.
But this night, while Bea was shutting out her family, Agnes was a lonely and suffering little girl. As the narrator explains:

She had needed to be close to her mother because she missed her sister, even though the girl had never been real. Agnes had wanted to ask for comfort but didn’t know how. She’d wondered if she ought to have given comfort to her mother. But her mother was a wall and Agnes assumed her mother didn’t need anything from her. She never did.⁴⁸

This is not the first time that Agnes has felt rejected by or superfluous to her own mother, and so instead turns her thoughts to Madeline; “Agnes decided it was Madeline who might need some comfort.”⁴⁹ She sneaks off to her burial site and looks for something—“She wanted something. Something to remember. To connect to Madeline somehow,”⁵⁰ deciding finally to smear her face with some leaves her mother had placed over the body, leaves sticky with the afterbirth. The narration shift suddenly to the past tense, and we are made aware that Agnes is thinking back on this event, and in a line not clear if this is Agnes herself speaking or the narrator, the reader is told:

What a strange thing to have done. She couldn’t say why she’d done it. She hadn’t thought of the girl in a long time. She hadn’t known what to think about her. But now, again, she felt a deep lonesomeness for Madeline, who probably had no idea how long it had been since she didn’t survive. What a sad thing, to have never been alive in this place.⁵¹

What is sad and ironic is that this is almost the exact opposite of Bea’s reaction to Madeline’s death, for she feels “a fleeting relief” that Madeline will be “poised” in the beautiful spot chosen for her, “instead of facing an unknowable landscape with her, a mother who felt incapable of maneuvering it with grace.”⁵² While Bea never wanted the child, when Agnes becomes pregnant, she experiences what can be called a maternal instinct. She feels able to communicate with her fetus and worries that it might suffer or even had somehow already suffered. She wants to speak with Bea about her miscarriage but says she cannot, that because; “It felt overly human. Rationalizing and worrying and preparing. It felt unlike herself. As though she’d already been changed by the child, even though they would never meet.”⁵³ It is through the juxtaposition of their alternate understandings of this event, as well as their feelings toward motherhood, that Derrida’s concept of différences, with its two connotations of difference
and deferment, as well as Madeline’s function as the trace, that the reader
is invited to make a meaning of the clutching of the ankle, and this frac-
tured mother–daughter relationship.

Although Bea physically abandons her daughter and husband in the
Wilderness upon hearing of the death of her mother when her long-de-
layed letters are finally received, the gap between Bea and her daughter
had already existed and can even be seen in flashbacks she and Agnes
experience about their earlier time together in the City. For Agnes, the
memories of her life in the City are fragmented and seem to come to her
unsolicited. She had been a little girl of five, and deathly ill, so many
of her memories revolve around that. But there are also profound mem-
ories, of a time when she felt connected to her mother and when she felt
safe; “Somewhere in her deepest memory, she recalled that when she felt
really sick, but also other times, the only way to feel better was to crawl
into her mother’s bed. To learn anything about the world, about life, or
about her, Agnes had to nestle alongside her.” And it is this feeling that
Agnes is desperate to recreate when she grasps her mother’s ankle and
when she mimics her mother’s actions. Yet not only was Bea an unreliable
maternal figure then (at least as revealed in her internal dialogue), but af-
after running off and leaving Agnes behind, she has shown that she not only
harbors these feelings but is willing to act on them. Despite being angry
at Bea when she does return, and not understanding why Glen is willing
to accept Bea’s return as well as her physical couplings with Carl as the
new leader, she also wishes at times that she could go back to the family
unit, wondering, “Did they miss the feel of her hands around their an-
kles?” And just before Agnes rejects her mother’s overtures to run away
with her to the Private Lands after Glen dies and it has become clear that
the study is over, Agnes sees herself in the eyes of other members of the
Community, and what she sees makes it clear that she is Bea’s daughter,
and despite her desires to connect with her mother, the instinct that she
chose to follow was to run away.

In this only moment in the entire novel when we hear Agnes call
Beatrice “mom,” it is already too late for the two of them to connect, to live
in the same reality at the same time. For Agnes life in the Wilderness was
all she knew, was “simply life” where for Bea it had been an experiment
and a game—and one from which she fantasizes running away from, at
first alone, and when this causes her to shiver with fear, then with Glen
and her child. Bea, the best storyteller in the community, is very care-
ful in how she speaks to Agnes of the City, because she does not want
the City to become “mythic,” perhaps similar to the way stories of her
own mother’s childhood had become mythic to her. In fact, at times, “Bea didn’t know where her mother’s memories ended and her own began.” She continues to believe that she still needs her own mother, but also feels an inordinate amount of anger at her for having abandoned her, even though it was Bea who had literally closed the door in her mother’s face and fled to the Wilderness. Bea seems angry at her own mother (who does not want her to stay in the Wilderness and is constantly begging her to return in her letters) rather than at herself and her inability to truly bond with her own daughter. She feels a new-found anger for her mother because “Mothers ought to be with their children” and even though she was an adult, “what else did they have but one another, the family, this line of women?” If she was here with Agnes, then her mother should be here with her.

Bea is angry that her mother did not follow her into the Wilderness, the same way her grandmother did not follow her mother to the City. But she also admits that their relationship was less than ideal; “It wasn’t exactly that they’d been so close, but it had been them, together.” It was the matrilineal genealogy of her family that Bea claimed to value, but not only did she continue its fracturing from the previous generation by leaving the City, but also ruptured her connection to the subsequent by leaving Agnes behind when she fled back to the City. The circumstances surrounding her shocking departure deserve further investigation, for they exposed the tangled web of the feelings of anger and abandonment nestled within every mother/daughter relationship in this family. Finally reading one of the long-delayed letters, Bea learns from a lawyer that her mother had gotten sick and died. “My mother is dead” she announces but becomes enraged when she sees Agnes mimicking her sorrow, too wild to feel love on her own—at least this is how Bea interprets her daughter’s performative quivering lip and tearful eyes, “looking now for attention she rarely had desired before and did not deserve now.” We are told:

Bea’s heart stopped for a moment. Her burning cheeks turned icy. Leaning toward Agnes’s face, with cold emphasis, she pointed to her own thumping chest and repeated, “My mother is dead. Mine.”

There. She felt her grief crawl back into her own arms and was so warmed and comforted by it, she almost smiled. Her mother was back with her, safe, where she belonged.
Almost immediately after that she runs after a truck departing from the Wilderness and begs the driver to take her away to the City, where she remains for several years before returning to claim leadership of the Community and try to build a relationship with her now fiercely independent and somewhat wild daughter. What we see here is almost an inversion of the concept of matrophobia, one explained by feminist theorist and poet Adrienne Rich in her 1986 work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution.* Matrophobia is not fear of one’s own mother or of motherhood itself, but rather of becoming one’s own mother, of being bound and limited by patriarchal institutions in society that equate a woman’s value to traditional gender roles. It is a fear of succumbing to the same self-hatred and sacrifice one sees poisoning one’s own mother’s life. But here Agnes is desperate to be(come) her mother, to the point of physically grasping at her in her sleeping hours and mimicking her actions and emotions in her waking hours. It is Bea who experiences a kind of schizophrenic matrophobia, for while she claims to want (to be?) her mother, she rejects the very concept of motherhood that will help her achieve this. And she is blind to the fact that she and her daughter are so alike; when she had complained in earlier letters to her mother about Agnes’ strangeness, her mother had replied; “Sounds just like you at that age.” The narrator adds that “Her forgotten history opened back up to her,” but in that history there seemed little space for her progeny.

**Ecofeminism and the Future in “The Ballad of Agnes”**

For the remainder of the essay I would like to consider what space is available for this progeny, and what meanings have been created by tracing the genealogy and by deconstructing the collision of this mother–daughter dyad, and whether the legacies of ecofeminism are useful to this enterprise. Ecofeminism is a strand of second wave feminism that argues for a connection between women and nature and became “a movement that sees a connection between the exploitations and degradation of the natural world and subordination and oppression of women.” There is a desire to see woman as somehow *by nature* closer to the land, and so see the land *by nature* as somehow maternal. In “Unearthing Herstory” Annette Kolodny wonders if there was a *need* “to experience the land as a nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown” as well as (as seen in the novel) the authoritarian patriarchy of the City which has resulted in the exploitation and devastation of all the land except this last bit of wilderness. Maria Mies concludes the groundbreaking book *Ecofeminism*
co-written with Vandana Shiva with a discussion of “the subsistence perspective” which she describes the life-producing and life preserving work done primarily by women. It can decelerate ecological destruction and can provide “the way out of the many impasses of this destructive system called industrial society, market economy or capitalist patriarchy.”

There has been a backlash against earlier manifestations of ecofeminism on at least two counts; that it is essentializing and ethnocentric which can lead to a false universalism among women, and that it can easily be coopted by patriarchy because of its reliance on an ideology of caring. While there is some truth to the way it has been understood and practiced at times, it is unfair to consider it in such a reductionist manner, as explored by Mellor in her book-length study *Feminism and Ecology.* One way in which she expands and contemporizes ecofeminism is by linking Donna Haraway’s influential essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” to an ecofeminist perspective:

The natural world is not just a resource to be exploited or even something that can be interpreted in a positivist or objectivist sense. Humanity cannot ‘know’ nature. Its active dynamic agency is always beyond our grasp. Haraway sees the natural world as a ‘Coyote or Trickster’ with an independent sense of humour with whom humanity must learn to converse. Knowledge of the natural world is a ‘conversation’, not a discovery.

Further back in feminist history, Simone de Beauvoir had identified the connection made by patriarchy between women and nature, and the desire by patriarchy to dominate both, largely because they are instrumental in the creation of man and because both remind him of his mortality. This is one of the possible directions for ecofeminism outlined by Ynestra King in her chapter “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology,” which is part of a multi-volume collection on environmentalism. The first direction reinforces the women–nature connection, focusing on its embrace of a culture spiritualism and intuition, and its opposition to the patriarchal culture of rationality. This is the direction most often identified by supporters and detractors of ecofeminism, some of whom are feminists themselves. While some radical feminists embrace the gendered connection to nature and the essentialism inherent in this approach, others dating back to the early second wave feminism of de Beauvoir have insisted that this tie between woman and nature must be severed in order for women to be truly liberated. Another direction includes the acceptance of the women–nature link but ascribes it to cultural or societal
rather than biological causes. A woman socialized into this position can also be socialized out of it, and thus “[T]here is no reason to believe that women placed in positions of patriarchal power will act any differently from men.” The final direction identified by King, and one which many contemporary advocates of ecofeminism would find most appealing, is described as follows:

Ecofeminism suggests a third direction: a recognition that although the nature–culture dualism is a product of culture, we can nonetheless consciously choose not to sever the woman–nature connection by joining male culture. Rather, we can use it as a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual, and rational forms of knowledge, embracing both science and magic insofar as they enable us to transform the nature–culture distinction and to envision and create a free, ecological society.

We see the mother Beatrice struggle most with her role in either the dystopian, capitalist city or the man-made and male-controlled Wilderness. The society in the novel is one which exploits both people and land—even the Wilderness is preserved only for its use value. The City has already been destroyed, as its criminality and toxic air quality have made it a dangerous place to live, and impossible after Agnes is born. Even the land surrounding the Wilderness has been degraded by the mining industry which has left behind the litter of abandoned machinery in a scarred landscape cut through by the Poisoned River. In the City Beatrice had been free to engage in superficial and transactional encounters that could be described as masculinist within its patriarchal and capitalist framework, and it is a kind of “freedom” that she regrets leaving behind. She had been an interior decorator there and brings with her to the Wilderness a forbidden relic of that life, a glossy magazine of interior design. Even though surrounded by a husband who loves her and child whose life in being saved by the clean air, Beatrice is unable to leave her previous life behind. She accepts favors of candy from one of the Rangers with whom she plans to use to escape to the idyllic Private Lands, remains connected to her own mother through letters, and for a time abandons her family in the Wilderness to return to the City. When she reappears, she chooses to partner with the male leader Carl in a transactional way that will guarantee food and care for her ill husband and child, The Wilderness has become increasingly hostile, and its Rangers have become increasingly fascistic, and the Community must now compete for food and shelter.
with another group, the Mavericks. For Beatrice the Wilderness has never been a home, but a stop on the way to something better, the promised land of the Private Lands, a capitalist suburban utopia whose existence is likely mythical.

The idea of Bea as a figure of redemptive motherhood is not one adopted in the story. She is no mother goddess giving birth to the new generation in the Wilderness, but rather a woman who gives delivers a stillborn baby on the hard earth while longing “for the stagnant scent of the hospital room” where she had given birth to Agnes in “sterile comfort.” Bea, clinging to the past of the City or imagining the future of the Private Lands, in unable to consciously choose to create a different kind of culture as described by King above, that neither rejects nor mimics masculinist culture, but rather integrates its quality of rationalism with those of intuition and spirituality.

This stillbirth of the baby girl Madeline, spoken about earlier in this article, had been witnessed by a coyote mother and her kits, the coyote being the trickster creature that Haraway offers in her “radically different” approach to “negotiating a feminist environmentalism [for the] Coyote Trickster not only resists glorified mystification, the Coyote also destabilizes the dualism of active/passive, resource/user, knower/known on which an epistemology and a politics of domination is based.”

While Bea kicks the coyote on the way back to camp, Agnes is described in several places in the novel as being part animal, as being wild, as being something other than simply human. Again Haraway’s conceptualization of the coyote is useful to the discussion:

The Coyote, like the human, is both part of nature and a creator of “artifactual” nature. Haraway’s theory of “artifactualism” further upsets the walls between nature and culture by figuring nature as something made, not something existing “out there” in some pure form. Conceiving of nature as made, as artifactual, seems to risk a wholesale appropriation of nature by culture, yet Haraway defines nature as “made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans.”

This is not an essentializing view of an eternal nature, but one which acknowledges that society, be it patriarchal or (eco)feminist, has a role as co-architect, along with humans and animals/non-humans in constructing nature; thus “nature is an artifact which cannot pre-exist its social construction.” While some have voiced concerns about a concept based on Greimasian structuralism may not have the ability to open the
nature/culture interaction. Haraway insists that a consideration of the “reflexive artifactualism [of nature] offers serious political and analytical hope.” Therefore the Wilderness, like the City, the Private Lands and the Resettlement, is in part a result of the society in which it exists, be it the patriarchal capitalism of Beatrice’s world, or the Ecofeminist society of Agnes and her daughter Fern. While Beatrice is the biological mother in the story, it is Agnes who is given the potential for creation and maternal behavior, both in the sense of Haraway’s artifactual, but also because she becomes an adoptive mother, and she composes “The Ballad of Fern.” Fern, “as scraggily as a coyote pup and as curious too,” and Agnes wind up in the Resettlement complex, as their former Wilderness is turned into the housing developments of Beatrice’s imagined Private Lands. For Beatrice, still ensconced in her previous life and gone missing after the violent “Ranger Roundup” of the Community members, even the Resettlement would have represented a kind of paradise of civilization and order in which “The road out was clean and paved black. A fresh yellow line painted down the middle.” But for Agnes who is housed in the Resettlement, the description does not end there: “At the end of that road was a gate and a barbed fence like we’d seen across the Poisoned River. When we looked back at the gate sliding shut, we could see the Caldera standing sharp and white over the rooftops of the town.” The Caldera was an off-limits volcanic crater that loomed over the Wilderness, and beckons to those in the Resettlement. Bea, reading an official map, had described it as “nothing important,” but she also insisted on leading the group to the summit as they had been ordered to do by Administration. For Agnes the Caldera has an entirely different meaning; “She saw her Community and the vast Caldera ecosystem behind them. They were specks. And the Caldera was a speck on the map.” For Agnes she, the Caldera, and presumably the Resettlement, are all part of the same “ecosystem” as she describes it, in which both humans and nature are “specks” or equally (in)significant. Fern, Agnes’s adopted daughter, is also described as part of nature, a hybrid creature:

She is probably seven years old now, as scraggily as a coyote pup and as curious too. When she was young and in the Wilderness and we were on the run, sometimes she didn’t bother to walk. She just sprinted on all fours as fast as any of us were walking. She loped alongside a coyote we encountered once by a stream, and the coyote, convinced of her feral canine-ness, yipped and bounced around her.
Agnes, who had felt “overly human” after her miscarriage, and her adoptive daughter Fern, have become hybrid creatures of the ecofeminist landscape, both creators and created. In an “Epilogue” that is told in the first-person narrative (unlike the third person of the rest of the novel), Agnes tells her daughter (as she calls her) “The Ballad of Fern,” and other stories, “with all their complications and confusions because those complications and confusions are what make them true. It feels at times like the only instinct left in me. It’s the only way I know to raise a daughter. It’s how my mother raised me.”

This is neither a rejection nor a romanticization of motherhood so prevalent in popular culture today, nor the matrophobia of earlier feminist theory, but one which embraces all the messiness and disappointments, and acknowledges the strength of its maternal genealogy. It is the unfinished work of feminism which can become integrated into the work of a de-romanticized ecofeminist society, as suggested in the “Ballad of Fern” whose unfinished story is needed for Agnes to begin the process of knowing her mother and herself. For, as Agnes herself tells us:

I didn’t understand until I had the chance to care for this little Fern and I looked at her and saw all that came before and all that would come after and all its potential awfulness and certain beauty and it was too much for me to bear. I looked away, scared, disgusted, overcome with love, on the verge of crying and laughing, and finally, finally, finally I began to know my mother.
Bibliography


Notes

9 Stephens 69.
12 Ibid, 23.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid, 231.
18 Ibid, 230.
19 Ibid, 253.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid, 150.
23 Ibid, 75.
24 Ibid, 253.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, 8.
33 Ibid, 9.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 For further discussions of this concept see for example Gérard Genette, *Narrative*

38 Cook, Wilderness, 11.
39 Ibid, 11.
40 Ibid, 19.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid, 59.
44 Ibid, 59-60.
46 Ibid, 175.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid, 176.
52 Ibid, 10.
53 Ibid, 286.
54 Ibid, 212.
55 Ibid, 251.
56 Ibid, 68.
57 Ibid, 87.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid, 66.
60 Ibid, 67, italics in original.
62 Ibid, 110.
63 Ibid, 111.
64 Ibid, italics in original.
67 Ibid.
75 King, "Ecology of Feminism," 333.
76 Ibid.
77 Cook, Wilderness, 8.

Alaimo, “Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions,” 145.


Cook, Wilderness, 320.

Ibid, 319.

Ibid.

Ibid, 293.

Ibid, 320.

Ibid, 322.

Ibid, 321.
‘Watchmen’ and ‘Hunters’: Reclaiming Black and Jewish Bodies in Contemporary American Superhero Series
Rebecca L. Gross

ABSTRACT:
This essay explores how contemporary American superhero television series grant Black-American and Jewish-American inheritors of intergenerational trauma the power to more deeply connect with their ancestors’ experiences. The work of scholars who write on intergenerational memory and trauma (Marianne Hirsch, Eva Hoffman, Victoria Aarons, and Cathy Caruth) has invaluably contributed to the scholarly conversation this article is born from. I join this work with rhetoricians to identify how this new genre turns intergenerational pain into embodied and artistic protest. In conversation with the aforementioned scholars, I analyze two TV series — *Hunters* (2020) and *Watchmen* (2019) — and contend that the contemporary superhero genre is used as a powerful tool to reshape the way Jewish-American and Black-American bodies are represented and recognized. It is not just that these two television series were released within a year of each other that creates a link between them; rather, *Watchmen* and *Hunters* set aside the tendency to compare trauma, and instead seek to join narratives of ancestral persecution to fight against a common oppressor. 2022 America, which is undergoing volatile and revolutionary crises of identity, oppression, and liberation, these narratives reframe and subvert the normative conception of what kinds of bodies can and should be seen as heroes, allowing for Black-American and Jew-
ish-American bodies to become dominant in narratives of power. As characters in these series connect with the collective traumas of their ancestors, stories are re-told; bodies are re-seen; and trauma is re-defined.

**Keywords:** Jewish-American Studies, Holocaust Studies, Black-American studies, Embodied Memory, Intergenerational Trauma, Superhero Narratives

In an article I co-authored with colleagues at Loyola Marymount University in April of 2020, we turned to the rhetoric of the present COVID-19 moment and asked: “What’s going to be archived in this moment of pandemic politics?” and “How will changes to our habits become part of our ‘bodily memory’?” We described “bodily memory” as “the ways that our bodies hold onto—archive—information” and we examined the rhetorical processes by which our bodies become archives of traumatic memories, particularly those cultivated by a collective experience such as the pandemic. These embodied traumatic memories, studies suggest, are literally encoded in our genes, passed onto future generations; but these traumatic memories also become narratives we walk with, rhetorical spaces we occupy. In *Rhetoric’s Pragmatism*, Steven Mailloux describes “embodied experience as narrative and narrative as embodied experience.” Embodied experience and narrative are one in the same, particularly when I and most of my city-dwelling colleagues are existing in bubbles of about 1000 square feet. Within the strange parameters which our bodies are kept in right now—one in which we sleep, work, and try to relax in—boundaries between our minds, bodies, and surroundings are being blurred.

The concern my colleagues and I expressed in our article for Black and Brown bodies in this moment was a call to action, an urgent call for rhetoricians and scholars in other spheres of the humanities to respond to the COVID-19 crisis with the assumption that many different narratives are operating simultaneously, and some of those narratives are informed by hegemony that ignores “structural and epigenetic inequalities that have been in place since American slavery.” When considering the massive tragedy of how this virus has been handled in America, it is important to remember that “the virus has not created these structural inequalities; it has only made them apparent.”
Even early in the pandemic, we predicted that our bodies, in this pandemic moment and in the months and years after the pandemic, would be important portals into understanding our narratives. We were (unfortunately) prescient in our hypothesis of the poor handling of the virus here in the United States. Perhaps not-so-coincidentally, just after my colleagues and I published this article, the country erupted in a movement for racial justice after the murder of George Floyd. Occupation of public spaces in the name of protest is creating new narratives of embodied progressive values, budding up against a right-wing government and nearly half the body politic that supports this wing. New questions are emerging about which bodies will survive the two-layered pandemic this country is experiencing: the COVID-19 virus and the undemocratic conservative regime upholding white supremacy in the United States of America.

To deeply investigate in the effort to find answers, we should turn to the stories our bodies hold within them. Our bodies are texts to be read—“heteroglossia” of “the variety of individual voices” that occupy each of our persons and the social-political body of the United States. Each human body is the culmination of generations of individuals’ experiences, traumas, and memories—and of course, the narratives each individual encodes through their own lived experiences. Ultra-contemporary literature and media being released and produced in this moment supports my thesis suggesting that our bodies act as texts; or perhaps, a more accurate description of this phenomenon is that our bodies are vessels that hold many texts of ancestral and lived traumas. Our bodies become archives of joys and stresses, pleasures and pains, celebrations and catastrophes.

In the coming months, years, and decades, many of us will be holding onto the traumatic memory of this moment in our bodies. As Avery Gordon calls for in *Ghostly Matters*, “we have to interpret anew the signs of this event to grasp it, to understand” the trauma of this moment; we must develop a process for excavating our bodily archives. The HBO series *Watchmen* (2019) shows that “in the rewriting of this event, a different story or history is made possible, and we are offered some important lessons for how to counter” hegemony that remains pervasive in this country. Psychological and sociological research makes it explicitly clear that if we fail to successfully tap into our bodily archives of trauma, this embodied wounding will continue to appear in future generations.

As a scholar of literature, my contribution to this undertaking will be in unveiling narratives which offer a framework by which we might learn
to tap into the collective and personal embodied traumas that continue to make this country sick. Through analysis of the 2019 series *Watchmen* and the 2020 series *Hunters,* this paper argues these palatable superhero narratives 1) awaken audiences that have not experienced a specific cultural trauma to a collective pain they are implicated in; and 2) empower the peoples who have been collectively impacted by the States’ hegemony, presenting a world in which their bodies have strength to defeat their history of oppression. In *Watchmen* and *Hunters,* American narratives of intergenerational embodied trauma are re-imagined, re-told, and re-claimed, and new frameworks are built to guide the audience on a path toward successfully collapsing unjust systems dictating their lives.

Critics may argue that contemporary literature and media cannot do the work of broadcasting collective memories of events such as the Tulsa Race Massacre and the Holocaust because the contemporary generation did not experience the trauma first-hand. These same critics may also feel that using superhero fantasy narratives to represent horrors of such collective traumas is disrespectful to the solemnity these events call for, that they denature the level of disgust audiences should feel when engaging with these events. To this position, I respond: If we can no longer accurately represent stories of trauma that occurred eighty, one-hundred, four-hundred, or four-thousand years ago, then who will remember these traumatic histories? How will we continue to make these events real to the contemporary generations, and how will we replicate the feeling of large-scale collective traumas in the present moment?

For third- and fourth-generation survivors of trauma—those whose grandparents survived the collective traumatic event—they are tasked with “mak[ing] emphatic and... respond[ing] to the experiential and conceptual gaps in making sense of enormity of Holocaust history.”13 Further, “such work calls upon a deviation from and a defamiliarizing of conventional boundaries and structures.”14 This is the same reason Damon Lindelof, creator of *Watchmen* (2019), succeeds in creating this story about a Black female police officer who is a descendent of a Tulsa Race Massacre survivor. This protagonist’s story is not Lindelof’s, and it’s not his ancestors’ story. However, as an American, Lindelof is implicated in this story, one that is centrally and fundamentally grounded in the larger history of white supremacy in this country. Similarly, third- and fourth-generation trauma survivors such as David Weil, the creator of *Hunters,* must continue to share their ancestral stories of trauma to unpack his bodily archive of trauma; in not doing so, he allows his body to continue “generat[ing] additional somatic issues” that replicate those
of his ancestors. As third- and fourth-generations survivors, our bodies, themselves, call on us to release this trauma, and to educate others throughout this process.

**Situating Collective Trauma in the Body, Situating the Body as Archive**

Eva Hoffman refers to “collective memory” as a “kind of shared ‘memory’ in which we hold certain aspects of the past as cultural property in common and ‘remember’ them together.” The Holocaust is an event that has indisputably become a collective memory of the Jewish people—“a past that is no longer actually remembered by many, but that is relevant to us together, and that has affected our cultural consciousness.” This “cultural consciousness” Hoffman discusses in her monumental *After Such Knowledge* has become deeply embedded in identity of contemporary Jews everywhere, whether or not they are direct descendants of Holocaust survivors, because it is an example of collective trauma central to a larger historical narrative of antisemitic oppression.

In her discussion of second-generation survivors (children of those who directly survived traumatic events), Hoffman states clearly that the “severance between experience and retrospection” creates a kind of “impersonal memory”—one that is not “embodied” because it is not experienced. When considering grandchildren and great-grandchildren of survivors, I want to complicate the notion that inherited traumatic memories cannot be “embodied.” Whereas Hoffman establishes embodiment as the lived experience of undergoing events that will become part of an individual’s psychic memory, I am compelled to consider how Hoffman’s definition of embodied memory might be adapted beyond the confines of lived experience to the inherited experience. Rob Baum refers to this as “the somatization of memory: involvement of the descendant’s body in a received memory, not only images, ideas, and thoughts but also sensations, ailments, and somatic history.” If descendants of trauma survivors can indeed receive memory and “somatic history,” then the embodied experience of the third-generation is hyper-personal rather than impersonal, although the descendent may not be conscious of the somatic history they carry within their bodies until they are called to investigate it more thoroughly.

Psychological brain mapping studies show that those who survived the Holocaust, the Tulsa Race Massacre, or any other collective-trauma encode their traumatic memories in a different location in their brain than they do non-traumatic memories. According to Baum:
Traumatic memory is placed in a different area than non-traumatic memory—in the amygdala, one of the brain’s more primitive regions. As a result (which may not be direct), the body as archive of traumatic memory confronts issues that include temporality, splitting, resilience, and varying notions of selfhood.

Lived traumatic memories, ones Hoffman describes as “embodied,” are situated materially, as physical markers in one of the earliest parts of the human brain, the limbic system. Van der Kolk’s studies on PTSD patients in *The Body Keeps the Score* clearly illustrate this, too—“when traumatized people are presented images, sounds, or thoughts related to their particular experience, the amygdala reacts with alarm,” but the question of whether or not their descendants’ amygdala light up when presented with similar imagery is still under investigation. Despite that, the biological field of epigenetics—which asserts that “life events can change the behavior of a gene, [but] they do not alter its fundamental structure” while “methylation patterns...can be passed on to offspring”—is gaining traction as more studies are published. These studies hint at new ways we as scholars of literature, culture, and rhetorics can investigate the body as a text, one that is recursive in its inherent methodologies of archiving, transferring, and unveiling traumatic memories. Real work occurs when these inherited traumatic memories are brought to the surface; this is when revisions of the past can be made as a mode of countering dominant hegemonic narratives.

Van der Kolk makes it “clear: Children who are fortunate enough to have an attuned and attentive parent are not going to develop [a] genetically related problem.” However, second- and third- generation survivor memoirs do not describe this “attuned and attentive parent,” but rather detail “subtle cycles, or loops, in which maternal states of absence or inner ‘exile’ lead to withdrawals front he infant and the present, in turn driving the child to withdraw in confusion and retreat into his own exile.” These loops are recursive in their nature too, and like any text that never makes it to a stage of revision, these horrors are repeatedly reproduced, re-traumatizing survivors and distracting from the present. So often, these states of absence produce what Gabriele Schwab calls “the collective or communal silencing of violent histories” which “leads to a transgenerational transmission of trauma and the specter of an involuntary repetition of cycles of violence.” So I, in the field of literature, ask: How does the literature, film, and television produced by third- and fourth-generation survivors replicate, but also challenge, these “cycles,” these “loops” of trauma and violence?
Perhaps more importantly, how do these reproductions subvert these cycles, challenge them, make them their own and reinstate power where it had been previously stripped? Schwab turns us to the body, which she writes often “becomes the site of narration, acting in corporeal cryptography the conflict between the encrypted lost self and the traumatized self. In telling this story, the body can speak.” And so I turn to the ways in which third- and fourth-generation bodies are currently speaking to their ancestral trauma, reframing it for a contemporary audience; in doing so, I develop a theory of why this embodied intergenerational trauma is ultra-present in 2020 America and suggest there is power in re-visiting and re-vising these stories for a contemporary audience.

**Excavating the bodily archive through fantasy**

The physical nature of “traumatic memory,” which according to Baum, “often generates additional somatic issues” making “survivors’ descendants...prone to manifest[ing] inherited or family trauma without direct medical cause” is not wholly self-shattering and destructive. The stories of trauma, physically held in the bodily archives of survivors—in their guts, muscles, cells—are spaces of empowerment, memorialization, and healing. The beauty in multi-generational inherited embodied trauma is that while “bodies as archives eventually die...” “the imprint it has left, perhaps over generations, on affect and its expression in speech or writing” holds power to remember and retell history as it has been authentically experienced by those most deeply affected by the trauma. If the narratives lived first through ancestors become encoded in the viscera of second-, third-, and fourth-generation trauma survivors, then I argue, the bodies of descendants become “inscribed memorials” vowed to “continue upholding our promise to pass the story forward, generation to generation, as though each of [them] were there.” Imagine the implications of this for dominant archives, memorials, museums, and other modes of historical education: archives created and upheld by oppressive and hegemonic structures are now met with a counter-archive, making loud the narratives that have been buried or silenced.

Still, third- and fourth-generation survivors are situated in a complicated position in this task to remember their ancestors’ experiences. Third-generation survivors are simultaneously part of the group that claims the memory of a traumatic event as their own, while also existing as outsiders to the cultural memory that defined their ancestors. Descendants live on the outskirts of their ancestral trauma in their temporal distance from the event, but their bodies connect them directly
to the people who experienced the trauma first-hand. The third-generation straddles the inherited bodily ‘knowing’ that comes with being a descendent of a trauma-survivor and the public naivety of what it means to experience large-scale cultural devastation. They are being tasked with, in Elizabeth Rosner’s words, “embody[ing] the DNA of the dead.” Rosner actually uses the “we” pronoun—“we will embody the DNA of the dead”—speaking on behalf of the collective group she is a part of: descendants of Holocaust survivors. Rosner consciously collapses the distance between those that experienced trauma survival firsthand, and those who did not, carry the traumatic event in their bodies even generations after those who survived it, directly, have died.

As Schwab suggests, speech and writing are the portal through which these descendants can walk into and share their embodied archives. The suggestion that we can translate our embodied archives to the page or the screen is certainly one that requires us to engage in metaphors of the self: How does one do the work of uncovering their inherited, embodied trauma, and translate it into a medium that can be understood by an audience that has very little knowledge or understanding of the traumatic event? To more deeply understand this, we must turn to the fantasy work being done in *Watchmen* (2019) and *Hunters* (2020), two series that engage with the literature exploring intergenerational trauma. While there have been literary representations of individuals inheriting their ancestors’ specific and individualized traumatic memories, third-generation survivors in *Watchmen* and *Hunters* engage with their inherited traumatic memory of collective, cultural traumatic events described by Hoffman. Indeed, the grandchildren represented in these series discover their grandparents’ memories through their bodies; however, these memories are part of collective cultural memory of events emblematic of hegemonic systems of oppression, often created and perpetuated by state institutions.

The act of uncovering the inherited traumatic memories and showcasing these narratives through the superhero fantasy genre, as seen in *Watchmen* and *Hunters*, is a particularly interesting rhetorical strategy. Critics have felt as though this strategy undermines the intention of preserving authenticity and solemnity required of media tackling content related to mass-scale tragedies. Theodor Adorno’s claim that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is Barbaric,” which condemns the act of beautifying the Holocaust through art, might apply to other types of Holocaust/massacre representations in media as well, i.e., “low culture” mediums such visual superhero narratives. The Auschwitz Memorial Museum, for example, took serious issue with *Hunters*. On Twitter, the museum accused
the series of creating “foolishness & caricature” out of the Holocaust, welcoming “future deniers,” and failing to “honor the victims by preserving factual accuracy.” However, representing large-scale collective traumas through a superhero/comic book lens has been done extensively before, and it has been both widely celebrated and widely critiqued, depending on which critic is consuming the media. Responses to one of the most beloved and complex supervillains in comic book history, Magneto, illuminate this controversy. However, as Rosner calls on descendants to embody the DNA of those who survived the greatest horrors in human history, we are left with the question of how one can successfully represent trauma, and rhetorically convince the most people to empathize with this cultural trauma.

In her book *Holocaust Graphic Narratives*, Victoria Aarons analyzes “the medium of comics as it elasticizes itself to shape around and maneuver... the tensions, the gaps, and the mediating intercessions that reflect the complicated ways in which memory travels through time and space” ultimately, “producing a material extension of trauma.” Although some have seen the comics medium as inappropriate for depicting trauma, a new camp of scholars including Aarons views comics as a generative form specifically suited for showcasing “the language of trauma.” We should agree with Aarons’ appraisal of the unique power this genre has in “contributing to the living shape, the experience of memory and testimony [...] achieved through temporal disjunctions, shifting modes of discourse, and the exchange of narrating perspectives.”

The two television series referenced in this article borrow the superhero trope popularly found in the comic book medium Aarons analyzes. In the “fiercely competitive North American” comic book market, “these narratives, often featuring... clashes between good and evil, continue to be popular and, for better or worse, typify the [comics] genre.” These series both succeed in appropriating these tropes, commonly written into comics, generalizing these ethical discussions to wider audiences. However, equally important to the continued usage and popularity of the genre is the shift from focusing on “long-underweared (or often scantily-clad)” characters and “youthful escapism” to showing “a mature sophistication by repeatedly engaging with political issues and tackling corruption, government scandals, bigotry, racism, alcoholism, domestic violence, gender discrimination, drug abuse, warfare, the War on Terror,” and in *Hunters* and *Watchmen*, intergenerational trauma that deeply affects races, ethnicities, and cultures that have undergone a collective trauma. Using these comic book tropes in television series is an easy transition from the
print medium, because the “wide range of modes of visualizing trauma” is easily translated to the screen from the page.\textsuperscript{44} These visual representations of intergenerational trauma—whether on the screen or in print—take advantage of this popular genre to 1) extend the personal, individual’s experience to the collective cultural and to 2) transgressively resist dominant, hegemonic portrayals of groups who were oppressed.

\textit{“You can’t heal under a mask, Angela. Wounds need air...”}\textsuperscript{45} Based on the 1986 graphic novel of the same name,\textsuperscript{46} the 2019 HBO series \textit{Watchmen}’s central narrative involves a Black masked police officer and her fight to take down a white supremacist group that has begun threatening Tulsa, Oklahoma. While our central heroine, Angela (Regina King), endeavors to dismantle the toxic white supremacists labeling themselves as the “Seventh Kavalry,” she is met with a personal haunting of her own past when her estranged grandfather, Will Reeves (Louis Gossett Jr.), informs her of her long-lost ancestral history /trauma. While the original series was engaged with politics of the Cold War, the show takes a closer look at the inter-generational repercussions of anti-Black racism in the United States through the lens of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

When Angela receives a surprise visit from her grandfather, who she didn’t know was alive, she is met with shock and curiosity. In Episode 6 of the series, “This Extraordinary Being,” Angela takes a handful of her grandfather’s “memory pills,” called “nostalgia,” in an effort to learn more about him and her family’s history.\textsuperscript{47} She discovers her grandfather was Hooded Justice, from the original \textit{Watchmen} comic, who, according to this TV series, was a victim of the Tulsa Race Massacre. As just a child, he was the sole survivor of his family, and the racialized trauma he experienced during this event follows him throughout his life. He was harassed by the Ku Klux Klan as an adult, nearly killed in an attempted lynching. To top off his intersectional trauma, he was a closeted gay man in a heterosexual relationship. Angela sees her grandfather’s past when she takes these “nostalgia” pills, but moreover, she \textit{becomes} her grandfather for a period of time, walking in his shoes as though his memories are her own. She becomes both the observer and the subject of these memories, both viewing and feeling how her grandfather’s childhood trauma and encounters with racism as an adult have deep, long-lasting effects on him; but she also \textit{feels} this experience in her mind and body as she embodies her grandfather’s body in these memories.

Angela walks in her grandfather’s footsteps on multiple levels: She learns he became a vigilante because he saw no other way to go about
taking down the Klan, and it becomes obvious that history has repeated itself through her own career as a masked officer fighting the Seventh Kavalry. Although Angela’s ancestral memory is a result of the implanted memory she accesses through “nostalgia” pills, her experience “remembering” her grandfather’s past is an embodied one on two fronts: She sees herself in her grandfather’s memories and sees her grandfather in her life choices. On a third plane, Angela embodies her grandfather’s psychic pain in the aftermath of taking the “nostalgia” drug; her awakening to her grandfather’s past is accompanied by days of a coma-type affliction, seizures, and sweating. This kind of memory, while brought on by pills, still produces a body-centered reaction in Angela.

We can view Angela’s body as “a palimpsest, a document that has been inscribed several times, where the remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased scripting is still detectable.” As a palimpsest, Angela walks in her grandfather’s footsteps without even knowing him and his history. Angela’s body’s spatial relationships with the world around her—her choice to live in Tulsa and her career as a masked fighter of white supremacy—emulate that the etchings of her grandfather’s life as a survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the original Hooded Justice live on in Angela’s body. But we can also view Angela’s body as an archive—“simultaneously the expression and the repression of memory” in which “descendants may (or may not) ‘know the story,’ but may nonetheless embody the trauma.” In this vision, Angela’s “body as archive” is “multiply constituted,” conceived “not merely [as] the conjunction of memory and postmemory” but also as a “reembodiment; the reciting of memory and its resisting.” This imagining allows for possibilities of reclamation, empowerment, and deliberate challenging of hegemonic narratives that live on, inscribed in Angela’s flesh.

A major theme in both the Watchmen series and the original graphic novel is “time,” and Doctor Manhattan’s ability to view time as non-linear—the past, present, and future occurring simultaneously. Amazingly, the series itself is a representation of this nonlinearity. The series is deeply invested in bringing the buried American past to the surface; it does this in two ways: It uses the original Watchmen story and imagery to build an alternative world, and it also roots its narrative in 1921 Tulsa, a history not taught to most American children. At the same time, it roots itself in the present-day, allowing for viewers to make connections between the traces of that past in contemporary America. And it wouldn’t be Watchmen if it wasn’t eerily prophetic in that it was written, filmed, and it even aired prior to the dreadful year of 2020. The narratives and meta-narratives
present in the *Watchmen* series nearly predict the unraveling of America, perhaps most prominently through the boiling point that was reached after George Floyd’s murder and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests that took this country and the globe by storm.

But other components of the 2019 *Watchmen* feel strangely familiar, too; for one, we all have become “masked” due to the global pandemic (although, only some of us have become vigilantes). Certainly, there was no way for the series creators to genuinely predict what 2020 would look like regarding the protests and pandemic; however, rooting the story in the descendent of an individual who survived the Tulsa Race Massacre successfully makes the argument that the white supremacy we see dictating our present America is no different than that which dictated the often forgotten, deplorable 1921 slaughter in Tulsa. Topics that Moore and Gibbs were critiquing and exploring in the graphic novel, such as war, identity, and time, enter the 2019 series recursively. The series communicates that understanding the narratives that have been—and are currently being—inscribed in our bodies has never been more important, because if we fail to do so, they will repeat again on a potentially disastrous front.

When Angela ingests the “nostalgia” pills, her “body essays to turn the reality of the trauma into its opposite: to create enough distance and dissociation from the trauma event (and the memory of that event) that it becomes ‘unreal,’ like a work of fiction”; but at the same time, this shock is met with the revelation that her body is implicated in the past. Angela’s life as a masked officer fighting for justice of Black and Brown bodies is, without her even knowing it at the time, a direct carrying out of the destiny her grandfather put in place for her. Embodied destiny becomes a character in Episode 8, “A God Walks Into Abar,” when we discover that Angela’s husband Cal (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) is actually Doctor Manhattan, the blue god of the original *Watchmen* graphic novel. Most interesting about this revelation, however, is that the way in which Angela’s relationship with Doctor Manhattan plays a role in her fate to avenge her family history and defeat the white supremacists in Tulsa. Angela’s grandfather, Will Reaves, appears in Tulsa suddenly because Doctor Manhattan’s ability to engage with time fluidly enables him to inform Reaves of the situation there; this is why Angela is fated to take his memory pills, and this is how Angela ultimately is able to solve the case of the Seventh Kavalry to successfully save Tulsa from white supremacy.

In this episode, Angela’s body is the vehicle through which an authentic narrative of her ancestral stories—albeit traumatic ones—are realized. Sharon Crowley argues on behalf of the potentials of fiction to work as
engines of authenticity. In analyzing Slavoj Zizek’s claim, “at its most fundamental, fantasy tells me what I am to others,” Crowley implies that the relationship between fantasy, our sense of self, and how this “self” interacts with our surrounding relationships is a rhetorical strategy to extend our memories to a larger shared, cultural memory. It is the fictive aspect of Angela, and the possibilities of utilizing the comic tropes present in *Watchmen*, that enables those who have not directly experienced the Tulsa Race Massacre, or more broadly, the harrowing effects of white supremacy, to understand it more. This conception of fantasy is not the fictitious and flippant, it is an approach to unveiling and making public the narratives we hold within our bodies. In tapping into the very real, traumatic, and heartbreaking stories we hold in our bodies the fantasized versions we put into the world through writing and speech are part of a strategy to narrativize trauma for the masses—to create a lingua franca to be understood by people who did not experience the event.

“Fairy tales aren’t written for us, but we’re the ones that are meant to fight the monsters”

Jennifer Griffiths echoes this argument, suggesting that the way to make “fractured pieces of the survivor’s self” whole is through joining “together in the reflection of the listener.” Like *Watchmen*, *Hunters* does this through a re-imagining of historical facts through the comic book genre Weil loved so much as a child. Weil thinks through his favorite genre of comic book fantasies in an effort to make his grandmother’s experience relatable to his own life, and the experience of others. The show creates a world in which ex-Nazis are living among U.S. citizens, with the intention of creating a Fourth Reich. Set in 1977 Brooklyn, a team of eight Nazi hunters work together to curtail this plan. Writer and show creator David Weil places himself in the show as Jonah Heidelbaum (Logan Lerman), the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, who has been killed by a Nazi in disguise. Weil’s grandmother was actually a survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. In an NPR interview, Weil explained the impact his grandmother’s stories about the Holocaust had on him:

From a very young age, she would tell me and my three older brothers her stories, her stories about the war...I’d be eating dinner, and I wouldn’t finish my meal. And she would tell me about how, for so many years, she starved in the camps and how important food is...So these stories began to penetrate, you know, my life. And at such a young age, those stories felt like the stuff...
of—it was the only thing I could relate it to—the comic books and the super-
heroes that I loved.\textsuperscript{58}

Weil borrows from his grandmother’s stories, but he takes her memories
and refracts them through the genre of fantasy in a way that made her
stories understandable to him. \textit{Hunters} also plays with the fact that Nazis
were invited to live in the U.S. by NASA to participate in our space pro-
gram.\textsuperscript{59} Lawyers famously went after these Nazis in an effort to hold them
accountable as war criminals (a phenomenon that has finally reached its
end because most of these Nazis are too old to appear in court).\textsuperscript{60} The
show does this through focusing on a group of eight Nazi Hunters who
are more like tropic comic book characters than they are like the law-
yers who made their career out of taking down Nazis in the courtroom.
Instead of the setting of this series being the courtroom, the setting is the
United States as a whole: Weil’s imagined comic-book-esque vigilantes
begin killing hidden Nazis living among every-day people in the U.S. In
a flashy, Quentin Tarantino fashion, a surf-rock version of Hava Nagila
plays in the background as a 13-year-old girl introduces the Hunters at her
Bat Mitzvah, inviting them up for her candle-lighting ceremony. As she
describes each team-member, the audience is presented with a clip of the
character acting in their role on the team.\textsuperscript{61}

The team includes the group’s leader and supposed Holocaust sur-
vivor, Meyer Offerman (Al Pacino); Holocaust survivors Murray and
Mindy Markowitz (Saul Rubinek, Carol Kane) serve as the team’s “ge-
nius, gadget-making, weapons experts” and signal decoders; Lonny Flash
(Josh Radnor) is a middle-aged Jewish actor /“master of mimicry and
disguise” on the team; a young Black power activist, Roxy Jones (Tiffany
Boone), is the teams “counterfeiter, forger, and crime-scene cleaner”;
Asian-American Vietnam War veteran Joe Mizushima (Louis Ozawa)
is the team’s expert in combat; and former Jewish WWII child refu-
gee Sister Harriet (Kate Mulvany) “runs the [team’s] logistics and mis-

At the start of the series, Jonah does not know his grandmother had
been part of the group of Nazi hunters, and was unaware that Nazis (the
actual people who were running concentration camps in WWII, in ad-
dition to Neo-Nazis) are living among him. When Jonah’s grandmother
is murdered by a Nazi, and the police assume it to be a result of a simple
robbery, Jonah decides he must find a way to take matters into his own
hands. He quickly becomes adopted by this team of Nazi Hunters after
meeting them at his grandmother’s funeral. Again, returning to Griffiths, the survivor’s ability to tell their story, and their interlocutor’s willingness to listen creates a successful discourse, and allows “memory [to] come into meaning through this bodily transaction, rather than simply by creating a narrative in language.”

Extending Griffiths’ theory to Hunters, Weil’s grandmother’s story becomes whole within his body. Like Angela does with her grandfather, Jonah literally walks in his grandmother’s footsteps as a member of the team of hunters. At the same time, Jonah is removed from his history as a descendent of a Holocaust survivor—he is a normal 19-year-old Jewish kid raised in Brooklyn. This requires a level of “embodied thinking” because Jonah is separated temporally from the facts of the Holocaust. Unlike Angela, Jonah is aware that his grandmother was a Holocaust survivor. However, he still struggles to walk in her stories. Because Weil has no mental model of the Holocaust, in order to tell a narrative of the event, he must search for that within himself, in his body.

Interestingly, the way Jonah is able to walk in his grandmother’s footsteps is if he views her narrative through the lens of comic book narratives. Ultimately, the show’s presentation of the Hunters team as embodying tropes of good versus evil, superhuman fighting skills, and fantastical moments in which characters break into song and dance are clues to the audience that this narrative is largely being shaped through Jonah’s eyes. The character works at a comic book store and has two best friends with whom he discusses science fiction and comics. The world that is built in
Hunters is Jonah’s (and to an extent, Weil’s) way of “contemporizing the Holocaust, of negotiating the Holocaust as a parallel event to other, more contemporary tragedies...The Holocaust is simply always present, always there, a fearful measure of what was possible.” Weil contemporizes his grandmother’s experience through the fantasy genre, via Jonah’s character; her story becomes ever-present through comic book tropes because, once again, this is how Weil remembers relating to his grandmother when he was a child. Weil’s tactic of combining his own /his grandmother’s autobiographical narratives with the superhero genre is his way of giving his familial narrative power. And of course, as discussed with Watchmen, utilizing popular modes of entertainment is a way for Weil to engage an audience and re-tell his family’s narrative.

Concluding: Mining Embodied Social Justice Narratives
Connecting with one’s body as an archive of ancestral trauma is only helpful so long as the individual can find a way to tap into that trauma, to mine their embodied archive of historical and ancestral traumatic pasts and re-imagine how those pasts are shown, interpreted, and remembered. In the introduction to Redrawing the Historical Past: History, Memory, and Multiethnic Graphic Novels, editors Martha J. Cutter and Cathy J. Schlund-Vials write, “integral to many multiethnic graphic novels is a re-seeing of history, and central to these revisionist works is an archival project of reassemblage.” While in Cutter’s and Schlund-Vials’ case, graphic novels are the medium of archival reassemblage, this claim equally applies to the visual modes of storytelling Watchmen (2019) and Hunters (2020) emulate. It is crucial to identify how the writers of these series and the characters they create reassemble the archive. How does one re-create a historical, embodied archive that exists internally with an audience of one—the self—to be broadcasted and digested by many?

Watchmen and Hunters are key texts to more deeply understanding how this archival rewriting is done, and these series perhaps hold embedded clues as to how writers might continue to present history “as a site of struggle where new configurations of the past can be manipulated and alternate conceptualizations of present and future histories might be envisioned.” The bodies of characters in these visual narratives are themselves archives, but it is the work of rewriting traumatic narratives that enables these characters to embody empowerment, rather than trauma. In these multiethnic texts, “history itself is fluid, unstable, and polyphonic” and “the past is evocatively re-narrated, provocative reconfigured, and strategically remade.” Viewing history as “fluid” rather than fixed is
central to *Watchmen* and *Hunters*; history acts with the human actors as a character, at once familiar and also foreign from how we all remember her to look. Treating history as a malleable fiction rather than a fixed reality allows for “idiosyncratic negotiations of dominant history, which intersect with the radical contours of memory, [to] render visible the wide-ranging critical possibilities of multi-ethnic” visual literatures /narratives.\(^\text{67}\) Fantasy, then, becomes a tool for extracting embedded deposits of embodied hegemony, and further, the page or the screen becomes a site of deliberate transformation in which re-framings and re-envisionings of histories are possible.

But it’s not simply their nature of existing as embodied archives that allows these characters, and the larger narratives they are part of, to transgress hegemonic histories. Rather, there must be an archivist, or a transcriber, that does the work of unveiling the archive and making it palatable for an audience while maintaining the integrity of the story that requires telling/retelling. In certain instances, one of the individuals who holds the embodied archive themselves acts as the transcriber, as seen in the case of Weil and *Hunters*. Weil’s creation of Jonah as an emblem of himself is an act of mirroring himself on the screen, and viewing his own trauma through a character. Jonah’s fictionalized and fantasized body as a Nazi-fighter serves as a “mystical site of transformation,”\(^\text{68}\) as a place of “potential for a kind of action”\(^\text{69}\) that Weil could not claim in the parameters of our “real” world. Jonah’s body is mystical insofar as it represents Weil’s own intuitive act of identifying the visceral, inherited trauma he harbors inside himself; but it should also be said, what completes this mystical cycle is Weil’s ability to translate trauma from a language of his body to language on the screen, calling the audience to awareness and action.

In other situations, as we see in Lindelof’s *Watchmen*, members outside of a particular group are called to do the work of using their privilege to rewrite and retell a particular story, to claim responsibility for an event because it is part of a cultural memory of an entire country, not just a certain group. Here’s what Lindelof said about this in his 2020 Emmy acceptance speech for *Watchmen*’s win as a limited series:

History is mystery, it is broken into a million puzzle pieces and many are missing. We know where those pieces are, but we don’t seek them out because we know finding them will hurt. Sometimes we caused that hurt. Maybe we even benefited from it, but we have to name it before we repair it...Dissent, be consistent, embrace paradox, never contradict yourself. And finally,
stop worrying about getting canceled and ask yourself what you are doing to get renewed. We dedicate this award to the victims and survivors of the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. The fires that destroyed Black Wall Street still burn today, the only way to put them out is if we all fight them together.\textsuperscript{70}

The first point I glean from Lindelof’s speech is that in order to retell and re-historicize an archive of ancestral trauma—one that the transcriber does not possess viscerally in their body—the individual must do the work of listening, investigating, and bringing together puzzle pieces that have been deliberately kept separate by hegemonic forces. Secondly, the transcriber must accept, and must embody, their own implication in causing and/or benefiting from the pain endured and archived by survivors and descendants of the events they wish to retell. And finally: Those of us privileged to have white bodies must set aside our assumptions about ourselves as individuals and begin contextualizing ourselves in the larger framework of the United States of America’s past, present, and future.

The past, to paraphrase Lindelof, must be identified before it can be repaired. It is not enough to stay quiet and wait for others to engage in the activism that is needed, deeply, in this present moment, because we know “memory renews itself in the body of the listener even if nothing is said.”\textsuperscript{71}

The work of speaking loudly and clearly and fearlessly, of repairing hegemonic histories, is an obligation of white bodies who hail from ancestors caused and/or benefited from the genocides, massacres, and other violent histories woven intimately into this country’s fabric. The work Lindelof does in \textit{Watchmen} is an act toward curing the American sickness, “the bondage of white-body supremacy,” that is ultra-present because it has never been confronted honestly, and therefore never repaired.\textsuperscript{72}

It is critical we dive into the layers of understanding the present in our bodily archives in a moment in which trauma being archived in our bodies. We should approach historical “facts” with skepticism, and should “write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities” through superhero, comic-book-inspired narratives, which reframe trauma as resilience for a contemporary audience.\textsuperscript{73} As scholars, we are the researchers and scribes of historically unheard voices, and we have power to bring these into our classrooms. These rhetorical representations of inherited, embodied are not just familial histories, but also amalgamations of the political and social forces that condition them. The humanities, in this reading, become a key to unlocking untold stories, buried archives, and authentic truths, free from the oppressor’s gaze.
Bibliography


*Hunters,* season 1, created by David Weil, aired 2020, Monkeypaw Productions, Sonar Entertainment, Big Indie, Big Mass Productions, Governor’s Court, Amazon Studios, 2020, Streaming on Amazon Prime.


*Watchmen*, season 1, created by Damon Lindelof, aired 2019, White Rabbit, Paramount Television, DC Entertainment, Warner Bros. Television, 2019, Streaming on HBO.
Notes

2 Baker, 208
3 Rachel Yehuda’s work; for details see bibliography.
5 Baker et. al., 210.
6 Baker et. al., 210.
7 For more on bodies as texts, I recommend Elizabeth Grosz’ Volatile Bodies. See bibliography for full details.
10 Watchmen, season 1, created by Damon Lindelof, aired 2019, White Rabbit, Paramount Television, DC Entertainment, Warner Bros. Television, 2019, Streaming on HBO.
11 Gordon, 163.
12 Hunters, season 1, created by David Weil, aired 2020, Monkeypaw Productions, Sonar Entertainment, Big Indie, Big Mass Productions, Governor’s Court, Amazon Studios, 2020, Streaming on Amazon Prime.
14 Aarons, 12.
17 Hoffman, 167.
18 Hoffman, 166.
19 Baum, 671.
20 Baum, 675.
22 van der Kolk, 154.
23 Those of us invested in rhetoric and composition studies are quite familiar with the theory that writing is recursive. In her discipline-changing article, “The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers,” Sondra Perl notices her student Tony is recursive in his writing process, and “this repetition set up a particular kind of composing rhythm, one that was cumulative in nature and that set ideas in motion by its very repetitiveness” (324). This rhythmic, cumulative repetition is found in the intergenerational, ancestral body’s method of recording its own trauma. The third-generation survivor’s body exists in a recursive loop, at once archiving their own memories while also doing the work of discovering their ancestors’ records and endeavoring to set them straight.
24 van der Kolk, 156.
27 Schwab, 45.
28 Baum, 675.
29 Baum, 675.
30 Schwab, 53.
31 Elizabeth Rosner, Survivor Café (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 33.
32 If, as Pratt defines in “The Art of the Contact Zone,” the autoethnographic text is “a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them,” then the development of the embodied counter-archive is a space for the body to record itself.
33 Rosner, 33.
34 Rosner, 33.
35 In Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, a family of three generations of women all have the same father. He was an enslaver, and he raped the enslaved women he owned, causing generations of incest. In this novel, the women’s memories become slippery, blending between generations.


39 Aarons, 15.

40 Aarons, 88.

41 Aarons, 88.


43 Murphy, 57-8.

44 Aarons, 194.


47 *Watchmen*, season 1, episode 6, “This Extraordinary Being,” directed by Stephen Williams, written by Damon Lindelof and Cord Jefferson, aired November 24, 2019.

48 Gordon, 146.

49 Baum, 670.

50 Baum, 671.

51 Gibbons and Moore.

52 Baum, 675.


55 *Hunters*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Wayne Yip, written by David Weil, Zakiyyah Alexander, and Stacy Osei-Kuffour, aired 2020, Monkeypaw Productions, Sonar Entertainment, Big Indie, Big Mass Productions, Governor’s Court, Amazon Studios, 2020, Streaming on Amazon Prime.


57 Weil, *Hunters*.


62 Griffiths, 2.


65 Cutter and Schlund-Vials, 2.

66 Cutter and Schlund-Vials, 2.
67 Cutter and Schlund-Vials, 5.
68 Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the edges of language* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 42.
69 Hawhee, 47.
71 Baum, 688.
73 Gordon, 17.
74 Debeer, 0:31.
75 *Hunters*, season 1, episode 2.
ABSTRACT:
Chuck Palahniuk’s 2018 novel Adjustment Day is set in twenty-first century America when both resources and important positions are few and far between. Palahniuk likens this to Gunnar Heinsohn’s “youth bulge,” when 30 to 40 percent of all males in a given nation are 15–29, which politicians address by culling the population through war. In Palahniuk’s fictional world, disempowered American men start a revolution they call, “Adjustment Day,” a power reversal eradicating the old regime and creating three new ethnostates: Caucasia, Blacktopia, and Gaysia. Adjustment Day is a hyperbolic, parodic dystopian vision that many readers would find offensive. The contemporary politicization of wearing face coverings and the rigid stratification between Black Lives Matter advocates and “All Lives Matter” rhetoric both suggest that the United States could move toward the extreme division Palahniuk depicts. New Right supporters might find echoes of their ideology in the text, and Neoliberals might be appalled by the stereotypes Palahniuk employs. However, Adjustment Day’s ethnostates hold up a mirror to the United States that exposes racism, isolationism, and the binary thinking that posits extremes are the only options. While some might argue that international crises have paled issues of racism and isolationism, Palahniuk’s text demonstrates that such stratification along identity markers remains prominent in the United States. This article argues that Adjustment
Day warns against both the staunch nationalism of the right and the identity politics of the so-called left that characterize current responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** Chuck Palahniuk, *Adjustment Day*, Proud Boys, Donald Trump, white supremacy, dystopia, satire

During the first presidential debates on September 29, 2020, moderator Chris Wallace asked incumbent Donald Trump, “Are you willing, tonight, to condemn white supremacists and militia groups and to say that they need to stand down and not add to the violence in a number of these cities?” Wallace was referring to locations like Portland, OR, and Kenosha, WI, where far-right Americans organized counterdemonstrations to Black Lives Matter protests and sometimes violently clashed with the antiracist protestors, obvious evidence of the extreme polarization of the United States political landscape. In response to Wallace’s question, President Trump accused “the left wing” of being the main initiators of violence, asking for various forms of clarification of the question before saying, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.” Along with his claim that that Black Lives Matter is “denigrating” and “a symbol of hate,” the President’s call to the Proud Boys solidified his support of a violent militia grounded in white separatist ideology. Like Trump, the Proud Boys do not position themselves as white supremacist. Instead, they argue that they are “Western-chauvinists” accepting of every race, religion, and sexuality, even as their self-description on “My Militia: An American Patriot Network” implies white-centrism by stating, “Men have tried being ashamed of themselves and accepting blame for slavery, the wage gap, ableism, and some fag-bashing that went on two generations ago, but it didn’t work. So they’re going with their gut and indulging in the natural pride that comes from being part of the greatest culture in the world.” Only white men would logically “accept blame for slavery,” as they were the perpetrators of the institution on American soil, so, despite the Proud Boys’ claim, it is clear they are white supremacist. So clear, in fact, that the tenets they list on their website largely echo those of the Ku Klux Klan during its resurgence in the 1920s.

The Proud Boys’ statement is a somewhat blunter articulation of Trump’s euphemized 2016 campaign to “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), which neo-Nazi and members of the Ku Klux Klan have
explicitly stated support their views. Kelly J. Baker, a historian of the 1920s KKK and writer for *The Atlantic*, points to the ways that Trump’s rhetoric “is just like the rhetoric of the Klan, with their emphasis on virulent patriotism and restrictive immigration.” She also notes that the current leader of the KKK, David Duke, publicly declared support for Trump and that the latter “declined to disavow the Ku Klux Klan on CNN.” These facts lead more liberal citizens to interpret MAGA as a racist, misogynistic slogan suggesting that the country was “great” before the Civil Rights Movement and the political gains of women and LGBTQ Americans. Putting aside interpretation, Trump’s 2016 campaign was entrenched in American isolationism, ensured by strengthening national borders, restricting immigration, and renegotiating international trade deals. His reelection bid in 2020 echoed that call for isolationism and reimagined it through his response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which he termed “the China virus.” While the President and his supporters ignored medical experts who urged face masking in public, most supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement wore face coverings and remained largely socially distant during their demonstrations.

The polarization described above is a magnification and intensification of the one demonstrated in the 2016 presidential election, which concluded 18 months prior to the publication of Chuck Palahniuk’s hyperbolic, parodic novel *Adjustment Day*. Palahniuk was therefore writing and publishing in the social climate of a contentious election and economic downturn, and the election’s victor won on a platform tied to a commitment to racial homogeneity, enforcement of that homogeneity by increased law enforcement, and exploiting the fears of white America. Australian journalist Luke Kinsella reports that Trump’s campaign “slogan appealed to a group of disaffected voters who, due to globalisation, were struggling to fulfill the American dream that was promised to them.” As Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, “following the collapse of each system of control, there has been a period of confusion—transition—in which those who are most committed to racial hierarchy search for new means to achieve their goals within the rules of the game as currently defined.” Baker affirms Alexander’s claim, describing how messages of white supremacy, sometimes coded in “America first” language, gain “traction again and again every time white Americans encounter social change and shifting demographics. With a black president, LGBT equality, an enormous Hispanic community, and predictions that America will soon be a majority minority country,” the message to “Make America Great Again” becomes a dog
whistle for the (mostly male) whites threatened by minorities’ rights. Palahniuk’s novel reflects these backlashes and centers on fictionalized versions of these Americans that reject the so-called progress and espouse extreme white supremacist views. His depictions of Black characters and sexual minorities, though sympathetic, are largely stereotypes, which can work to reinforce hegemonic beliefs that maintain white supremacist practices. The author himself expresses disillusionment with such beliefs and practices, and the novel’s satire calls these views into question, but because many readers miss or choose to ignore the satire, *Adjustment Day* can be read as highly offensive and work to reinforce extreme beliefs.

While some might argue that international crises have paled issues of racism and isolationism, Palahniuk’s text demonstrates that stratification along identity markers remains prominent in the United States, and *Adjustment Day* depicts a dystopian vision of where adhering to such isolationist individualism might lead. *Adjustment Day*’s ethnostates warn against the binary thinking characteristic of American responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and suggests the danger of blindly accepting extreme dogma, particularly in the face of crisis. The contemporary politicization of wearing face coverings and the rigid stratification between Black Lives Matter advocates and “All Lives Matter” rhetoric both suggest that the United States could move toward a radical division similar to what Palahniuk depicts.

*Adjustment Day* is set in twenty-first century America when both resources and important positions are few and far between. Palahniuk likens this to sociologist and economist Gunnar Heinsohn’s “youth bulge,” or a period of time when the population of males aged 15 to 29 comprises 30 to 40 percent of all males in a given nation. According to Heinsohn’s theory, these “youth bulges” coincide with historical periods of unrest, crime, and even civil war, for example, the eighteenth-century French revolution, and Mao Zedong’s revolution in China. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Heinsohn describes his theory as follows: “With so many superfluous, frustrated young men, who are better fed and educated than ever before but have few prospects of finding a good job, nations with a youth bulge are likely to experience social upheaval.” On the other hand, “in countries where large birth rates are combined with abject poverty and hunger, young men are much more likely to sink into lethargy.” According to *Adjustment Day*, “the United States was struggling with the hyperactivity and status demands of the Millennial generation—arguably the biggest boy bulge in world history,” and the way politicians deal with surplus men is by declaring war, which results in the death of many
young men, culling the population. Rather than let this come to pass, the disempowered men in Palahniuk’s America band together to overthrow the current regime and reinstate their own in a revolution they call, “Adjustment Day.”

Adjustment Day is a power reversal in which adherents to the old regime are eradicated, and the young men encumbered by debt and unable to advance under that regime become the leaders of three new ethnostates: Caucasia, Blacktopia, and Gaysia. The composition of the population of each state is strictly enforced through genetic testing and affidavits confirming individuals’ sexuality. Heterosexuals with predominantly white or Black DNA are citizens of Caucasia and Blacktopia, respectively, whereas homosexuals are citizens of Gaysia. I should note that the text singularly identifies only whiteness and Blackness as the races constituting ethnostates and “homosexuals” as those who live in Gaysia. There is no mention of the broad spectrum of LGBTQIA+ identities, just a broad presumption that sexuality is a binary opposition. The ethnostates also presume a binary opposition between only two races in the United States—erasing mixed race identities and multiracial Americans—and that one’s identity is based solely upon percentage of genetic make-up.

According to the text, “In Caucasia and Blacktopia, people with a preponderance of Asian genetics were deported to Asia. Jews went to Israel. Mexican types self-exiled to Mexico.” People in Gaysia, however, can be a multitude of races, so heterosexuals with a variety of skin tones and ethnicities who were in interracial relationships prior to Adjustment Day feign homosexuality in order to remain together. As might be evident from the brief description of residency, many readers would find these ethnostates offensive, but they also replicate the America-first viewpoint that there are “Mexican types,” who would choose to self-exile together, and that all Asians and their cultures are essentially similar. The implication is that these “Mexican types” lack any meaningful cultural difference, and it ignores the centuries of history that created tensions between Venezuela and Mexico, for example.

Similarly, and like American white supremacists, the ethnostates in Adjustment Day ignore differences between European heritages and historical conflicts between nations in order to create one “white race” in one “white nation”: Caucasia. Caucasia is an extreme version of a return to feudal patriarchy, where a few high chieftains take multiple wives to perpetuate the white race, and their wives till the fields. Everyone in Caucasia is supposed to use “white speak,” which is a kind of bastardized Renaissance English, and they wear cod pieces and kilts and worship Norse
gods. While white speak and cosplay might be far-fetched and somewhat comical, Caucasia’s enforced gender dynamics mirror those promoted by Trump’s campaigns and the Proud Boys that supported them. By calling themselves “Western chauvinists,” the Proud Boys make a weak attempt at veiling their white supremacy and misogyny. “Western” connotes whiteness, and the term “chauvinist” has connotations of sexism and bigotry when used as an adjective, along with the patriotism denoted by the noun form. A Western chauvinist, therefore, is by definition a white nationalist, and as a fraternal organization that does not allow women, the Proud Boys’ degradation of women is clear. The group claims that its members “venerat[e] the housewife,” which they cite as evidence that they are not women haters. However, they are avowedly antifeminist, arguing for “Father Knows Best gender roles,” and their founder, Gavin McInnes, is known for “woman bashing.” McInnes founded the Proud Boys in 2016 as a group “focused on ‘anti-political correctness’ and ‘anti-white guilt,’” and membership skyrocketed during and after the election of Donald Trump. McInnes admires Trump for alleviating the American “cultural crisis” created by “a president for eight years who was validating social-justice-warrior lunacy. … And then Trump comes along, and goes, ‘No, I’m not a purple-haired college feminist, we’re not doing any of that.’” McInnes’ description of what he terms the problem—social justice advocates and “purple-haired college feminist[s]”—recall the targets of an internet kill list in Adjustment Day, one of whom is explicitly a college professor who wears “a sweatshirt printed with the words ‘This Is What a Feminist Looks Like’” and a ponytail where he isn’t already bald.

The List is essentially “America’s Least Wanted,” a website where people upvote individuals to be killed during the revolution, and the total value of kills ultimately determines a man’s status in the new ethnostates. The most valuable kills are “teachers and professors who’d been exposed for teaching students what to think in place of how to think,” along with “media figures, actors, journalists,” or what might be called “the liberal elite” by the Proud Boys and like-minded Americans. Men who murder figures from The List are those who subscribe to the ideas expressed in what becomes known as “the Talbott book.” Like the Proud Boys’ guiding tenets, the Talbott book presents itself as beneficial to both Blacks and whites, to both hetero- and homosexual, but its rhetorical undertones reveal that it is white supremacist. The Talbott book’s underlying racism is most evident when it argues that “the black thug conducts gang violence [to] demonstrate political identity” and “the last thing a black man
wants to be is another fake white man.”27 These negative statements are surrounded by phrases suggesting that living among non-Blacks is what stifles Black people (e.g. “No group should be blighted by the intellectual expectations and the moral yardstick of another”), but whites are said to “feel threatened and guilty” by living among Black people and homosexuals, much in the way that the Proud Boys refuse to be “ashamed of themselves and [accept] blame” for social and political inequalities that benefit them. One wonders why anyone, but particularly a Black man or gay man, would fight for ethnostates framed in such a white-centric way, and one of the characters suggests that “the actions they took… would destroy the ideological slavery of current politics and replace it with a world where proven heroes would steer the course.”29 “Destroying ideological slavery” and men proving themselves by killing elected officials seems to frighteningly prophesy the October 2020 plan of a terrorist militia group to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, burn the capitol building, and “take hostages, execute tyrants, and have it televised.”30 While these domestic terrorists are anarchists and not Trump supporters, the latter’s tweet to “LIBERATE MICHIGAN” amid COVID-19 restrictions galvanized many protesters of stay-at-home orders in the state, including two of the militiamen facing trial for the October 2020 plot.31

Based on the content of Talbott’s book, and the fact that a who man embraces the book is deemed “a bigoted, race-baiting psycho obsessed with micro-aggressing the transgendered and rape-culturing tipsy co-eds” by a coddling, neo-liberal mother, one can conclude that Talbott’s ideology reflects that of the Proud Boys and other right-wing extremists. This intra-familial conflict is noticeably split along gender lines, where the white woman holds views associated with the American Democratic Party, which likely exacerbates her son’s white-supremacist stance. He secretly reads the Talbott Book, away from what he would view as her feminizing gaze, where he finds “The Declaration of Interdependence.” This document is broken into Acts and Articles in an obvious nod to the founding documents of the United States and perhaps as well to Western chauvinism. The Declaration of Interdependence outlines how the integrated United States will fairly and logically—at least according to the logic of those who subscribe to the Talbott ideology—transition into the new ethnostates of Caucasia, Blacktopia, and Gaysia. Much in the way that people wonder how everyday Germans could follow Hitler’s order, or how many liberal Americans wonder how anyone would vote for Donald Trump a second time, the Talbott book is unfathomable to many in the fictional world of Adjustment Day. The Talbott book is also referred to in
the text as the new *Mein Kampf*, and Talbott suggests that his scribe is like Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s deputy fuhrer.\(^{34}\) I do not mean to suggest that the New Right or the Proud Boys are explicitly Nazis, only that they are indeed geared toward extreme white supremacism and a government that at least borders on fascism, and that the ethnostates imagined by Talbott Reynolds and executed by his followers are a hyperbolized version of what many far-right extremists who back Donald Trump would support. Like *Mein Kampf* and even the Christian Bible, the Talbott book, “the same as all the most important books... made sense only to the faithful,”\(^{35}\) and the most faithful to Talbott Reynolds, at least at the outset, is his scribe, his Rudolf Hess, Walter Baines.

In Walter, the novel’s catalyzing character, Palahniuk describes the state of many men of the Millennial generation and suggests that Walter’s goal is to become something of a Donald Trump figure. According to the text, Walter is a “screw-up” and a “lame helpless loser,”\(^{36}\) but he is keen to impress his girlfriend, Shasta, and win her hand in marriage. Walter “dropped out of school. He worked at Starbucks, earning a few dollars and trying to enjoy the precious smidgen of life left to him.”\(^{37}\) Shasta knows “him as some baked chode. A hammered nobody who can only afford ditch weed shake full of seeds and stems. He lives in his ma’s basement, where the plumbing growls like the sound of an impending bad smell.”\(^{38}\) While the universe of *Adjustment Day* is satirically hyperbolized, the situation for many Millennials is economically similar. Graduating from college no longer guarantees a secure job, student loan debt continues to rise, and many live with relatives after graduating. In Walter’s current economic situation, “Shasta likes him okay, but not so much that she’d marry him.”\(^{39}\) He has fantasies of a cross-country trek through extravagant homes, where Walter will show Shasta “his secret Robin Hood bad-boy side. The way he can open doors—abracadabra—and human traffic the two of them into rich, forbidden worlds.”\(^{40}\) Walter fantasizes that at each location, the couple will “christen every room” by “going at it until they’re half dead,”\(^{41}\) and he will masterfully break into the safes to steal just enough money for transportation to the next city and home to repeat the process. By the end of this journey, he imagines, he will have shown her that “he’s more than a slack-jawed, single-digit brain cell burn-er” by explaining “about network enumeration and exploitation,”\(^{42}\) hacking security cameras and elevator codes,\(^{43}\) and finally demonstrating with “a deed of property ownership” and “in the elegant intonations of a landed aristocrat” to law enforcement officers who have caught them in the act that the homes belong to him.\(^{44}\) Trump is not a stoner, but Walter’s
fantasy of owning property nationwide and flaunting it for sexual and marital gain recalls Trump’s public persona.

The way that Walter is also able to skirt the law—or at least appear to—is also reminiscent of Trump and his empire. Since Walter and Shasta have been caught in the act of intercourse, his fantasy involves him confronting police officers, who he has hired to bring together the culmination of the fantasy—his marriage proposal, naked and with “his pecker still stuck out so hard it shines, still waving the filled condom like a little white flag.”

The crude language with which Walter experiences his fantasy is in line with Trump’s infamous so-called “locker-room banter,” in which he opines that because he is a star, he “can do anything” from “just start kissing” women to “grab[bing] them by the pussy.” In short, Walter’s fantasized marriage proposal is a pornographic “cross-country crime spree. Bonnie and Clyde without the body count.” However, it is not actually a crime spree because he owns all the property where they commit their “crimes.” He wants to create a sense of danger, so Shasta views him as a hero when he whisks her from place to place, “saving” her from being caught.

Walter’s “big plan to get rich,” so he can live out his fantasy and marry Shasta, involves finding a mentor with similar financial skills and knowledge to Trump. Walter imagines that his mentor will be “some billionaire so-and-so to take him under his billionaire wing and show him the ropes on money reproducing itself like rabbits, on insider trading and leveraging commodity futures, the bloodless world of corporate takeovers and funds piling up in some tax haven in some bank account numbered to infinity.” While Trump has not been convicted of all the aforementioned crimes, he has been accused of insider trading, been involved in a number of corporate takeovers, and it recently came to light that he only paid $750 in taxes in 2016 and 2017 despite being a billionaire. It’s not enough to just find a mentor, though. Walter is under the impression that he needs a “new old man,” whom he must kidnap and force to bestow his financial investment knowledge upon him. With his “hillbilly redneck white-trash” background, Walter’s “dad hadn’t been a world heavyweight douche sufficient to score him a big trust fund, but Walter could remedy that” by “becom[ing] the son some Croesus never knew he had” or “cherry-pick[ing] some T. Boone Pickens. Like fantasy football only with his own family lineage.” His solution involves a “hostile takeover,” in line with The Wolverine Watchmen’s language, in which he abducts such a man on the streets of Manhattan. The man Walter kidnaps and holds hostage is Talbott Reynolds, and, tied to a chair, Reynolds dictates the
Talbott Book. Walter is “always faithful that the ramblings of this old coot were going somewhere. That he wasn’t wasting his life documenting the dying words of a lunatic.” Even though Walter is never quite sure how Talbott’s aphorisms about race and sexuality are going to make him rich, he invests blind faith in the man’s wealth, and by extension power, dutifully typing everything Talbott says, setting Talbott’s plan in motion. Walter’s unquestioning faith in Talbott resembles that of Trump supporters who continue their support despite the president’s propagation of misinformation and perhaps because of his political incorrectness.

While Walter is prowling New York City streets to find a mentor to abduct, he reveals an interconnection between white masculinity, violence, and sexual domination that manifests in Trump’s persona: “He’d pull up some porn on his phone. Just still images to peruse until his ‘nads filled up. Just so the blood went to his junk, and he was thinking with the fearless brains below his waist. A hard dick was never scared.” After he pulls up what might be considered “softcore” pornography on his phone, he Googles the names of a number of convicted killers: “Ted Bundy, Wayne Williams, Dean Corll, Richard Ramirez, Angelo Buono, David Berkowitz.” Each man was convicted of multiple murders that also involved rape. The possible exception is Wayne Williams, who was not convicted of rape, but the Atlanta murders of 1979–1981 that he is suspectedly linked to were of children, and many associate those murders with sexual assault as well. The narration of Adjustment Day tells us that “porn made Walter a ruthless wolf pack of one,” which associates him with the serial killers he researches on the internet and the so-called “lone wolf” white supremacist terrorists of the twenty-first century, some of whom were found to be part of the violent subculture of “involuntary celibates.” When Walter does abduct Talbott, he says, “I’m not any terrorist,” as he locks Talbott in the trunk of his rental car. Distinguishing himself from a terrorist speaks to the white supremacist logic that labels non-white outsiders as terrorists and white mass murderers as “lone wolves.” This is not to say that Walter is himself a serial rapist and killer, mass shooter, or incel, but that he is creating that mindset for himself in fantasy, in order to pursue his fantasy of a pornographic rendezvous with his girlfriend.

These fantasies illustrate what J. Jack Halberstam calls the “special effects” of white male masculinity. These special effects, characteristic of James Bond movies, both mimic and represent the explosions and expressions of violence integral to combat. In Female Masculinity, Halberstam argues that despite the performative nature of dominant modes of masculinity, “current representations of masculinity in white
men unfailingly depend on a relatively stable notion of the realness and the naturalness of both the male body and its signifying effects.\textsuperscript{60} Any James Bond film illustrates that his masculinity “is primarily prosthetic and, in this and countless other action films, has little if anything to do with biological maleness and signifies more often as a technical special effect.”\textsuperscript{61} With all his gadgets, characteristic black suit and martini (shaken, not stirred), and his hypersexualized attachment to women, Bond demonstrates that white male masculinity relies on a collection of props. According to Halberstam, these props and the well-known idiom “performance anxiety” point to the performative aspects of “manhood.”

Performance anxiety is, of course, a euphemism for fears about sexual impotency, and Halberstam argues that it also indicates “the strained relationship between heterosexual masculinity and performativity.”\textsuperscript{62} Performance anxiety in white males specifically stems from a “neurotic fear of exposing the theatricality of masculinity” and “emerges when masculinity is marked as performative rather than natural, as if performativity and potency are mutually exclusive or at least psychically incompatible.”\textsuperscript{63} Masculinity is therefore culturally perceived as intertwined and perhaps even synonymous with potency, both in the sense of power and of achieving an erection or reaching orgasm. As already discussed, however, much of this potency is the result of various kinds of performative “special effects,” such that “the masculinity of the white male... depends absolutely, as any Bond flick demonstrates, on a vast subterranean network of secret government groups, well-funded scientists, the army.”\textsuperscript{64} Both Halberstam’s analyses and a brief look at cultural productions throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century in America make the interconnection between white-male masculinity and military institutions clear, but many deny the performative requirements inherent to masculinity and the cultural agreement to ignore the performance as such. While Walter does not explicitly engage the military in his fantasy, law enforcement has become increasingly militarized in the United States, and the U.S. military has been referred to as a kind of world police for much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.\textsuperscript{65} Because of these overlaps, I consider the police an extension of the armed forces and thus as a further example of the function of white-male masculinity in law enforcement practices.

In Walter’s mind, which has been shaped by the laws and social practices of his nation, he can become the patriarch of a conjugal relationship with Shasta by achieving mastery over land, property, the law, her orgasm, and her sense of safety. Jacqui Alexander further explores the links
between white-male heteromasculinity, the law, property, and the U.S. nation-state, arguing that

“Patriarchal state-building practices are multiple, and...are paradoxically constitutive of nation-building. Among these practices are heteromasculine soldiering; the territorial marking of land and property coincident with the territorial marking of whiteness; ... rendering heterosexuality, consumerism, and citizenship mutually contingent; [and] folding Judeo-Christian conjugal tradition into the regimes of rule.”

Walter’s focus on effectively marking land and property across the United States; the way his fantasy incorporates his hyper-heterosexuality into his acquisition of not only property but also consumer goods such as “a bear-skin rug;” and the interconnection between his marriage proposal, the police and his power over them, and his use of the word “christen” to describe his sexual exploits all demonstrate Alexander’s point. As he imagines it, Shasta will see that “not only is he a brash bad-boy douche bag with the stealth and cunning to skate through life and show a girl a good time, he’s also rich. He’ll be the same old Walter she liked before, only loaded. The regular him, but with so much more to love.” He realizes, however, that “there’s not enough of him, not yet, to constitute anyone’s everything. What he has to do is, first, make a shit ton of money.” Walter views his current social and economic standing as inadequate to “secure” him Shasta as a wife. In other words, he believes that desirable women will only commit to a man with multiple properties throughout multiple states, a man with enough power to orchestrate the police in a grand narrative that he can subvert the law, when in actuality, he is above the law. This heterosexual white-male fantasy of unbridled wealth and power—the kind flaunted by Donald Trump—is what catalyzes the ultimately dystopian world in which Black, white, and sexual minorities are separated.

Once the ethnostates are underway and the new regimes are operating, Shasta becomes the most desirable wife for Charlie, one of the highest chieftains in Caucasia. What is fascinating about her position in Caucasia is that her genetics are not primarily European. Despite her “ivory arms” and “periwinkle eyes,” “Charlie’s perfect Aryan consort” is actually “over-the-line Hispanic” and “fifty-four percent sub-Saharan descent, making her ineligible to reside in Caucasia much less become wife to a chieftain.” She initially flies under the radar because of her appearance but, to be Charlie’s wife, is required to take a DNA test to prove her
whiteness. She passes the test by smuggling black-market “packaged saliva of an undeniably white girl” in ketchup packets she holds in her cheeks and opens by biting down just before supplying a sample. The disconnect between Shasta’s actual genetic makeup and the position she holds in the race- and sexuality-based new world suggests that creating social and political bonds based solely on these kinds of identity markers and categories is ridiculous and indicates Palahniuk’s criticism of white supremacy, the white nation-state, and the Talbott book that fostered it. Not only are Caucasia, Blacktopia, and Gaysia ridiculous, but the characteristics by which they group people together are a social construct that shift and resignify based upon which group is in a dominant position and what aims that group hopes to achieve. In the case of whiteness in *Adjustment Day*, a woman who is “not really white” is upheld as a queen-like figure in Caucasia and is able to subvert the supposedly infallible DNA test that confirms her membership in the race. This racial folly suggests the folly of racial categorization in general, especially when that categorization is used as a basis for a legal and political system.

White Americans carry the potential to perpetuate white supremacy through their practices, and some intentionally adhere to racist beliefs and practices, while others do not carry those sentiments in their hearts and work toward change. Josephine Peabody in *Adjustment Day* is vocal about her racist beliefs because they support “the natural order.” According to Miss Josephine Peabody, as she likes to be called, “the natural order... held that property owners alone should determine what was best for people, for only owners had the proper vested interests. Planters in particular in the agrarian tradition of Jefferson, without the corrupting influence of the Jew and to a lesser extent the Catholic interests.” Josephine’s belief that owning should equate to power echoes Walter’s fantasy that owning real estate nationwide will imbue him with the kind of masculine appeal to secure a wife in Shasta and adds explicit religious intolerance to the Trumpian economic perspective. Trump’s campaign and presidency were littered with more implicit religious intolerance, such as the infamous “Executive Order Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States,” which was widely termed a “Muslim ban” because travel was originally restricted from seven Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. In October of 2017, Sudan was removed from the list of restricted countries, and North Korea was added, in what seemed to be an effort to detach the order from anti-Muslim sentiment. While Josephine does not mention Muslims, her conception that people of certain religions are
a danger to American ideals and the “natural order” resonates with the MAGA ideology that undergirds Trump’s travel ban.

Just as Josephine’s religious intolerance is more explicit than Trump’s, so too is her anti-Black racism, and like some Trump supporters, Josephine thinks that all of the outsiders are conspiring against her and her white lineage. When Adjustment Day comes, Josephine’s Peabody Plantation becomes part of Blacktopia, so Josephine no longer owns it, but “despite the evidence of her eyes and ears, the Peabody Plantation remained her property and her home…. No gerrymandering tomfoolery would change matters.” She thinks that the Talbott book and its associated ethno-states are the result of “the Jew in league with the Papist, both parties attempting to agitate the pre-existing negro situation and dispossess the region’s Scots-Irish of their birthright.” She seems fine to ignore that “the land had belonged to the Muscogee Creek and Yamacraw tribes” before her family took it over because, on her family’s plantation, “she had stature. If she allowed herself to be uprooted and carted northward or out west, why, she’d be reduced to nothing more than a garden variety old lady.” Like those who claim to want to “Make America Great Again,” Josephine conveniently forgets the history of race-based slavery, genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples, and political, cultural and economic white supremacy that was explicitly codified into law to create and maintain her position. She and her entire sense of identity are threatened by the world changing around her. At least at some level, though, Josephine recognizes that her immense privilege is the result of institutionalized hierarchies since she understands that she will be just a regular old lady in the new order. This recognition also implies that she knows her worldview and the privileges it has endowed her and her family with are not in fact “the natural order.” If that were the case, then her status would follow her wherever she went.

As part of the restructuring of the formerly United States into Blacktopia, Gaysia, and Caucasia, the Peabody Plantation becomes the property of Jamal, a young Black man. Before his participation in Adjustment Day, Jamal “had always played the submissive good guy because the only other role was to be a thug.” When he first arrives in his newly acquired home, he encounters Arabella, one of Josephine’s two Black servants, in the kitchen and is confused because she is wearing “an old-time uniform, just a gray dress with a white apron tied over it.” He wonders if somehow “the website had allocated the property to two parties,” but she lets him know that she and her “family look after things” and asks if he is the new owner. Neither Arabella nor her husband, Lewis,
mentions that Josephine is hiding in the attic or that she has been sneaking down at night to tinker with various hoses and pumps that she then fixes to try to prove her value to the plantation’s function.\footnote{81} Otherwise, she is convinced that they would kill her or turn her in for the reward money offered for traitors to the new ethnostates. Jamal, however, hears noises coming from the attic, and Miss Jo decides she no longer wants to remain in hiding, so the result is peak satire.

Miss Jo’s solution is to black up with Arabella’s assistance, and no one is at all convinced by her minstrelized performance of Blackness. The text details how she dyes and over-perms her hair and takes “thirty milligrams of methoxsalen, followed by time under a sunlamp” in the way that many white people have throughout American history.\footnote{82} While Miss Jo presses her lips together with rock salt to puff them up, she practices affecting Margaret Mitchell’s “dialectic patois” from Gone with the Wind.\footnote{83} As she is undergoing her “transformation,” Miss Jo’s “head swam. Her vision blurred,” and she considers all the possible side effects: “headaches, dizziness, insomnia, and nausea... possible kidney damage... Liver damage was a threat with methoxsalen, as was cancer.”\footnote{84} In her mind, the possibility of experiencing these side effects is a serious sacrifice, “but these were a small price to pay for a miracle drug that allowed white people to become black people.”\footnote{85} Throughout her time in the attic, Miss Jo likens herself to a kind of Anne Frank figure, viewing herself as somewhat of a martyr, who puts herself through such a harrowing and degrading experience to “escape from the strain of her current tenuous circumstance.”\footnote{86} Of course, like the number of contemporary white Americans who have worn blackface,\footnote{87} Josephine’s performance of minstrelized Blackness doesn’t fool anyone she encounters, but Jamal, Arabella, and Lewis pity her. “The Barnabas creature,” as the narration refers to Miss Jo’s embodied performance, explains that “dat Mizz Josafeen” was a “debil” who locked it in the attic before she vanished.

Though he doesn’t buy her performance for a second, Jamal is interested in learning more about the plantation and its history, so he plays along and develops a relationship with Barnabas. Jamal and Barnabas drink mint juleps on the patio, and the intoxication sometimes dulls Miss Jo’s performance. Jamal muses that “in its indigo-black hide he could discern traces of the aged belle who’d burnt her hair to a frizzled mess and daily strutted down from the attic, high-stepping and animated with Bojangles jazz hands and leering minstrel show faces.”\footnote{88} Barnabas tells “Massah Jamal” about the people memorialized in the home’s paintings, and they tour the property. When looking at the graveyard on the plantation,
Jamal asks if there is one for a person named Belinda. Barnabas responds, “Dat beez in dah slay-vah sex-shun,” which is near to but outside of “the family graves.” This scene sets up the somewhat obvious, though historically accurate revelation that Jamal and Miss Josephine are related.

Even as she realizes that she and Jamal are related, Josephine’s deeply ingrained racism is prevalent. As she studies Jamal’s “patrician brow,” “high thoughtful forehead and widow’s peak receding hairline,” and “the slightly hooded Peabody eyelids, the result of generations of careful matchmaking,” she still thinks of him as “this boy, this Jamal.” Jamal is much younger than she is, and she may simply be thinking of that drastic difference, but the text seems to be drawing attention to the way that some contemporary white Americans consider Black men as “boys” and Black women as “girls.” This linguistic gesture is based in the racist idea that “men” and “women” are white ideals that cannot be achieved by Black people. As Barnabas, Miss Jo exclaims, “So you’re white!” to which Jamal winces and scowls, “‘Hell, no!’... ‘But,’ he added, ‘my blood is your blood. I am your last living Peabody kinsman!’” This little exchange demonstrates the “one-drop rule” still present in the United States, which holds that a person with any amount of sub-Saharan blood is Black. Jamal’s pride in his Blackness reinforces the American cultural—and legal—conception that anyone who is not “purely” white is not white, and that anyone with any amount of Black blood is Black. Historically, whites have fought long and hard to keep themselves legally and culturally separate from Blacks despite sexual and therefore genetic intermingling.

That sentiment is still characteristic of MAGA supporters and the “New Right” generally, many of whom have latched on to Palahniuk’s work as support of their ideas, rather than seeing his satire. Jef Costello, a writer for a New Right website called Counter-Currents Publishing, writes in his review of Palahniuk’s *Adjustment Day* that the text promotes the New Right agenda despite adding caveats that Palahniuk’s perspective is “hard to pin down.” Though Costello admits that he is “quite biased” and “strongly inclined to think that Palahniuk believes” the doctrine espoused in the Talbott book, he is careful not to say that Palahniuk is ideologically aligned with the New Right. Despite identifying that Palahniuk “engage[s] in some vicious satire directed at” politicians, academics, and journalists, Costello seems unaware that Palahniuk is also directing that same satire at the New Right. A key moment in *Adjustment Day* that makes it clear that Palahniuk is satirizing white separatist fantasies is the rapid degeneration of Caucasia: “It felt as if the white race had lost its way. It no longer had blacks and queers to feel superior to so
a key source of its pride was gone…. In the absence of queers and blacks, … without underlings to dazzle, the white ethnostate seemed to be floundering.” Costello simply notes this is “a very dumb argument” and goes on to cite other examples in the text that could be construed as supporting his worldview.

In addition to the content of the Talbott book, Costello cites an interview with Joe Rogan in which Palahniuk discusses reading New Right websites as evidence that Palahniuk leans that way politically. Just minutes earlier in the same interview, Palahniuk shares a story about riding in a hired car, where he and the driver connected over their knowledge of Flemish bond, the bricklaying style used on Liberty Hall in Philadelphia. The driver’s father was a bricklayer, and he was thrilled that Palahniuk was able to identify the technique, so the two chatted amiably from Philadelphia until they entered Manhattan where the driver commented on two men walking together. According to Palahniuk, the driver said, “Oh Christ. I hate coming to New York. Ah, the fags,” to which Palahniuk replied, “Well, you know I’m married to a man, and faggot is pretty much my middle name.” At that moment, the driver is no longer thrilled because the man who he thought shared his ideological beliefs was “one of them” to use Palahniuk’s phrasing. Palahniuk describes the situation as “one of those wonderful kind of icky but necessary moments” because he knew the driver was going to “hate [his] guts after” learning that Palahniuk was gay. Palahniuk also describes the “shooting [him]self in the career foot thing”: that he reads The Daily Stormer. The author of the website, Andrew Anglin, is a neo-Nazi, one of the organizers of the 2017 white-supremacist “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA, and a fan of Palahniuk’s first novel, Fight Club. Palahniuk says Anglin writes “the most atrocious, insensitive, brutal things, but they are, they’re so shocking and so transgressive that, uh, that sometimes I laugh just out of the shock… There’s a shock value there that, that just sort of jars me and makes me laugh sometimes.” His shock-laughter does not necessarily indicate that he agrees with the statements, though. In discussing that some of his “less than savory” fanbase has written him letters offering to “kill anyone [he] names, free of charge,” Palahniuk mentions that his “father was murdered by an avowed white supremacist who claimed to have buried anthrax bombs throughout the Pacific Northwest.” Bringing these two ideas together—that he has some less than savory fans and that his father was murdered by a white supremacist—suggests that Palahniuk does not feel a kindred relationship with these fans.
Palahniuk’s distaste for white supremacists alongside his story about revealing his sexuality to the hired car driver suggests that he does not actually support separatist identitarian states. Costello and Anglin, like other readers who would take the hateful rhetoric in satires as supporting that rhetoric, cherry pick quotations and scenes in the text that support their worldviews. The same can be said about what authors say in interviews. Though Costello and others might notice when a novel seems critical of their perspective, they simply dismiss it as a “dumb argument.” This is not to say that Palahniuk is “liberal” or a leftist or what have you, only that he is satirizing the extremes in American society and suggesting that racialized stereotypes—that white men are either a monolithic group of hypersexual white separatists or ultra-liberal ponytail having feminists and that Blacks are either Barnabas-type buffoons or epically regal god-like figures—are inaccurate. The message seems to be that identities and people’s experiences of the world are much more complicated than that. There are institutional forces at work, and the decisions of those in power shape the institutional forces, which thereby affect the available options for people of all identities. Meanwhile, each so-called sect blames it on the others, without realizing that giving over too much of one’s power or identity to such forces leads to crises, whether it be the actual crises the country is currently facing or the fantastical satire Palahniuk plays out in his novel. It seems that *Adjustment Day* is cautionary to a large degree, that the novel parodies the ridiculousness of ethnostates. One can criticize an autocratic, homogenous state without looking toward socialism, and that kind of binary thinking is part of what Palahniuk seems to be critiquing. As Costello does point out, however, Palahniuk’s actual political views are not the most relevant point. What is important is how readers interpret the novel and the kind of work the novel does in the world.

Palahniuk is energized by the kind of power books hold, but he also seems to warn his readers about taking fiction too seriously. In the Rogan interview discussed above, the two are discussing the American drive to purchase status symbols, and how, previously, the drive was more often to learn a skill and be satisfied with the fruits of one’s creative endeavors, whether artistic or utilitarian. In that context, Rogan suggests that the most satisfying thing about being a writer must be feeling the completed book in one’s hand. Palahniuk counters that feeling “is nothing compared to when you hear it echoed in the culture, and you hear people pick up the word snowflake, and you hear all these people say, ‘the first rule of blank is...’ , when you realize you’ve kind of dictated the semantics of the culture for a period, that feels like power.” In the
previous quotation, Palahniuk is referencing his first novel, *Fight Club*, which became a highly successful film and spurred a cult following. That kind of cult following of the Talbott book is what spurs the events in *Adjustment Day*. Throughout *Adjustment Day*, the phrases “before this book was a book” and “the Before Times” are repeated, which points to the real-life effects books can have. In other words, if the kind of separatist attitude espoused by the Talbott book is actually played out, the world could look like the world of the book with people dying and society deteriorating to near ruin. The hardcover version of *Adjustment Day* has a paper jacket that bares Palahniuk’s name, but the hardback book underneath is just how the Talbott book is described within the novel: blue-black and written by Talbott Reynolds. In other words, the name Talbott Reynolds is inscribed on the hardback volume beneath the paper jacket with Palahniuk’s name on it, furthering the implication that books have the power to change people’s thoughts and thereby alter the trajectory of history. Because of the destructive effects of the Talbott book, however, readers ought to note the dangers of taking any extremist dogma—whether from a written text or a political personality—as gospel.

Though Palahniuk would not have had this yet in mind because the COVID-19 crisis had yet to begin when he wrote *Adjustment Day*, this includes the extremist dogma that positions a public health concern—wearing a face covering to slow the spread of a deadly virus—as a political gesture with no real safety benefits for the wearer or the public at large. Yet as Palahniuk demonstrates through his dystopian though not-so-far-fetched ethnostates, isolationism and racial distinction trumps public health concerns like COVID-19. Combating such crises require uniting across differing identity markers and political ideologies, and *Adjustment Day* is eerily prophetic in the way it predicts the United States’ stratified, bumbling, and frankly dangerous lack of meaningful response to COVID-19. One hopes that if readers do not take Palahniuk’s cautionary tale as the warning it appears to be, then at least they might heed the lessons learned from how the stratification he depicts can play out during a crisis: the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives across political and social identification categories.
Bibliography


McLaughlin, Kelly. “The Wolverine Watchmen Plot to Kidnap Michigan Gov. Whitmer Also Included a Plan to Burn Down the


Notes


2 Ibid.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


12 Baker, “Make America White Again...”


15 Ibid.


17 Ibid., 14.

18 It is worth noting that the text does not mention the already-displaced Indigenous population.

19 Ibid., 256.


24 Houpt, “Everything Inside Gavin McInnis.”


26 Ibid., 78.

27 Ibid., 72; 86.

28 Ibid., 90.

29 Ibid., 96.


32 McLaughlin, “The Wolverine Watchmen.”

33 Palahniuk, Adjustment Day, 71.

34 Ibid., 303-4.
35 Ibid., 68.
36 Ibid., 6.
37 Ibid., 14.
38 Ibid., 30.
39 Ibid., 30.
40 Ibid., 30.
41 Ibid., 30.
42 Ibid., 29.
43 Ibid., 30.
44 Ibid., 32.
45 Ibid., 32.


48 Ibid., 55.
49 Ibid., 56.

51 Ibid., 57.
52 Ibid., 57.
53 Ibid., 57.
54 Ibid., 131.
55 Ibid., 55.
56 Ibid., 55, italics in original.
57 Ibid., 55.

59 Palahniuk, Adjustment Day, 60.
61 Ibid., 3.
62 Ibid., 235.
63 Ibid., 236; 235.
64 Ibid., 4.
65 The United States military and its patrolling of global affairs was famously parodied in the 2004 film Team America: World Police.
67 Palahniuk, Adjustment Day, 32.
68 Ibid., 33.
69 Ibid., 192.
70 Ibid., 192; 186; 240.
71 Ibid., 241.
72 Ibid., 146.
73 Ibid., 146.


Ibid., 150.

Ibid., 147-48.

Ibid., 160.

Ibid., 161.

Ibid., 161.

Ibid., 151.

Ibid., 207.

Ibid., 206-7.

Ibid., 207.

Ibid., 207.

Ibid., 208.


Ibid., 232.

Ibid., 300.

Ibid., 300.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., *Adjustment Day*, 190.

Costello, “A Greater Gift…”

“Joe Rogan Experience #1158 – Chuck Palahniuk,” uploaded by PowerfulJRE, YouTube, August 22, 2018, https://youtu.be/v8ZCX0eywXw.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


“Joe Rogan Experience #1158”


“Joe Rogan Experience #1158”
Black Lives Mirror: Reflections on White Anti-Racist Activism in 2020
Lois Leveen

Introduction
I am a middle-aged white woman who has been studying, teaching, and writing about race for most of my adult life. In some ways, those decades were preparation for the deeper understanding and activism of the past year; in other ways, I could not have anticipated how much my thinking would change during this time. And it might not have changed, if it weren’t for the concurrence of the brutal murder of George Floyd and the pandemic.

The historian in me is very interested in why the killing of George Floyd ignited such a profound response here in Portland as well as nationally and internationally. Many other police killings that were just as brutal and just as well documented did not evoke the same level of response. (Of course, many Black people and their allies of other races have been protesting earlier killings, for years and decades, laying the groundwork for the current movement; the question I am pondering is, why did it take until now for others to join them?) The historian in me surmises it has to do with the pandemic. First, it put people’s lives on hold. If you don’t have to drive the kids to soccer practice or you can’t go to the movies, it opens the space for getting yourself to a protest. And people were feeling so much frustration at the pandemic and at the Trump administration’s mishandling of it, and his mishandling of so much else. So millions of people were frustrated and feeling politically dispossessed, and being
able to target white supremacy as a “bad guy” was suddenly enormously motivating for people who hadn’t protested for racial justice before. (As I wrote in an opinion piece for Portland’s main newspaper,¹ even as someone who has long studied racism in the U.S., I found the stress and fear of living in a pandemic enabled me to understand the stress and fear of being BIPOC in America more profoundly than I ever had before.)

In 1854, in Boston, Massachusetts, local and federal law enforcement – police officers, the court system, federal marshals – forced an African American man named Anthony Burns back into slavery. Burns had stolen himself free, traveling from enslavement in Virginia to a new life in Boston. Witnessing agents of the state participating in this forced rendition galvanized anti-slavery sentiment among many white Bostonians, accelerating the sectional divisions that would eventually erupt in the Civil War. One wealthy white Bostonian famously declared, “we went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad Abolitionists.” I am somewhat chagrined to admit how similar my own transformation was in 2020.

I already knew about police brutality – centuries of it – and of course I thought it was wrong. I understood how systemic racism functions. I believed white people have a responsibility to call out white supremacy; that

¹."Do the Math" 2020 Portland graffiti invoking the 1918 influenza epidemic and the 1968 student uprisings (photographed July 2020 by Lois Leveen).
is why I study, teach, and write about race. Yet my partner Chuck and I went to our first Black Lives Matter protest quite by accident. If you had asked that morning whether we would go to a protest, we would have answered, “Are you kidding? Haven’t you heard there’s a pandemic?” It was the weekend after George Floyd was murdered, and we were out on a long Sunday bike ride. As we headed home, I noticed people walking from the bus stop and people getting out of cars, all carrying signs. I realized a Black Lives Matter rally must be starting at the park nearby. As somebody who writes about race and rants about racism, I felt I couldn’t just go home and keep myself safe. We slipped on our masks, locked up our bicycles, and agreed we would just stand by the edge of the amassing group. But if you’ve ever been to any political rally, you know how powerful it is to be surrounded by people who care deeply about the same things you care about. You feel such a sense of kindred spirit and commitment and joy and righteous anger. This was the end of May, and we hadn’t been around people since mid-March, when our governor issued the first “Stay Home, Stay Safe” orders. It just fed my soul so much to be in that mass of protestors.

From then on, we kept going to BLM-related events at least once a week, often more frequently, because we needed to feel like we were
working for positive change. At home, we read academic books, scholarly analyses, and progressive news articles, and we watched films, and listened to interviews, all of which shaped our thinking so deeply. Although I haven’t lived in New York for decades, I still have a New Yorker’s impulse to jump into the fray and to speak up boldly. Chuck is quite different from me; he’s from a place and a culture in which people are kind and take care of each other, in which they greet a “come from away” (as they call visitors) with a warm welcome – but loud protests or disrupting norms is not part of the culture. Yet together, we find we now think and act differently, not just at protests but all the time, through this movement.

I want to share a few of our (now many months old!) social media posts to demonstrate what our experience was like in real time; we were surprised that friends and strangers across the U.S. and beyond began sharing what we wrote, largely to counter what they were seeing in national news coverage of Portland. This is a place with a disturbing history of racism, yet protests here were especially sustained and substantial.

Our posts began from a desire to celebrate how the community was coming together, how mutual aid allowed people to care for each other in deep ways. But our posts reflect how our analyses deepened and sharpened, so quickly. After these examples of social media posts, I will offer a few reflections by way of conclusion.

July 17, 2020 social media post by Chuck Barnes
I wish you could know how beautiful the movement for racial justice in Portland is right now, and how it represents the finest of American values. My partner and I have been attending Black Lives Matter events since the last day of May; we found our first one by accident in our local park, and, though we had to that point been extremely strict about social distancing, decided to mask up and march. You all know about the nightly rallies downtown, but there are many events each and every day across Portland and its suburbs. If you could have heard the 16-year-old Indigenous woman I heard on the 4th of July talk about how she was ashamed of her heritage until the BLM movement led her to bring herself into awareness and pride of her community, you would be moved. I wish you could have seen the bowed-instrument rally to celebrate the life of Elijah McClain. I wish you could see the bicyclists and motorcyclists who ride with each community march, keeping intersections clear and safe. The community is caring for each other. I wish you could have seen the little girl I saw Saturday night, on the sidewalk with her eyes wide, with her fist in the air. (I also wish you could have seen a young
man mistake me for his high school literature teacher, just a minute after
my partner told me that we were likely three times older than some of the
people we were marching with. You know how masked middle-aged
white guys all look the same!

I’m sure you’re curious about what’s going on downtown, and have like-
ly formed some opinions. We’ve been there in-person five nights now in
the past week. Every night, there are speeches at the Multnomah County
Justice Center, which is one block south of the federal courthouse. These
are absolutely Black Lives Matter centered, and led by Black commu-
nity members. The speakers are not all in alignment as to the methods
to achieve the common aim of racial justice. I wish you could hear them
talking, in voices hoarse from use night after night, about economic jus-
tice, police brutality, and the deeply personal experiences that have led
them to yelling through a bullhorn. The square-offs between federal forc-
es and protesters happen later.

Yes, these nightly protests feel chaotic. There are thousands of people in
the street. They are not violent criminals; they are seeking redress of griev-
ances under the Constitution. Some of them wear armor and respirators
and carry shields, which given the disproportionate police response,
makes defensive sense; they are facing forces with impact munitions, tear
gas, and assault weapons. There are clergy. There are doctors. There are
Native Americans performing sacred dances. There is a bagpiper, and
a bugler. Friday night, a band played New Orleans-style jazz through the
tear gas. There are, astonishingly, protesters who move through the crowd
picking up trash. And 24 hours a day, “Riot Ribs” feeds everyone for
free, entirely supported by donations. And everyone chants “Black Lives
Matter.” Every night.

You may have heard Chad Wolf, Acting Secretary of the Department
of Homeland Security, or Mark Morgan, Senior Official Performing the
Duties of the Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, or
Mark Meadows, White House Chief of Staff, talk about how we need
federal forces here because the protesters are trying to burn down the fed-
eral courthouse. Yes, there have been fires in the portico of the federal
building; none present a threat to its structural integrity or have required
more than a fire extinguisher to put out.

Federal forces are here under the President’s “Executive Order on
Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Com-
bating Recent Criminal Violence.” Though Assistant US Attorney Craig
Gabriel has acknowledged that the federal presence has exacerbated ten-
sions, there are more federal police on the way here. And to other cities.
It is a privilege to witness this movement in American history. The protesters’ struggle here is real, and legitimate. Thanks for reading these few thoughts, happy to talk to anyone about what’s going on here.

**July 18, 2020 social media post by Lois Leveen**

Friends outside Portland: many of you have reached out with concern because of the news accounts of illegal behavior by federal “forces” the president has deployed in our city, against the wishes of our governor, mayor, and other elected leaders.

First, thank you for being concerned. Please continue to express outrage about people being randomly abducted into unmarked vehicles, and about a nonviolent protestors being intentionally shot in the head. It is harrowing.

Second, Portland only feels “lawless” in the presence of these federal forces, who are not trained for crowd control, work in urban areas, etc. The latest information indicates they are essentially SWAT-like border agents, trained for intercepting drug smugglers in the desert.

Third, Portland and Oregon are not daunted. Our state attorney general has filed suit against the feds, our governor and congregational delegation and even our mayor are pushing back on behalf of the people here.

Fourth, every day in Portland and neighboring communities, there are MANY protests. Neighborhood by neighborhood, there are daily sign waving events. There are musicians playing for Elijah McClain and dancers dancing for Mali Watkins and marching and speaking and learning for legions of others mistreated and murdered by white supremacy. Most of these events do not involve any federal or local police interference. Organizers, including youth organizers, create security and medical support. It is amazing to see. Friday night, we were at a rally in a park, organized by high school students, when a white man wandered into the gathering and started shouting anti-black ideas. He may have been one of the many folks struggling with mental illness, but the effect was disrupting. I watched first two young (20s? early 30s?) people stand up and walk toward him, then more, and more. They firmly but without physical contact surrounded him, and gradually ‘walked him off.’ The speaker—a grandmother of one of the organizers, who has lost both her own father back in the 1970s and decades later her son to gun violence—did not even notice the disruption. This is what the great majority of protests and political events here are like. People are taking care of people. The president and those he has ordered here to harm us cannot and will not change that.
Fifth, I want to commend Oregon Public Broadcasting for breaking the story of the illegal abductions, which is now national news (let me tell you, as someone who writes and teaches about the era of enslavement, when free people were routinely snatched off the streets, the echoes are just horrific). WE NEED GOOD LOCAL REPORTING BY TRAINED INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS NOW MORE THAN EVER. If you can toss a few bucks to OPB and/or local indie journalists, please do. If OPB had not taken seriously the first two voices of those affected, we might not know around the nation and the world what is happening here.

Finally, PLEASE wherever you are, whatever your personal circumstances re: the pandemic and other vulnerabilities, please take every action you can to show you stand with the movement for racial justice. One lawn sign, like one protestors, will change nothing. But unrelentingly demonstrating that we will not stand for anything less, in every way we can, is exactly what has already led to change (I’m looking at you, Mississippi State Flag), and what we must keep up because so damn much more change is needed.

July 20, 2020 social media post by Lois Leveen

In case you are wondering what the epicenter of anarchist lawlessness (as defined by the president) looks like, this photograph is of the site of the protests. I took it on Sunday, July 19, between 4:30 pm and 5 pm, as I was biking home from the Portland Art Museum a few blocks away. Yes, there is graffiti on the building. Interestingly, though, there is no graffiti on nearby buildings like the Museum, the public library, the numerous performing arts centers, the movie theaters... so, if you think federal forces coming into and remaining in a city/state where every local official has asked them to NOT be, and then abducting people into unmarked vehicles, shooting at and beating unarmed, nonviolent protestors, etc. is the best response to graffiti, then you’ll know American democracy is just as it should be. If not, you should be very concerned. BUT THIS IS NOT JUST ABOUT PORTLAND!!!!

SUNDAY: the president states on national television that he reserves the right to be the first president of the United States to disrupt the peaceful transition of power if he loses the election.

MONDAY: he announces he will send federal forces into other cities throughout the U.S. These are not unrelated events, and you should all be writing/calling your Congressional Reps/Senators to voice your concern. If you and/or they are Republicans, all the more so. There is no greater
example of federal “overreach” than what is happening here. Now I’m going to get ready to go spend the evening with my fellow Portlanders.

July 28, 2020 social media post by Lois Leveen
In recent days, friends, family, and strangers have welcomed social media posts my partner and I have offered about what we are experiencing in Portland. Many have explicitly mentioned the value of hearing from a “trusted source” who shares in the light of day what is difficult to discern—or simply not shown—in the night-time, tear-gas-filled photographs and videos of the protests here. But I suspect what you value most in these posts, why you have shared them with others and asked for still more from us, is that they give you by proxy what Portlanders are experiencing directly: the fierce beauty of how community functions here now. We are so moved by how strangers are coming together around their commitment to Black Lives Matters and caring for each other in ways that are necessary, inspiring, and sometimes downright amusing.

We all need hope and purpose, especially in the face of the pandemic, the economic crisis, and the horrific images and accounts of brutalized Black bodies that have demanded our attention. The foremost value of the protests is that around the nation we have begun to achieve some
small victories in the struggle for racial justice, girding our commitment
to achieve still more. But another value is that the protests are sustaining
us through the worst time we have ever experienced. This is love. Love is
what we are experiencing and expressing, by day and by night, at protests
in Portland and throughout the nation.

But the antipode of love is fear. Love opens our hearts. Fear closes our
hearts. And many of your well-intentioned questions about the motives,
tactics, and goals of the protests reveal how much fear there is now. So
now I will speak to that fear. What I write may be more discomfiting
to read than our posts focused on the love. But please bear with me. You
cannot understand and truly experience the love without also under-
standing and resisting the fear. And understand that I write today not
simply to supplement or counter what you may be seeing/hearing in the
media. I write today to challenge you to think differently about all that
you are seeing/hearing, and perhaps experiencing yourselves.

I’ll address the questions we’re being asked:

- **But aren’t some of the protesters violent? Why are they trying
to damage the federal building?**
- **Why not just protest someplace else, away from the federal
building?**
- **Are some of the white protesters coopting Black Lives Matters for
political ends?**
- **Aren’t you just giving Trump what he wants—a way for him and
FOX and other conservative outlets to stoke people’s fears and
prejudices? What if you are jeopardizing the November election?**
- **What do the protesters really want?**

But first a quick reminder: we are protesting over-policing and its
(often fatal) impact on Black lives. George Floyd, Atatiana Jefferson,
Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain... all the names we’ve been saying, and so
many others whose names we may not know. We are protesting in many
ways, every day, across Portland and the nation. As I have described
elsewhere, most of these events do not involve any federal or local police
interference. Organizers, including youth organizers, create security and
medical support. It is amazing to see. But in downtown Portland (buck-
le up your irony belt), nightly protests against over-policing are being
over-policed, first by the Portland police, and now by both the Portland
police and the Federal “forces” that are here against the express wishes
of our governor, our senators, and our mayor. Protesters have been beaten,
shot, gassed, abducted... all by agents of the government, whether federal
or local. Disturbing as these particular attacks are, we must understand
them as a minor reflection of how consistently over-policed Black (and BIPOC) people are in this country.

Why is there so much over-policing in America, and why does it have such disparate racial impacts? The answer is long and complicated and involves history, politics, money (who profits from providing military-style gear and training to municipal police forces?), explicit racism, and implicit bias. Here I will address one significant piece of the answer (which I focus on because it relates directly to the alleged need to “protect” the federal court building in Portland): “Broken Windows Policing.” This theory asserts that any infraction, such as breaking a window, will inevitably lead to greater and greater crime, making communities unsafe and ultimately lawless. Thus, police must focus on “minor” crimes to preserve the social order. The Broken Windows Policing approach advocates Zero-Tolerance policies, Stop-and-Frisk laws, and other measures that are promoted as preventing crime—although study after study evidences that these approaches have deleterious rather than beneficial effects: they do NOT make any of us safer. They actually make Black people, as well as other people of color, and poor people of all races, far less safe (and they especially harm women and girls of color). Because, as this brief video shows, Broken Windows Policing doesn’t mean police fix the broken windows; it means they criminalize those who live in the neighborhood where the windows are broken—leading the police to use disproportionate violence as well as making disproportionate arrests in these neighborhoods. If you have wondered how we come to be a nation in which police choke humans to death on the city streets for allegedly selling loose cigarettes or passing a counterfeit $20 bill, it is because of over-policing driven by these policies. Another way these policies malfunction is that over-policing of some crimes feeds the way society ignores other crimes. Thus, the Black man murdered for allegedly passing a counterfeit $20 bill died at the hands of a white man who had stolen more than $20,000 from the U.S. government, in unpaid taxes. Don’t even get me started on how the “War on Drugs” has driven incarceration rates for low-level “drug-related” offenses, while pharmaceutical executives and other “white collar” criminals who engineered and accelerated the opioid epidemic for their personal profit go unpunished. No time for that very important detour, when I need to get us back to your questions about the federal building in Portland!

But aren’t some of the protesters violent?

By far the most severe violence we have seen—shootings and beatings—has been perpetrated by the federal forces against community
members, despite the government falsely claiming\textsuperscript{13} otherwise. The most serious substantiated account of violence by a civilian involves an individual who, while surrounded by six U.S. marshals who were arresting him, swung a sledgehammer hitting one marshal three times; according to ABC news (does that A stand for antifa or for anarchist? oh, wait for American!) the marshal’s protective gear likely prevented him from serious injury\textsuperscript{14} So the federal forces aren’t here to respond to violence. They have brought the violence.

Why are protesters trying to damage the federal building?

The president says he sent federal forces here to “protect” the federal building. From what? Fireworks have been set off outside the building, and small fires have been set outdoors, in its portico. These have not harmed the building, which was designed and constructed in the late 1990s to withstand attacks of far deadlier force. Viewed in daylight, no fire damage appears on the building. Nor have there been firefighting forces deployed by the feds. Protesters have repeatedly taken down portions of the fence the feds put up around the building; but this fence is itself illegally constructed by the feds, as the cease-and-desist letter from the city attorney calling for its removal spells out\textsuperscript{15}—another counterfeit $20 bill obscuring what in this case is a $200,000 illegal act\textsuperscript{16} So what’s left for the feds to defend the building against? Well, there is graffiti on the building.

So how should we view that graffiti? As I have noted elsewhere, there is little graffiti on other nearby buildings in downtown, like the public library or the art museum or the performing arts center. Moreover, the graffiti on the federal building could be removed in a matter of hours, if the feds wanted to remove it. But they are keeping it there, to trigger the Broken-Windows mentality that has wrongly taught us to view graffiti as something more dangerous and sinister than it really is, which then drives over-policing. When you see graffiti, remember: those who graffiti deploy graffiti to express themselves. The feds deploy the same graffiti to justify their beatings, shootings, gassing, spraying, and abducting of Black Lives Matter protesters.

So why not just NOT graffiti? Isn’t graffiti both wrong and playing into “their” hands?

This is a thornier question (really two, but who’s counting?). I currently have lots of signs in my front yard, with hand-painted messages like “BIPOC Lives Matter” and “Whites Against White Supremacy” and “Ending Oppression Requires Action.” I’m pretty sure the number and placement (in the strip of land between the sidewalk and street) of these
signs violate some local ordinance. But the police and the city are not bothering to enforce that ordinance. That means I will also not be subject to brutality during an encounter with police over this minor violation. By privilege of homeownership, my hand-painted messages remain in the public space, and I remain unharmed. I admit, with the same privilege of homeownership, if someone graffitied my house, I would not be pleased. But I also wouldn’t tear gas, beat, or shoot “less lethal munitions” at them, or at people who just happen to be standing around them. And I don’t think our government should do so, either.

Bonus on graffiti: Historians have long relied on graffiti as a kind of “primary source” to document historical events and social movements, because it reveals what the people involved on the ground are thinking. Through the power of his office, the president has a means to share whatever vile, hateful, untrue, and even dangerous statements he wants to make, and they are heard worldwide. People who feel disempowered are trying to share their messages to counter his, through graffiti. So when I see “Fred Hampton Was Murdered by the Feds” spraypainted on

On the outside, bicyclist forced into traffic lane by unpermitted structured obstructing marked transit corridor. On the inside, federal goons trying to figure out how to make their $200K fence withstand the people they are supposed to protect. Pretty sure the M on the street is there to tell you that BLACK LIVES MATTER. Heart on car in foreground may be to assure you we are totally in Portland (photographed on Saturday, July 25, 2020 by Lois Leveen).
a courthouse building, I do not think, “There goes the neighborhood!” I think, here is a person who has educated themself about America’s long, racist history of over-policing, and is trying to educate others. I also wonder whether, had the government not brutally murdered Fred Hampton and undertaken countless other acts to undermine the struggle for racial justice decades ago, we might all be in a much, much better place now (and in “all” I especially include Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, George Floyd, and all the others who are more than just their names).

You do not have to agree with the content of all the graffiti, or condone any graffiti, or approve of everything everyone at the protests does, to support the protests. Even as I protest, there are some chants I choose not to say. There are things I do not do, some because I am not brave enough and some because I am not angry enough. As I make these choices that differ from those of other protesters around me, I recognize that I have never been part of any formal or informal group in which I agree with everything that every other member of the group says and does. (I would be frightened of any entity that demands such groupthink from its members.)

Thus, I do not join thousands of community members who gather in protest and expect them all to think, speak, and act exactly as I do. How arrogant would that be? Or, an even more important question: Why is our first reaction to judge and condemn those who are protesting differently from what we feel comfortable doing ourselves, rather than trying to understand the reasons for their actions? I suspect it is because judging and condemning makes it easier to dismiss what discomfits us, and to rationalize our own tendencies to complacency.

*Why not just protest somewhere else, away from the federal building?*

The deployment of federal forces against Black Lives Matter protesters in Portland has produced much debate and a few lawsuits regarding questions of federal jurisdiction. A number of friends, here and elsewhere, have suggested protesters “solve” the problem by protesting somewhere else. This is a well-meaning but poorly thought-through response. First, as I noted above, we are and have been protesting lots of other places. Second, we are not willing to have our Constitutional right to protest against racial injustice segregated to “certain areas” by a government that is openly trying to undermine that right. Third, if one of the main threats to Black people’s lives and Black communities’ ability to thrive is over-policing, the most important places to protest this deadly reality is any site of extreme over-policing. Fourth, one of the many important things I have heard at Black Lives Matter Protests in Portland came from
a speaker at a Black youth-led Juneteenth protest: “White people, you are going to have to get uncomfortable.” Whatever your race, if you would feel more comfortable protesting someplace else, you should definitely do that (we need everyone protesting everywhere). But if you are uncomfortable with people gathering outside a federal building to exercise their first amendment rights by calling for racial justice and insisting Black Lives Matter, please question your own discomfort rather than questioning their/our choice of location.

(Final thought on this one: It is also worth noting that the feds are pursuing people well beyond the building, filling entire city blocks with tear gas, firing at people who are on other blocks, and abducting people into unmarked vehicles off the street without due cause. There is no reason to believe that with less of a protester and press presence downtown to witness and document these acts, they would end or even decrease rather than increase.)

Are some of the white protesters coopting Black Lives Matters for political ends?

There certainly are a lot of white protesters at Black Lives Matter events in Portland. The overall makeup of the black-led protests reflects
the demographics of the city, which in turn reflect a very racist state and city history, which continues today with active gentrification (a racial wrong that here as elsewhere is facilitated by public policy and public funding). But the makeup of the protests also reflects the fact that white people here think white supremacy is wrong. Not all the white people, but enough that they/we are risking their/our physical health from both the pandemic and the police tactics (have I mentioned gas, beatings, or shootings in the last few paragraphs?) to say we are committed to ending white supremacy. And “choosing” to be subject each night of the protests to the brutality of over-policing has made many white people even more aware of how horrific it is that African Americans and other people of color are subject to the brutality of over-policing every minute of every day, regardless of where they are or what they are doing (say these names: Atatiana Jefferson, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Tamir Rice. Now fill in a few on your own. There are all too many.)

No protester can reliably tell you what every other protester thinks. We do not (over)police each other’s motives—logistically, with thousands of people showing up downtown each night, this would be impossible. I can tell you that Black Lives Matter /Say Her Name /Say His Name / Say Their Name and other anti-racist chants are led both by those at the front with the megaphones and those throughout the crowds who call out spontaneously, throughout the night, every night. Most of the signs protesters carry refer specifically to racial justice and ending white supremacy. George Floyd’s face is often projected on the county building next to the federal building, and sometimes his last words are projected there. It would be impossible to observe or participate in these protests and not understand that Black Lives Matter is central. We are definitely keeping our eyes on that prize.

But I can name one white person who is trying to coopt these protests for political ends: the president.

He is railing about lawlessness and anarchy and antifa, and he is very carefully NEVER referencing Black Lives Matter. Like the coronavirus, he seems to believe if he pretends a national movement for racial justice doesn’t exist, it will just disappear. It is up to all of us to make sure this does not happen, by constantly keeping our focus on Black Lives Matter.

(Side note: while I cannot speak for all Portland protesters, I can say for myself that if the question is, “are you pro-Fascist or anti-Fascist?” the answer is a pretty clear “anti.” But nobody is asking anyone at the protests to pledge that they are “members” of antifa. No one even seems to be
But aren’t you just giving Trump what he wants—a way for him and FOX and other conservative outlets to stoke people’s fears and prejudices? What if you are jeopardizing the November election?

The president has been focused on stoking fears and prejudices since long before his 2016 campaign. He will do that regardless. Trying to curtail his fear-mongering by setting aside demands for racial justice will not succeed. Or rather, the only thing it will succeed at is shoving racial justice to the side yet again. Which we must not do. I am not interested in being part of a white majority that believes there is something potentially too provocative in protecting black lives, and protecting people of color in general.

If you are concerned about the November elections—and you should be—please help register voters. Work locally to ensure voter access is not impeded, especially with the pandemic raging (here in Oregon, we have long been 100% vote-by-mail, and knowing its advantages, we cannot understand why most other states still rely on single-day voting at polling places).

And by all means, keep talking about Black Lives Matter. Do not let the president or FOX News or your uncle pretend this is about antifa, and anarchy, and lawless cities. Call them out, over and over.

Activism is not going to cost us the election. But hesitancy and complacency just might.

What do the protesters really want?

The protesters in Portland and the Black Lives Matter movement nationally are not a monolith, which makes this question especially challenging.

But—this just in—over the past weeks, “a group of Black-led organizations, Black individual activists and protest organizers came together and asked the question—what demands do we want to make and of whom? The conclusion was simple: We don’t need to make any new demands. There are pages and pages already crafted, already proposed, and already being discussed. The problem is, these elected leaders haven’t enacted them.” Drawing on all those pages and pages, Reimagine Oregon came up with a list of key INVESTMENTS AND DIVESTMENTS, and met weekly with elected officials from state and local jurisdictions to identify the prognosis, timeline, and legislative leads for achieving each specific investment and divestment. I know if you came looking for lawless anarchy, this would be a very surprising thing to find. But it is kind of rocking
my world that our community now has a plan and process for moving forward.

The Reimagine Oregon policy areas extend well beyond policing, to economic development, education, health and well being, housing, legislative processes, transportation, and to “community safety” as defined in ways that are community-driven. This is an amazing thing to have achieved so quickly, but it is also not the same as actually enacting all the investments and divestments. Nor does it address everything every protester might want, for the simple reason that achieving racial justice will take more than a one-time checklist. So let’s be okay with what they’ve pulled together, even if it doesn’t happen to include, for example, efforts by students in the nearby town of Sandy to ban the Confederate flag in their high school, because it is a hate symbol that contributes to a racist environment they know is wrong. Or the need to honor Black trans experiences at the intersection of LGBTQ+ and Black Lives Matters. Or many other things that we continue to focus on.

Because ultimately, what we want is for Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland and George Floyd and all the others so brutally slaughtered by white supremacy—we want them to be alive. We know we can’t have that, but we’re willing to settle for having all those like them live, and thrive, from now on.

**Conclusion**

This selection of social media posts is intended to show an evolution in one white household’s understanding. The posts reflect how moved we were (and remain) by the love and commitment of our fellow protestors, as well as our growing desire to call out how events here reflected decades of policies that many white Americans, ourselves included, allowed to continue. There are a few concerns these social media posts don’t reflect, but which I think are important to address by way of conclusion.

This movement transformed public space in Portland, as people put up signs, flyers, and art installations. Some of what has appeared commemorates Black lives lost to police violence in Portland, elsewhere in the U.S., and around the world. Some of it is intended to educate passersby about the impact of white supremacy, structural racism, and white privilege as it plays out in everything from black maternal and child health to white accumulation of generational wealth. Messages are being put into public space to incite discussion and action. Back in June, someone posted a handwritten sign on a telephone pole that said, “Kids, have you asked your parents who Breonna Taylor is?” Theaters and houses of worship
that have been closed throughout the pandemic are using their marquees to communicate messages about racial justice. As I pass these spaces, I love that we are refusing to forget, refusing to move on.

With these activities, we are exposing – in the hopes of changing – what has been an open secret: the prevalence of violence and other ubiquitous manifestations of white supremacy. But I wonder about trauma and re-traumatization for those most harmed by white supremacy. Even as I have moved through the city as a white person appreciating these interventions in public space, I cannot know what it is like to move through the same space as somebody who feels continuously vulnerable to white supremacy and police brutality. Unless we really are making change, simply calling out the deaths, the losses, the disparities, and subjugation may not be much help. It may even risk becoming a harm, if all we achieve is a different landscape “normalizing” white supremacy’s presence in our culture.

For example, the Portland Art Museum put up a large Black Lives Matter banner in the summer of 2020. Weeks later, as Portlanders filled nearby streets each night to protest police brutality, the museum’s Northwest Film Center announced its first program since the pandemic shutdown: a “family friendly” screening of *Kindergarten Cop*. This
decades-old movie promotes deadly white male violence in the guise of patriarchal protection. Not surprisingly, community members voiced objections. The film center quickly substituted another film, John Lewis: Good Trouble, a newly released documentary about the Civil Rights icon. Yet the film center continued to defend its initial choice, rather than acknowledging why community members objected. To be sure, the museum is not alone in this kind of refusal. After 2020, more white Portlanders, and white Americans generally, now say they support Black Lives Matter. Yet there remains a deep resistance to recognizing how white normativity pervades our lives, and, in cases like this, to recognizing how supposedly “liberal” institutions celebrate and exonerate whiteness at its worst. What shocked me most in 2020 is how obtuse white people can be to simple truths: racism is not merely about uttering a nasty slur, and white supremacy is often far more insidious (and posited as innocuous) than the open brutality Derek Chauvin demonstrated in slowly snuffing out George Floyd’s life.

As one of the posts above indicates, I visited the museum after the banner was put up, before the movie was announced. I have long attended film center screenings, which more typically feature films like Good Trouble. And I was one of the community members who contacted the
museum to voice concerns about *Kindergarten Cop*. This led the white, male Arts and Culture editor of a local “liberal” newsweekly – who happened to be a fan of *Kindergarten Cop* – to post an article targeting me specifically. His article promoted an all too familiar theme: something is being taken away from white people, and white male rage is the proper response. Given the popularity of that message, his article went viral – nationally and internationally, resulting in me experiencing racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and transphobic cyberharassment (note that I am white, cis-gendered, and in a heterosexual relationship).

Months later, the FBI informed me they had apprehended a white supremacist in another state for illegal weapons trafficking, and found my name on a hit-list in his possession. It is disturbing to know someone who wasn’t going to cross state lines to see a drive-in movie would come that far to kill me. And it is disturbing to realize my life may have been saved by the FBI – the same organization that arranged the murder of Fred Hampton. But it is also disturbing that the museum still displays a BLM banner, despite never acknowledging or addressing any of what transpired as a result of their programming decision (in direct violation of their equity policy). When BLACK LIVES MATTER is reduced
to a banner hanging on the very institutions that promote white male police violence as “family fun,” we remain far from achieving racial justice.

When talking about “police brutality,” we really need to be talking about police unions. This was something I did not realize until mid-way through 2020. I long understood that the “few bad apples” paradigm denied how systemic racism shapes American policing. But I had no idea how pro-active police unions are in protecting and perpetuating those abuses. This understanding unfolded slowly this summer, because like many on the political left, I am pro-labor and thus pro-union. (At one online teach-in I attended, a young, queer, Latinx labor leader observed that in a pro-labor setting trying to critique how police unions promote white supremacy is like coming out sexually in your faith community. Another speaker at the same event wondered why police forces, which were created to protect the interests of capitalists, are unionized at all. I had never thought about these things before. Now I cannot stop thinking about them.)

One BLM event Chuck and I attended this summer was a “pop-up” film screening: organizers brought a portable projector, an inflatable screen, a DVD player, and a small generator to a public park, and showed
the film Arresting Power. This documentary focuses both on killings and other abuse by the Portland police, and on community efforts to publicize and disrupt that brutality. It is only a few years old, but already dated because it does not include more recent Portland police killings and other instances of abuse — including the immeasurable damage done to protestors (and sometimes whole neighborhoods) in 2020 by police use of chemical weapons, batons, “non-lethal” munitions, and other means, often in direct violation of a court order against such abuses. I truly did not know the unrelenting local manifestations of police brutality until watching the film, listening to BLM speakers, reading more accurate news coverage, and participating in these protests in 2020.

Portland is thought of as one of America’s whitest cities, yet the racial disparities in arrests and in police killings here are some of the highest in the U.S. It is worth noting that Portland’s current chief of police, Chuck Lovell, is black, but he is no friend to the Black Lives Matter movement. Our police force, like most in the U.S., is predominantly white; nevertheless, for those African American, Latinx, and Asian American people who choose law enforcement — and who can withstand the white supremacy within the system — policing can offer a surprisingly lucrative career. And the police abuse here is not only about race: much of the over-policing in Portland is of the growing unhoused population, which is predominantly white (although also disproportionately Native American). Portland experiences chronic police abuse — included police killings — of the mentally ill and of those without stable housing. I do not say this to detract from BLM. BLM exposes how the long American history of policing that positions African Americans as dehumanized prey now allows other groups to be similarly targeted.

The Portland Police Association is the longest continuously operating police union in the country. This is crucial to understand because unions make it difficult to fire officers for abuse, and often result in abusive officers being re-hired. Police unions set the terms and even oversee the process for investigations of abuse; they limit the extent to which public jurisdictions can disclose facts about offending officers; and they ensure that those jurisdictions — which is to say, individual taxpayers — pay for any court awards to compensate those harmed by police brutality, including the families of those killed. So we pay for the police, we pay them overtime to overpolice, and then we pay millions of dollars in penalties when they are caught brutalizing members of the public in our name. In November, Portlanders voted to implement better oversight of the police; the police union immediately challenged the measure legally. It would
be ludicrous to think of teachers or health clinic staff or any other public employees having the union-guaranteed protections to harm the public that police officers do. And it is unclear how we can end abuse while police unions insist on protecting abusers.
Bibliography


Leeven, Lois M. “A Neo-Nazi Planned to Murder Me Because of Kindergarten Cop. Why Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Sword-Wielding Viral Video Won’t Change Men Like That.”


Snackblopdx. “THIS FRIDAY THERE IS NO OTHER PLACE TO BE!” Twitter, June 18, 2020. https://twitter.com/BrightlyAgain/status/1406266995574677504


Notes


snackblocpdx, “THIS FRIDAY THERE IS NO OTHER PLACE TO BE!,” Twitter, June 18, 2020, https://twitter.com/BrightlyAgain/status/1406266995574677504


Contributors

Kelly Budruweit is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. She earned her PhD from the University of Iowa in 2018, with a dissertation that examines contemporary fantasy as an opportunity for revitalizing postmodern literary value.

Benjamin D. Crace (PhD, University of Birmingham) is Assistant Professor of English at the American University of Kuwait, where he has taught for the last ten years. His work has appeared in The Journal of Pentecostal Theology, Christianity and Literature, and Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions.

Angelica Maria DeAngelis earned her degree in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara. She currently teaches in the English Department at the American University of Kuwait, specializing in literature, cinema and composition. Her research interests include interrogations of race, gender and identity in contemporary and global literature (especially North African), speculative fiction, and popular culture.

Rebecca L. Gross is a PhD Student in the Literature department at UC Santa Cruz. She is interested in contemporary diasporic texts that address intergenerational memory, trauma, and cultural myths. Rebecca hopes to research how these literatures mobilize solidarity movements and social change. Before coming to UCSC, Rebecca received her B.A. in English from the University of
Washington, and an M.A. in English Literature with an emphasis on Jewish Studies from Loyola Marymount University. Outside of academia, Rebecca runs Off Menu Press, a zine publishing space for people who identify with canonically-excluded gender(s); she also writes flash fiction and drums in a punk band.

**Dr. Lois Leveen** earned degrees in history and literature from Harvard University, the University of Southern California, and UCLA, and taught on the faculty of UCLA and Reed College, in Portland, Oregon. She is the author of two novels: *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* (HarperCollins 2012), which was inspired by an African American woman who served as a Union spy during the American Civil War; and *Juliet’s Nurse* (Simon & Schuster 2015), which imagines the fourteen years leading up to the events in Romeo and Juliet. She is currently completing research for a scholarly biography of Mary Richards Denman, the real person who inspired her first novel. Much of Leveen’s research, writing, and work as a public intellectual focuses on race and racism in the U.S. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Los Angeles Review of Books, The Huffington Post, and similar publications, as well as in academic books and scholarly journals. Originally from suburban New York and Newfoundland, Canada, respectively, Lois and her partner Chuck Barnes continue to live in Portland, where they participated in a range of Black Lives Matter protests and events beginning in late May 2020. Here are their reflections on that experience.

**Nicole Lowman** is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York (SUNY). Lowman has work forthcoming from *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* and is Vice President of the Kurt Vonnegut Society.