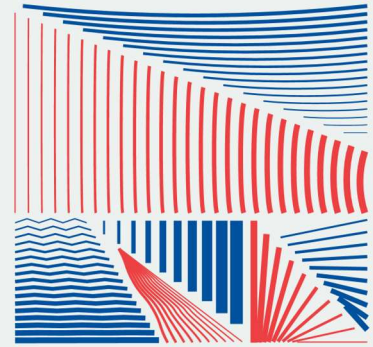


IN PROGRESS

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of North American Studies



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Academic Section

Something Moves: Affect in Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez' *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts*
Marielle Tomasic

Making Gender Trouble: How *Sex Education* Subverts Compulsory Heteronormativity and Re-Imagines Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*
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Thinking Alternatives in Science Fiction: Octavia Butler Meets Judith Butler
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Feminist Retelling of a Greek Myth: Reclaiming the Voice of Penelope
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Radicalism of Nonviolence in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
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About Our Journal

In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies is a peer-reviewed online journal based at the English Department at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany. Launched in 2023, *In Progress* features academic work by graduate students in Anglophone literary, cultural, and media studies, focusing in particular (but not exclusively) on the field of North American Studies. To that end, we publish academic writing that demonstrates the excellence of graduate scholarship and strives to include diverse perspectives in our Academic Section. Beyond that, our journal provides a space for the documentation of student projects and other creative endeavors originating in and around Leibniz University's international master program North American Studies. In this capacity, the journal also publishes creative writing, reports of events organized by students, and other outcomes of seminars offered in the master program's "Independent Studies" module (such as video essays, podcast episodes, and book reviews) in our Independent Studies Section. In addition, the journal's Open Section is dedicated to a wide range of other themes, forms, and contents that graduate students produce specifically for each issue. *In Progress* is managed and run by a small core editorial team and produced with the active collaboration of graduate students who participate in the advanced seminar "Editing a Scholarly Journal." Seminar participants are involved in the blind peer review of the academic submissions and, together with the members of the core editorial team, they work on the editing and publication process. This also includes preparing the content of the Independent Studies Section for publication and the conceptual design and text production for the journal's Open Section. Our journal thus serves several purposes: It gives graduate students the opportunity to publish peer-reviewed articles, it introduces students to the work process involved in editing a journal, and it showcases projects that students developed at the English Department in Hannover. As a literal work *In Progress*, each issue's publication depends on the dedication, creativity, and cooperation of the people involved.

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Journal Website

inprogress.uni-hannover.de

Contact and Submissions

inprogress@engsem.uni-hannover.de

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Editorial Note

Felix Brinker & Kathleen Loock

It is finally here: the first issue of *In Progress: A Graduate Journal of North American Studies*! We are thrilled to launch our brand-new, peer-reviewed online journal, which provides a platform for graduate students in Anglophone literary, cultural, and media studies to showcase their academic work and creative endeavors. *In Progress* is based at the English Department at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany, and our focus is primarily on the field of North American Studies. Our journal aims to publish academic writing that exemplifies the excellence of graduate scholarship and showcases diverse perspectives as well as experimental and creative approaches to specific topics. Therefore, the issue is divided into three different parts: an Academic Section that features five articles written by students, an Independent Studies Section with student projects on autofiction and the intersection of love, power, and academia, and an Open Section, in which students engage creatively with the theme of love & joy. We believe that graduate students have unique and important contributions to make to their respective fields, and *In Progress* offers a space for them to share their ideas and research with a wider audience. We hope to foster a community of scholars who are passionate about North American Studies and committed to advancing knowledge in this field.

In our Academic Section, we publish peer-reviewed articles that present original research and critical insights into various aspects of North American Studies. These articles are rigorously evaluated by the editorial board and team, ensuring that our readers have access to high-quality scholarship. We encourage submissions on a rolling basis that engage with a wide range of topics, including but not limited to literature, film, television, digital media, popular culture, history, politics, and social issues. Our goal is to promote interdisciplinary scholarship and encourage innovative approaches to the study of North America. This first issue features five academic articles that engage with a range of different topics. First, Marielle Tomasic explores autotheory and how the artistic expression of theoretical thought in works like Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez' comic *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts* produce affect that makes personal experiences palpable. Then, Nathalie Rennhack examines how the Netflix series *Sex Education* (2019-) destabilizes the heteronormative matrix that Judith Butler describes in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) – by presenting and simultaneously subverting gendered stereotypes and by focusing on queer identities that do not fit into the restricted realm of heteronormativity. In the third academic paper, Theresa Maria Forche puts Octavia Butler's novel *Wild Seed* (1980) and her trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (1987-1989) into conversation with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in order to probe the alternatives to capitalist notions of gender and to the capitalist systems these two Butlers have to offer. Celina Plaß is concerned with retellings of Greek myths, more precisely the feminist change in perspective that Margaret Atwood offers in her novel *The Penelopiad* (2007). By shifting the focus from the male point of view to Penelope's



version of the *Odyssey*, the book raises questions about the endurance of myths as well as literary canons and the power of feminist revisions. Finally, Setareh Ghasemireza analyzes Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) and its call for non-violent direct action in the U.S.-American civil rights movement. Taken together, these articles engage with questions of gender and race, with capitalism and violence, with the pasts, presents, and futures. They tackle different media and theories and work all to advance our knowledge.

In addition to our Academic Section, *In Progress* also offers a space for the documentation of student projects and other creative endeavors that originate from Leibniz University's international master program North American Studies. Our Independent Studies Section publishes creative writing, reports of events organized by students, and other outcomes of seminars offered in the master program's "Independent Studies" module, such as video essays, podcast episodes, and book reviews, for example. This section serves as a testament to the creativity and originality of our graduate students, showcasing their ability to push the boundaries of traditional academic research. This issue features student work from the advanced seminar "Autofiction," taught by Lujain Youssef in the summer term of 2022. Jia Shen Lim ("Lady Bird and Firebird"), Tina Pahnke ("In Theory"), and Sahar Al Kharsa ("The Story Untold") have submitted creative writing that they produced in the context of this course. Their contributions are preceded by a short introductory text, written by Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, and Michelle Pitson from the editorial team. We also highlight the student project that came out of the advanced seminar "Love, Power, Academia," taught by Anna-Lena Oldehus in the summer term of 2022. Here, students organized an exhibition with a variety of creative and interactive student projects that was part of the *WortLaut* festival program in October 2022. This issue presents a report of this event, written by Elisa Bongartz, Evelyn Dossa, Mruga Kelkar, and Celina Plaß from the editorial team, and an interview with porn scholar Madita Oeming that was also part of the event (transcribed and translated from German by Elisa Bongartz and Evelyn Dossa).

Finally, our Open Section is dedicated to a wide range of themes, forms, and contents that graduate students produce specifically for each issue. This section reflects the innovative spirit of our journal, inviting students to experiment with new modes of writing and expression and to explore topics that might not fit neatly within the confines of our other sections. The contributions showcase creativity, critical thinking, and a willingness to push boundaries. In this issue, the students have decided to work on the topic of love & joy. Jessica Hille, Jia Shen Lim, Nathalie Rennhack, Ahmet Servet, Harishnavi Sriskanthan, and Marielle Tomasic from the editorial team first provide a brief discussion of the relationship between love and joy. This joint introductory text is then followed by seven contributions that include essays, creative writing, and poetry. Each contribution finds a different angle on the topic and all together offer a varied and diverse panorama of how love and joy intersect in our lives.

In Progress thrives on the submissions we receive from graduate students. But it is also a journal that is *made* by graduate students. At the heart of *In Progress* is the advanced seminar "Editing a Scholarly Journal," which is integral to its production. Graduate students form an editorial team as they learn the basics of academic journals, the peer-review process, formatting, editing, and proofreading in this course, followed by the opportunity to put theory into practice. Under our guidance and that of the associate editors, for instance, the students conduct a blind peer-review process to evaluate submissions for publication. This hands-on experience enables them to learn about the intricacies of the publication process, including the editing and production of a journal, and to acquire valuable skills for future careers inside or outside of academia.

In Progress thus serves multiple purposes: Our journal provides graduate students with an avenue to publish their scholarly work, offers them valuable experience in editorial and publication processes, and highlights the impressive work being done at the English Department in Hannover. As general editors of *In Progress*, we are committed to creating a supportive and collaborative community of graduate students, faculty, and scholars. We hope that *In Progress* will serve as a platform for building connections and initiating dialogues among graduate students and scholars in the field of North American Studies. As a literal work *in progress*, each issue of our journal relies heavily on the dedication, creativity, and cooperation of all involved. We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has worked on this inaugural issue. Our team of associate editors has been indispensable for this project from its inception: Gülçin Dogan, Alissa Lienhard, Hanna Masslich, Shayan Rahmanian, and Harishnavi Sriskanthan have played a pivotal role in the conceptualization of *In Progress* and worked tirelessly over the past year to make not only this inaugural issue but the journal as whole, a reality. To bring *In Progress* into existence, the associate editors collaborated on various tasks such as managing the journal's workflow, writing and promoting the Call for Papers, setting up the website, communicating with authors, participating in the blind peer review process, and carrying out numerous other crucial tasks. We are also deeply grateful to this year's editorial team and the contributors for their dedication, enthusiasm, and hard work. We would also like to thank Katrien Stevens at Karavan Design for coming up with our wonderful logo, and the Faculty of Humanities and the English Department of Leibniz University Hannover for providing resources and support for the journal. And now we invite you to explore the fruits of our labor and engage with the exciting scholarship and creative work that make up this first issue of *In Progress*.

Author Biographies

Felix Brinker is assistant professor (wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter) in the division of American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany. His research focuses on contemporary American film, television, and comics, 19th- and 20th-century periodical culture, media theory, and Marxist theory. His work has been published in the journals *American Periodicals*, *Participations*, and *Television & New Media*. Recent publications include the monograph *Superhero Blockbusters: Seriality and Politics* (Edinburgh UP, 2022) and the volume *Modernity and the Periodical Press: Transatlantic Mass Culture and the Avant-Gardes, 1880-1920* (co-edited with Ruth Mayer, Brill 2022).

Kathleen Loock is Professor of American Studies and Media Studies at Leibniz University Hannover, Germany, and director of the Emmy Noether Research Group "Hollywood Memories: Cinematic Remaking and the Construction of Global Movie Generations," funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Her research focuses on Hollywood's remaking practice, seriality, and the role memory and cultural repetition perform on the levels of identity formation and for the maintenance of imagined communities. She has published on remakes, sequels, reboots, and seriality in film and television and written, edited, or co-edited six books and special issues on these topics. She has also gained academic editing skills as a review editor for the journal *Historische Anthropologie*, as an editorial team member of *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon* (North American Literature Section), and as associate editor of the journal *Amerikastudien/American Studies*.

Something Moves: Affect in Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez' *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts*

Marielle Tomasic

Abstract

Bridging the theoretical with the personal, autotheory is by nature a genre that exists between categories. This paper argues that it is this very in-between-ness of autotheory which enables an expression and circulation of affect. My analysis of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez' *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts* showcases how the artistic expression of theoretical thought enabled by works of autotheory is particularly successful at making the personal stories that are being portrayed palpable. To make this case, the article first discusses theories of affect studies, autotheory and comic studies and brings them into conversation with each other. Afterwards, the results of this theoretical discussion are employed to analyze the role of affect in *Wake* and *Wayward Lives*.

Keywords

Autotheory – Affect Studies – Comics Studies – Life Writing

Introduction

If it were not for my exhausted body, this paper would not exist. If I had not listened to my exhaustion, these pages would be blank. But I am not all mind, just as I am not all body. The two nourish each other. “[A]ll theories come from individuals with their own personal, subjective, and embodied experiences and [...] these experiences almost inevitably feed into their theories” (Amodeo). It is through my deeply embodied experience of exhaustion and the need to recharge that Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez' *Wake: The Hidden History of Women Led Slave Revolts* found its way into my life. Its description had managed to get me perked up again because it reminded me of the class on autotheory that I was taking. As I began flipping through the pages of the graphic narrative, I discovered that it was not only reminiscent of my class but also of one specific book that I had read for it: Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

Both works are written by women historians who are portraying the previously undocumented lives of rebellious black women. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Saidiya



Hartman traces the stories of young, black women at the beginning of the twentieth century, thereby choosing to give space and voice to those who, in their ordinary yet beautiful rebellion, are threatened to be erased by a history that was not written to include them. Similarly telling a ‘forgotten’ story about rebellious women, *Wake* depicts Rebecca Hall’s struggle of unearthing details about the lives of the women warriors who led slave revolts during the Middle Passage. Both authors fill the gaps of the archive and choose to tell their stories through a lens that Hartman refers to as “sensory” (xv), and which I am going to simply call ‘affective.’ I argue that this affective quality of both *Wayward Lives* and *Wake* is made possible through the authors’ autotheoretical, transdisciplinary engagement with the material.

Seeing as the two narratives have so much in common but are executed in quite different styles, I am interested in examining how lived experience and the affective quality that accompanies its portrayal can be evoked in different ways in works of autotheory. I argue that autotheory’s existence in the liminal spaces between personal and theoretical, “research and creation” (Fournier 10) makes for an ideal birthplace for affect.

In the following, I will first be looking at the place of the body in autotheory, before then diving into the field of affect theory in general and, following, its connection to graphic narratives such as *Wake*. Lastly, I will apply my findings to an analysis of *Wayward Lives* and *Wake*. Where fitting, I will supplement my theoretical research with the addition of my own lived experience as another layer of knowledge.

Affect, Autotheory, and Comics

In the following effort to determine the role that affect plays in, as well as, potentially, beyond both of these works, I am going to discuss Rebecca Hall’s *Wake* and Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives* as works of autotheory. To begin with, I am interested in what exactly we are dealing with when we are talking about ‘autotheory.’ According to Lauren Fournier,

autotheory seems a particularly appropriate term for works that exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects [...]. [A]utotheory might best be understood as fundamentally transdisciplinary. (10)

This definition certainly leaves room for interpretation. Fournier seems to suggest that any work in which theoretical findings are being expressed in ‘fresh’ ways could be regarded as autotheoretical. This definition then still lacks the ‘auto’-part of the work/word. Elaborating on her definition, Fournier further writes that “[t]he autotheorist shuttles between self and theory – political theory, linguistics, poststructuralism, affect theory, performance theory, aesthetics, gender – using firsthand experience as a person living in the world as the ground for developing and honing theoretical arguments and theses” (32). That is, the lived experience of the autotheorist lays the groundwork for an expression of arguments that transcends disciplines. Dan Harris agrees with Fournier’s notion of autotheory’s liminality but gets more specific when he clarifies that “[w]hile autotheory makes a case for the productive enmeshment of personal and theoretical, it does so in a work of written art that is modeling the affective nature of creativity [...]. It also challenges the still-pervasive myth of objectivity in academic writing” (22). Here, Harris identifies two interesting elements of autotheoretical works. Firstly, he points out the affective quality that can be found in autotheory’s creative expression. It could be argued that it is autotheory’s very centering of lived,

embodied experience that enables this rise of affect. Ralph Clare's concurrence of Harris' emphasis on the role of affect in autotheory surely points towards this conclusion of mine; he describes autotheoretical texts as those "that do not simply blur the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, [...] but, more importantly, that self-consciously attempt to deal with theory in a more practical, affective, and pragmatic manner, particularly by stressing the value of embodied experience" (90). But Clare also takes up Harris' second point – the challenge that autotheory poses to ideas of objectivity in academic works – when he mentions autotheory's blurring of fiction and non-fiction. For, clearly, anything that exists in the space between the two could most definitely not be regarded as 'objective.' I will revisit this point of enmeshment of fact and fiction later in this chapter in the context of graphic narratives, but before I do so, I want to further explore autotheory's connection to affect.

What Clare calls the "in-between-ness" (104) of autotheory may be exactly the point where affect can be found since, according to Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "[a]ffect arises in the midst of *inbetween-ness* [...] and resides as accumulated *beside-ness*. Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity" (1-2). They, too, are pointing towards the role of the body in affect and yet, it is not entirely clear what this thing called affect even is until they go on to frame "[a]ffect [a]s in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*" (2). Here, the body's necessary presence becomes more apparent, for what other, if not bodily, containers could encounter each other; where else could forces be felt if not in the body? This, then, raises a question: If affect is such a bodily phenomenon, can it even be evoked through such a mind-full activity as reading a text?

Following Sara Ahmed's notion that "affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation" ("Affective Economies" 120), one could suspect that such a circulation is also possible through different media. Elspeth Probyn supports this idea when exploring the role of shame in academic writing. She asserts that "writing affects bodies. Writing takes its toll on the body that writes and the bodies that read or listen" (76). Probyn even goes as far as to declare that "[t]hinking, writing, and reading are integral to our capacities to affect and to be affected" (77), and therefore dismantles Cartesian notions of mind-body dualism, where writing and thinking are categorized as purely logical, non-bodily activities. Although Simon O'Sullivan claims that "you cannot read affects, you can only experience them" (126), he also points out that art (which I would argue autotheoretical works to be part of) is "a bundle of affects [...] waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant" (126). He then continues to declare that "[a]rt is less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world. Less involved in knowledge and more involved in experience, in pushing forward the boundaries of what can be experienced" (130). While I do agree with this idea of 'art-as-experience,' I nonetheless want to call attention to O'Sullivan's disregard of (embodied, lived) experience as a form of knowledge itself, since it is this very disregard that autotheoretical works are challenging.

Turning from affect in written narratives to its role in graphic narratives such as Hall's *Wake*, I would like to reframe reading not as an activity of thought but, first of all, of perception. As Karin Kukkonen elucidates in her essay about embodiment in comics, "perception is not only exclusively visual, but involves the entire body [...]. [It is] not a detached contemplation of the world or an achievement just of eye and brain. Considering the bodily activities of characters, readers can get a sense of how they perceive the [world] around them" (51). It is through this perception that affect can be transported off the page and thus arise in the reader. Kukkonen bases her claims on research in the areas of mirror neurons and motor resonance, which "suggest that it

is likely that readers of comics, too, experience bodily echoes of the motions and actions they observe” (53). Andrew J. Kunka points towards a similar ‘force of encounter’ (to use Gregg and Seigworth’s wording) when writing that “[t]he interactive nature of comics [...] can help develop a sympathetic connection between reader and subject, enhancing the intense experience of trauma or the humor of the mundane” (2). This is particularly noteworthy since, according to Hillary Chute, autobiographical works are “the dominant mode of current graphic narrative” (456), meaning that the experience portrayed in the work is, in most cases, of autobiographical nature and thus exists in relatively close proximity to works of autotheory.

While comics or, as I am choosing to refer to them for reasons of inclusiveness, graphic narratives, were long “understood as an antielitist art form” (Chute 455), works such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* have helped to bring the genre acclaim (Chute 457) as well as scholarly attention. Chute suggests that the genre’s “compounding of word and image has led to new possibilities for writing history that combine formal experimentation with an appeal to mass readerships. Graphic narrative suggests that historical accuracy is not the opposite of creative invention; the problematics of what we consider fact and fiction are made apparent by the role of drawing” (459).

This argument is especially of interest to me since both of the works I am going to analyze are written by historians who are, through their works, challenging these very boundaries between ‘historical accuracy’ and creative invention or, as Hall calls it, making “educated guesses about what happened” (ch. 2). Not only are graphic narratives particularly suited to challenging such boundaries, but Chute even declares that “[t]he most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories” (459). In addition, she describes graphic narrative’s ability to “envision” (459) the everyday reality of women’s lives, which, as I will show in my later analysis, is something that can be observed in Rebecca Hall’s *Wake*. Chute argues that while these realities are rooted in personal experience, they are also “invested and threaded with collectivity” (459) – this, too, is a part of *Wake* that I will analyze later in this paper. In the case of *Wake*, but surely in many other autobiographical narratives as well, this collectivity does not just extend sideways but also back into the past, taking up the (hi)stories and experiences of ancestors and incorporating them into the present narrative and reality. The “ability of comics to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page” (Chute 453) makes the genre especially fit for portraying such connections. Here, the aforementioned mixing of fact and fiction becomes especially apparent: when, for instance, autobiographical (including autotheoretical) graphic narratives portray felt presences of ancestors as actual presences, the boundaries between fact and fiction become blurred.

Just as is the case in autotheory across all kinds of different media, “comics autobiography allow[s] the artist to structure the narrative to correspond to a larger, emotional [or, as I would argue, affective] truth” (Frederik Byrn Köhlert qtd. in Kunka 8). As Kunka concludes, it therefore reveals the very truth that there is no such thing as absolute truth, as what we mean when we talk about truth is always necessarily “mediated and unreliable” (10). It is the hybridity of graphic narratives, as well as, I argue, autotheory, that enables it to “challenge [...] the structure of binary classification that opposes a set of terms, privileging one” (Chute and DeKoven 769).

Now that I have hopefully been able to make clear the connection between autotheory and affect, as well as the potential of graphic narratives to bring out the affective quality of embodied experience, I will turn to Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Rebecca Hall’s *Wake* to analyze the role of affect in two different forms of genre-transcending works. After all, as

Jane Tolmie reminds us, “[t]here is an aesthetics of affect, not an inevitable or natural emotional side effect but a deliberate result of artistic decisions” (ix) – it is these very artistic decisions that I am going to examine more closely.

Affect in (and around) *Wake* and *Wayward Lives*

One way in which artistic decisions can create affect in autotheory is beautifully demonstrated in Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. The fact that there is, indeed, a deliberate artistic decision behind Hartman’s work becomes apparent on the very first pages of the book. In “A Note on Method,” Hartman explains that “[t]he aim is to convey the sensory experience of the city and to capture the rich landscape of black social life. To this end, I employ a mode of close narration, a style which places the voice of the narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text” (xv-xvi). Already, we can sense the potentially affective layer of the book, with words such as ‘sensory,’ ‘relation,’ ‘vision,’ and ‘rhythm’ alluding to a centering of bodily experiences. Not only is Hartman trying to give space to those whose voices and presences have been crushed by the archive, but she is doing so in a way that values their perspectives and centers their experiences (xv, xvi). Instead of merely glancing *at* these wayward lives, the reader – through Hartman’s careful crafting – is invited to step *into* the crowd and experience what life feels like inside of its center.

To begin with, Hartman guides the reader into the “ghetto [a]s a space of encounter” (4), the place where they are going to encounter ‘wayward’ characters. This guidance is especially necessary since, in this part of the city, “[t]he experience is *too much*” (4) – therefore it is only natural that “[t]he senses are solicited and overwhelmed. Look over here. Let your eyes take it all in” (6). Hartman encourages the reader, brings to attention the fact that to really perceive, instead of just noticing something, requires a certain level of active engagement. Now that the readers are, hopefully, immersing themselves into the experience provided through Hartman’s imagination, she plunges into a row of sensory descriptions:

What you can hear if you listen: The guttural tones of Yiddish making English into a foreign tongue [...]. The eruption of laughter, the volley of curses, the shouts that make tenant walls vibrate and jar the floor [...]. The rush of impressions: the musky scent of tightly pressed bodies dancing in a basement saloon; the inadvertent brush of a stranger’s hand against yours as she moves across the courtyard; a glimpse of young lovers huddled in the deep shadows of a tenement hallway; the violent embrace of two men brawling; the acrid odor of bacon and hoe-cake frying on an open fire; the honeysuckle of a domestic’s toilet water; the maple smoke rising from an old man’s corncob pipe. A whole world is jammed into one short block crowded with black folks shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but still *intoxicated with freedom*. The air is alive with the possibilities of assembling, gathering, congregating. (7-8)

If one accepts Hartman’s invitation to linger in these places instead of just rushing through them, it is possible to make use of one’s bodily capacity to be affected by the words on the page. Especially through the choice of accumulating all these impressions, Hartman manages to make the city palpable. After having thus set the scene, she goes on to introduce (in what could be classified as twenty short stories) a set of characters she encountered during her research as a historian and portrays their lives. While each of these characters would be deserving of attention, I want to focus on the one whose encounter left me the most affected.

The first time I saw the girl, I did not see her at all. It was late at night on a weekday when I – in need of something I could immerse myself into to get distracted from the heaviness that can be my very own personal life – sat down at my desk and read the chapter from *Wayward Lives* that had been assigned for our class on autotheory. When I returned to my desk from a water refill break, I noticed something strange on the screen that was illuminating my by-now-dark apartment: a weird, senseless pattern of colors. At first, I thought I was simply so tired that I was imagining things, then, that something was wrong with my screen, but as I got closer, I realized that it was the text itself that looked *wrong*. Something must have gone wrong with the scanning of this particular set of pages. Relieved that neither my vision nor my laptop were impaired, I continued reading. It was only when I had finished the chapter that I realized the text was missing something: the study questions I had received for the text made mention of two photographs, while I had only seen one. Confused, I scrolled back – until I noticed my mistake and felt a wave of guilt wash over me. What I had explained as a result of madness; as something broken; the mistake was, in fact, a girl. A girl about the age of ten whose only remaining trace was the very photograph I had so horribly failed to notice in the background of the text. That night, I spent a long while ruminating on my experience of not-seeing the nameless girl. Was this not exemplary for most encounters she had probably had in her lifetime? Through all of this guilt, confusion, affect I was experiencing that night, there was something that I only noticed a week later when re-reading the text in preparation for class. In the very first lines of text covering the girl, Hartman relays wondering: “Was it possible to annotate the image? To make my words into a shield that might protect her, a barricade to deflect the gaze and cloak what had been exposed?” (26) – by my not-seeing the girl, Hartman had achieved exactly what she had hoped to. First, through speculating what the girl’s experience had felt like, Hartman had made my skin crawl in response to her questions:

Anticipating the pressure of his hands, did she tremble? Did the painter hover above the sofa and arrange her limbs? Were his hands big and moist? Did they leave a viscous residue on the surface of her skin? Could she smell the odor of sweat, linseed oil, formaldehyde, and clothes worn for too many days? Did she notice the slippers, tattered shirt, and grubby pants, and then become frightened? Had the other models left their imprint in the lumpy surface, the oily patina of the upholstery, and the rank musty odor? (26)

Then, Hartman had made sure to protect the girl from further harrowing encounters by creatively using her own words as a barrier, leaving exposed only the haunting feeling of the girl’s experience. When discussing the text in class the following day, I learned that I was not the only one whose gaze Hartman had been able to successfully avert. In our *Zoom* breakout room, several fellow students stated having needed the guidance of the study questions to break through the barrier of words that Hartman had set up. However, one student in particular did not seem to experience Hartman’s artistic choice as the same kind of successful protection that it had come to resemble for me. Although they, too, had failed to notice the girl at first, upon realizing what lay hidden behind the words that their eyes had grazed, the student became filled with shame and rage – shame because they had involuntarily spent minutes staring at the naked body of a child, rage because Hartman had made them do so and, they felt, also subjected the girl to further violations. The affective forces were piling up in our virtual room and we got into a heated argument. I was almost yelling, trying to convince this other student of the girl’s protection, wanting to reach through the screen to grab them by the shoulders and shake them to make them realize that all was well. Before we could reach an agreement, though, our time in the breakout room was up and we had to end our discussion to return to the plenum.

While there were many aspects of *Wayward Lives* that left an impression on me (such as several other sections like the ones explored above), what stayed with me most deeply was this encounter and the way in which Hartman’s work had not only affected me, but also how her creative entanglement of image and text had affected this other student. Clearly, there was something happening in the gaps that the in-between-ness of autotheory afforded. Today, I would consider this ‘something’ the emergence of affect.

Exploring affective qualities in another autotheoretical work that creatively plays with both image and text, I am now turning towards Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez’ graphic narrative *Wake*. While I do not want to discredit Martínez illustrative contribution to this collaborative work, I am choosing to only make mention of Hall going forward, since it is her lived experience that supplies both the ‘auto’ and the ‘theory’ to the work. Just like Hartman is reading archival documents “against the grain [...] in order to narrate [her] own story” (34), Hall had to “read between the lines” (ch. 2) of the archive to come across the women whose stories she is sharing in *Wake*.¹ Where Hartman mainly inserts her presence to translate her characters’ experiences to the reader, *Wake* centers more clearly on Hall herself. As such, the book portrays not only the findings of Hall’s research but also illustrates the ways in which her work finds, affects, and guides her in both her professional and personal life. While doing so, there is a continuous emphasis on the role of her personal (some might say subjective), embodied experience.

Already in the prologue, *Wake* portrays Hall’s motivation behind her work: A two-page spread relays a revolt on a slave ship, and we see a woman escaping her capturers by jumping into the water (fig. 1). On the next page, we follow her journey underwater, diving across a few panels until a set of hands that looks just like hers is grabbing the sleeping Rebecca Hall. In the next panel, Hall is wide-awake, a haunted look on her face, and two captions inform the reader: “I am a historian. And I am haunted” (prologue). While this sequence does end with a verbal explanation, it is the graphic representation that relays the most information and makes Hall’s affective truth of physically feeling haunted, of being reached by and connected to the past, evident.



Figure 1. In *Wake*’s prologue, a two-page spread of a revolt on a slave ship is followed by a page that shows Hall being haunted by the past.

¹ Like many other graphic novels and comics sources, the edition of *Wake* cited in this article does not include page numbers. Because of this, parenthetical references to the text indicate book chapters instead of pages or page ranges. Where needed, I have included figures to illustrate my argument and to reference relevant parts of *Wake*’s narrative.

The beginning of chapter four further accentuates the fact that Hall’s research is affecting her. A splash portrays Hall, surrounded by stacks of court records, trying to trace the journey of three enslaved women who had been imprisoned post-revolt (fig. 2). The bottom part of the panel depicts one of these women pushing herself up from the dungy floor of her cell and reaching towards Hall. The illustration, which utilizes a set of parallel lines to guide the reader’s gaze directly to the woman’s hand, overpowers the panel’s captions and thus centers Hall’s embodied experience. She is conducting her research because, perhaps, she feels like she can help the women escape their imprisonment by reading archival “documents against the grain” (ch. 4) and trying to uncover their stories – or because, even if she cannot help after all, she still feels haunted by the past.



Figure 2. In this page from Wake’s fourth chapter, Hall researches court records about post-revolt imprisonments.

That this work is anything but easy becomes apparent later in the chapter. Sitting in the library, still fenced in by stacks of documents, Hall is first depicted as being surrounded by empty space before the composition becomes reversed and we see a bustling library surrounding Hall's by-now empty body (fig. 3). A caption reading "I can't find her, I'll never know what happened to Sarah or Abigail" (ch. 4) serves as an explanation to this portrayed experience of first ungroundedness, then emptiness. That the affect her work has on Hall does not 'stay in the office' when she leaves at the end of the workday becomes apparent over the next couple of pages. The reader follows Hall slowly coming 'back into herself' and going home: On the way, her surroundings become more and more warped and overwhelming until she is enveloped by complete darkness – a darkness that is still present when she eventually arrives home and curls up on her bed (fig. 4). All of this transpires without a single caption or speech bubble and makes this portrayal of depression especially visceral.



Figure 3. Later, consecutive pages in chapter four show Hall coming back into herself and leaving the library...

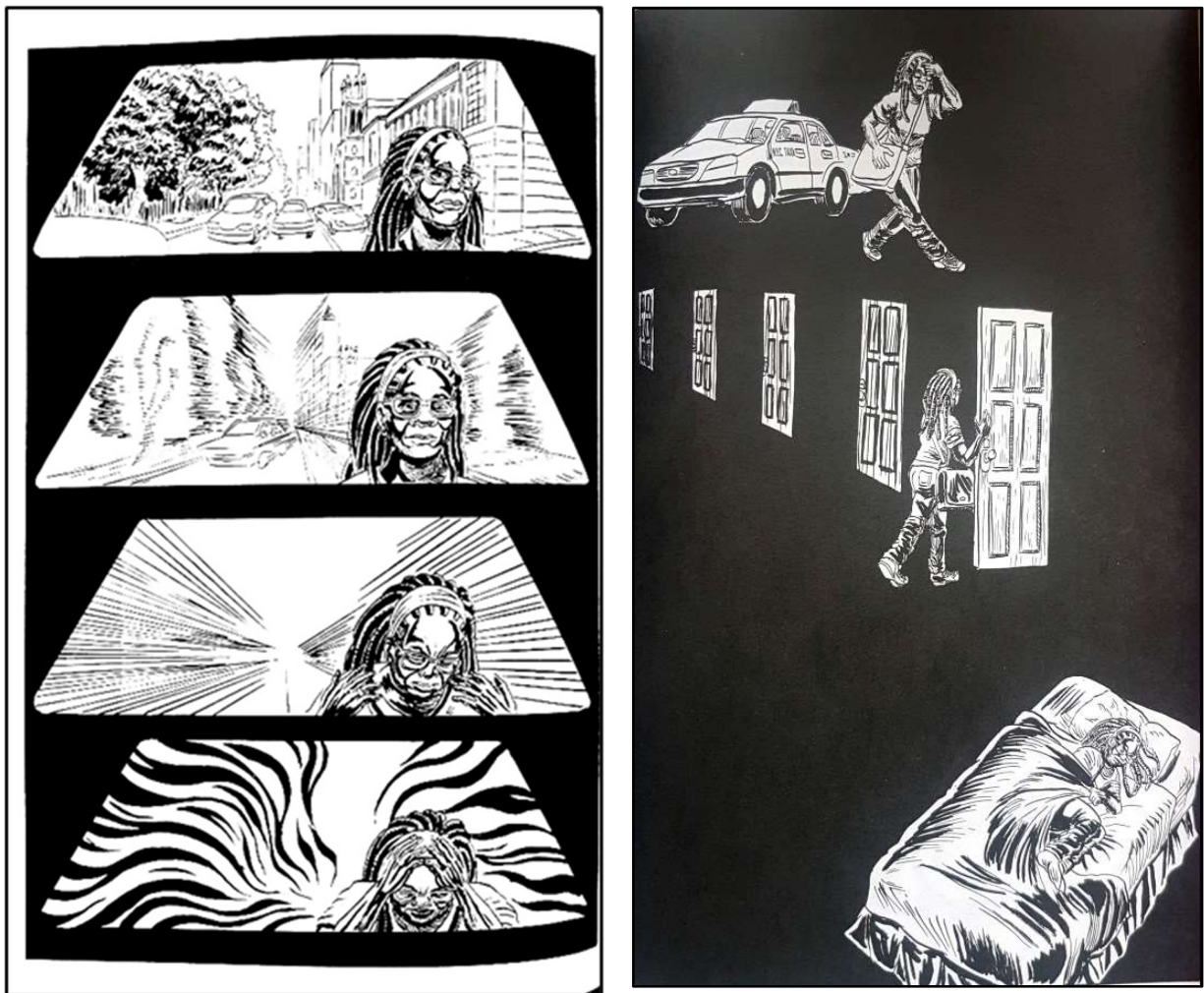


Figure 4. ... only to show her becoming encased by darkness on the way home (*Wake* ch. 4).

Wake, however, makes a point of equally showcasing the ways in which Hall's affective entanglement with the (hi)stories of black women is a source of strength for her. Chapter six depicts how, following a conversation with one of her students about Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Hall is visibly upset by the story's powerful message about the trauma of slavery – that to kill one's child would be better than to subject it to life as a slave. Having written down in her notebook that “[o]ur memories are longer than our lifespans[.] Haunting is what makes the present waver” (ch. 6), Hall is standing in front of the sink, splashing hot water into her face, when she looks up into the steam-covered mirror to find her reflection distorted: a woman appears holding an arrow, ready to fight (fig. 5). Here, again, the illustrations depict what can be characterized as Hall's embodied knowledge: that those who came before her are somehow still alive inside of herself.



Figure 5. On this page from chapter six, Hall faces the realization that the past lives on inside her.

In the following, the chapter focuses on Hall's grandmother, illustrating how both her grandmother's spirit as well as "the spirit of [her] ancestors, including those in slavery" (ch. 6) are not only present in Hall's life, but help her feel like she can survive "today" (ch. 6). The ensuing portrayal of the life of Hall's grandmother, Harriet Thorpe, not only registers her struggles but, more than anything, her strength as well as the ways in which she managed to still find joy amidst misery. In a scene where Thorpe's son mentions his mother working two jobs, which must clearly leave her tired, she responds by starting to dance, demonstrating that her assurance, "No ways tired!" is to be taken seriously (fig. 6). Here, too, the graphic addition to the text makes all the difference: Thorpe's energized body speaks its very own language, affectively informing both her son and the reader of a truth that transcends any literal expression of truth.



Figure 6. In chapter six, Hall's grandmother Harriet Thorpe first embraces and then dances around her son.

It is this element of joy that makes me return to *Wayward Lives*, where sensuous pleasure shares center stage with the struggle of daily life. For instance, one story portrays the ways in which, no matter how bleak the circumstances,

[i]n its broadest sense, choreography – this practice of bodies in motion – was a call to freedom. The swivel and circle of hips, the nasty elegance of the Shimmy, the *changing-same* of collective movement, the repetition, the improvisation of escape and subsistence, bodied forth the shared dream of scrub maids, elevator boys, whores, sweet men, stevedores, chorus girls, and tenement dwellers – not to be fixed at the bottom, not to be walled in the ghetto. Each dance was a rehearsal for escape. (Hartman 306)

By portraying the lives of these young, black women in all of their affective layers, Hartman refuses to paint a simplistic, judgmental picture, instead “offer[ing] an account that attends to beautiful experiments” (xvi). Hall ends *Wake* on a similar note of empowerment when declaring that “[w]hen we go back and retrieve our past [...] we empower and bring joy to our present” (ch. 10), thereby accentuating the value and power of the affective “*forces of encounter*” (Gregg and Seigworth 2) that shape human lives.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show through my analysis of Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* and Rebecca Hall and Hugo Martínez’ *Wake* that autotheory’s existence in the liminal spaces between personal and theoretical, “research and creation” (Fournier 10) makes for an ideal birthplace for affect. Especially in cases where the autotheorist themselves supplements their theoretical work with their own, lived experience, they can make use of autotheory’s transdisciplinarity to allow affect to enter the page.

As we can see in *Wake*, autotheoretical works can productively employ creative forms of expressions, mixing genre and media to portray the autotheorist’s own experience, therefore making palpable the “*forces of encounter*” (Gregg and Seigworth 2) that fuel and affect both professional and personal lives. But even when autotheorists put less emphasis on their own existence, it is still this very existence that enables works of autotheory to be infused with an affective quality. In cases such as *Wayward Lives*, autotheorists’ embodied connection to their material makes possible what Hartman so powerfully applies: by placing herself inside of the circle of those whose lives she is portraying, by asking questions and imagining not only what the lives she is researching have looked but, almost more importantly, felt like, Hartman manages to fill the page with affective forces. However, Hartman also seems aware that in order to transport these affects off the page, readers must really immerse themselves into what they have been offered. Just as Hartman guides her readers to look, hear, feel, Hall, too, seems aware of the readers’ need to pause and feel their way into the affective when she writes: “[m]aybe, if we listen carefully, we can hear [the voices of the slaves]” (ch. 8), thus placing emphasis on active engagement instead of passive consumption.

In any case, it seems that the in-between-ness of autotheory, both in regard to form and content, is especially suited for causing a circulation of affect. As my own experience with reading and discussing *Wayward Lives* demonstrates, texts can, indeed, affect their readers in some way or another. However, this encounter also reveals that, while works of autotheory can have such affective effects, the kinds of affects that arise from a piece of autotheoretical work can vary drastically. This does make sense if we take into consideration that, as Sara Ahmed points out,

“bodies do not arrive in neutral, if we are always in some way or another moody, then what we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation” (“Happy Objects” 36). Additionally, the ways in which we are affected by something are highly dependent not only on our current state, but also on our personal past histories, encounters, and experiences. That being said, my point remains that, in autotheory, lived experience as both knowledge and personal truth can be expressed through a creative mingling of genres and media. And that, I strongly feel, is a whole kind of pleasure itself – a pleasure which can then fuel the ways in which we live, work, and affect.

Author Biography

Marielle Tomasic is a master student of North American Studies and holds a B.A. in English and Philosophy from Leibniz University Hannover. Besides being a student, she is also an editorial assistant for a publishing house. In her research, she is particularly interested in literature that crosses the boundaries of fact and fiction as well as those between the personal and the theoretical, and thus focuses on studies of autotheory, autofiction, life writing and liminal studies.

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Making Gender Trouble: How *Sex Education* Subverts Compulsory Heteronormativity and Re-Imagines Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*

Nathalie Rennhack

Abstract

This paper approaches the internationally successful Netflix series *Sex Education* through Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and investigates how the show – through its characters – imagines and constructs a realm of cultural possibility that exceeds the heteronormative matrix. This paper reads the representation of the characters Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa) and Adam Groff (Connor Swindells) throughout the first season of *Sex Education* as an answer to questions Butler poses concerning identity and legibility. In doing so, this paper argues that the series subverts culturally constructed heteronormativity through the repetition of attributes which construct the heteronormative matrix. The show thus, through this repetition, destabilizes the attributes that – according to Butler – naturalize this exact matrix. This paper thus explores how *Sex Education* engages with Butler's ideas and suggests how the realm of cultural possibility that Butler imagines might function.

Keywords

Gender Studies – Queer – Judith Butler – Heteronormativity – Television Studies

Introduction

“What the fuck did you come as, Tromboner? A girl?” (1.7). These questions from the Netflix series *Sex Education* (2019-) exemplify what Judith Butler refers to as “metaphysics of substance” (*Gender Trouble* 22): particular but accidental attributes make the human body meaningful and thus legible within society. In their work, Butler uses this concept, amongst others, to demonstrate how the entirety of compulsory heteronormativity is culturally constructed. Their ultimate goal is to imagine and eventually construct a social realm which is able to surpass this heteronormativity. Butler argues that “[i]f subversion is possible it will be a subversion from within” that is able to take place “when the law turns against itself” (127).² Still, most media representations are

² The law or name of the father is a psychoanalytical term coined by Jacques Lacan that, according to Butler, constructs the basis of heterosexuality in that the father prohibits children from continuing to fully occupy the time and attention

“constructed through a heteronormative lens” (Poole 279) and thereby only stabilize what Butler aims to deconstruct. When compared to those depictions, *Sex Education*’s focus on queer characters stands out.

I argue that the Netflix show *Sex Education* can enter into a dialogue with Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and is thus able to answer distinct questions Butler poses in their writing. Following Butler, who tries to imagine a realm of cultural possibility which exceeds compulsory heteronormativity, *Sex Education* outlines this discourse and offers answers to questions concerning identity, legibility, and cultural subversion. Even though the show operates within the culturally constructed heteronormativity, it exemplifies how this exact system can be deconstructed within and through itself. *Sex Education* employs overt representations of gendered stereotypes and mixes opposing attributes within one character to destabilize gendered attributes as well as the need for one’s identity to function within the restricted realm of heteronormativity. It thereby creates a discourse which subverts compulsory heteronormativity while simultaneously offering a perspective on queer men’s identities in this discourse.

I will specifically focus on the characters Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa) and Adam Groff (Connor Swindells) and approach their representation through Butler’s imagined utopia. I ultimately aim to show how, thirty years later, Butler’s ideas function in the framework of a (British) mass media production and how conceptions of gender have or have not changed. It still needs to be taken into account that Butler’s theory was thought, written, and published in an American context, whereas *Sex Education* is set in Britain, written by a staff of screenwriters around the British series creator Laurie Nunn, and performed by mostly British actors.

I nonetheless assert that, in spite of these British influences, the show can be approached through Butler’s theory as it has an international character due to the blending of American and British aesthetics. The online magazine *RadioTimes* notes that *Sex Education* “feels distinctly American” (Harrison), notwithstanding the fact that it is set in a rural area close to Cardiff (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. 199). The feeling that *RadioTimes* describes is caused by “Breakfast Club-style lockers,” “American football,” and “Letterman jackets” (Harrison). Nunn even describes these distinctly American visuals as a “conscious choice” (qtd. in Harrison). These characteristics, which clash with the rural British setting and dialect, create a scenery that is neither British nor American but has an extremely international character – it is “a teenage utopia” (Palmer). The blending of American and British culture in the visuals inevitably also influences the characters portrayed within them. Simultaneously, the British setting allows to openly address teenagers’ sexuality as the British curriculum explicitly includes sex education (Long 6) and even addresses LGBTQIA+ (13), whereas most American schools still refrain from teaching anything beyond abstinence (Bleakley et al. 1151). The British setting is thus utilized to justify the show’s focus, and the mixing of cultures then functions to actively include a multiplicity of cultures. Netflix, as a global streaming platform with culturally diverse, international audiences, also furthers this understanding. Thus, the discussion of *Sex Education* in the context of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is promising.

Gender and Heteronormativity

When analyzing Netflix’s *Sex Education* with Butler’s theory, gender must first and foremost be understood as constructed. Years before writing and publishing *Gender Trouble*, Butler already

of their mother. This law thereby normalizes and enforces ongoing heterosexual behavior. Refer to chapter 2 of *Gender Trouble* for a more detailed discussion of this law and its problems.

argued that “gender is not a fact” but “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (“Performative Acts” 522). This idea is fundamental to their arguments concerning heteronormativity and its subversion and closely connected to the production of binary categories for attributes and behaviors. The result is what Butler refers to as “metaphysics of substance” (*Gender Trouble* 22) – a concept that is indispensable for cultural subversion.

Butler describes gender as being performative and highly regulated (“Performative Acts” 520). Repeated actions thus naturalize gender and simultaneously create ideas of gender. These repetitions then create social norms which “govern intelligibility” (*Undoing Gender* 42). An individual’s performance allows society to ‘read’ their gender identity; through a heteronormative lens, individuals are recognized as either ‘man’ or ‘woman.’ Compulsory heteronormativity, which relies on heterosexuality, then, “both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31). This system thus needs clear definitions of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ which also include desire: a man desires a woman and vice versa. A discourse which presupposes this binary system and enforces it must be understood as performing “a regulatory operation of power that naturalize[s] the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 43). Compulsory heteronormativity, in the most fundamental way, is consequently a regulatory system which governs what is thinkable and intelligible within a given social context.

As this concept is neither natural nor given, it must be stabilized through social practice in order to persist. In this context, Butler argues that “[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – this is, that those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practice of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (*Gender Trouble* 24). The binary system modern society widely relies on can thus only exist as long as individuals follow heteronormativity – queer individuals become unintelligible. This also relates back to the creation of norms which are necessary in a binary gender system. But while individuals who do not follow norms become unintelligible and therefore do not fit into any of the binary categories, “any opposition to the norm is already contained within the norm, and is crucial to its own functioning” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 51). Gender identities which deviate from the norm hence also stabilize the norm when the deviation is recognized as such. A restricted and highly regulated heteronormative system only allows certain identities to exist, resulting in a suppression and the creation of a hierarchy of identities.

One result of this regulatory practice, which stems from the intelligibility of norms, is what Butler refers to as the “metaphysics of substance” (*Gender Trouble* 22). When certain behaviors and attributes – which become norms through repetition – are understood to be accidental, they are exposed as unnatural and “a regulated fiction” (33). Butler furthermore names this understanding of gendered attributes as one way to work against heteronormativity (33). The deconstruction of such attributes and norms might also deconstruct notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and what it means to be either.

This already is a starting point for Butler’s wish for cultural subversion which would ideally result in a realm of cultural possibility. And even though they still pose many questions concerning this subversion and how it may take place, they are certain that any kind of subversion must take place within the heteronormative law (127). Some of Butler’s questions nonetheless remain unanswered throughout their whole work. In my approach to Netflix’s *Sex Education*, I will use the following two questions Butler asks about subversion and identity: “What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?” (44). And: “If the

multiplication of gender possibilities expose[s] and disrupt[s] the binary reification of gender, what is the nature of such a subversive enactment? How can such an enactment constitute a subversion?” (171). In this context, identity must be understood as “an effect of discursive practices” (24) and as following from performative acts within society.

Butler mainly focuses on women and the suppression of them within society throughout *Gender Trouble*, but their explanations and ideas concerning heteronormativity and its subversion can still be applied to any contexts involving queer characters. Even in such queer settings in this heteronormative culture, someone is either ‘man’ or ‘woman,’ ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine.’ Most media representations consequently still widely rely on a heteronormative context (Poole 279), which includes stereotypical and accidental behaviors and attributes that are closely related to the production and stabilization of heteronormativity.

Following this understanding, being masculine is still understood as “being not-female” (125), as Sharone Bird suggests. Hegemonic masculinity furthermore includes attributes such as domination (Poole 282), “a quick temper” (283), as well as “detachment and independence” (Bird 125). Femininity is often associated with opposing characteristics such as subordination, vulnerability (Poole 283), and emotionality (284). Femininity as ascribed to women in a heteronormative framework is thus constructed as inferior and articulates the need for domination by masculine men. Amanda Lotz similarly states that “masculinities that reinforce men’s dominant gender status in the culture include aspects such as behaviors and attitudes that assert men’s ‘natural’ place as leaders and their superiority over women” (35). This ultimately creates the powerful and the powerless within the binary of man and woman.

In the context of this binary opposition, queer characters can hardly be represented at all. Jay Poole states that men “who adopt or exhibit traditional feminine attributes [...] were and are contextualized as ‘queer’ and/or ‘gay’ by mainstream America” (280). Hence, a man who is not portraying masculinity in a patriarchal sense has to be queer by default. Bird similarly argues that “meanings associated with behaviors that challenge hegemonic masculinity are denied legitimation as *masculine*” (121). This regulation stabilizes the gender binary and allows gay characters to only live on the margin as they are men but often stereotypically portray feminine attributes and thus, according to Butler, become unintelligible.

Even though the number of queer representations in mainstream television is evidently multiplying (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. 199), these characters still mostly operate within a heteronormative framework. Bird also asserts that “violations of the norms [...] typically fail to produce alternations” and rather “result in penalties to violators” (130). As *Sex Education* represents many queer characters, it is crucial to analyze what role this heteronormative framework plays in the show in order to discuss whether or not the show is able to function beyond this regulatory system.

Creating the Realm of Compulsory Heteronormativity

When following Butler’s understanding of cultural subversion, Netflix’s *Sex Education* needs to produce a realm within the law in order to create a possible scenario for subverting compulsory heteronormativity. This includes the notion of heterosexuality as given and therefore pre-discursive, which makes the idea of the natural binary of the sexes inseparable from gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 7). What also follows is the homosexual taboo that heteronormativity inherently entails. I assert that this space within the law of compulsory heteronormativity that enables cultural subversion is particularly constructed through the character Adam Groff. Adam’s hegemonic

masculinity – which surfaces in his phallogocentric speech and behavior, his need for (physical) domination, and his emotional detachment – as well as the fact that he evidently internalized the norms and attributes which lead to this conception of masculinity, work together in creating this space.

Phallogocentric language is described as being “pervasively masculinist” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 13). This phallogocentrism particularly shows in Adam’s repeated usage of words related to ‘fuck,’ which center the penis and the active act of penetration. For example, in the first season, he addresses his peers with statements such as “[s]hut the fuck up” or “I’m gonna fucking kill you” in the first and second episodes, respectively. Such behavior not only represents hegemonic masculinity which is associated with a “quick temper” (Poole 283) but also constructs Adam as the dominant and active individual in those situations. This observation also fits with Butler’s conception of phallogocentric speech that fails at representing women (*Gender Trouble* 13) and which thus supports patriarchal structures that also play a decisive role in the construction of compulsory heteronormativity. Beyond Adam’s language, the show focuses on his actual penis that he reveals while standing on a table above everyone else and explaining that “this is [his] dick” and referring to it as “large” towards the end of the first episode. The camera further supports his physical superiority with a shot that is taken through Adam’s bare legs at the height of his thighs, making everyone else visually appear below him. Considering that Poole explains that media representations of “‘real’ men” often involve “large dicks” (288), this scene physically constructs Adam as superior – both through him presenting his penis as well as through him positioning himself above everyone else – and thus further stresses his masculine behavior.

While this already demonstrates domination, Adam also repeatedly showcases a need for physical domination. The aggressiveness that his cursing conveys is furthered through him physically attacking other male characters in the second and seventh episode of the first season. In both of these situations, he punches his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend while the camera follows his movements and centers his actions rather than his opponent’s, which, again, constructs him as the dominating man. Presenting Adam in this way aligns with Lotz’s argument that particularly physical power puts men in superior positions (35), which then also strengthens the relationship between men and power (34). The powerful and superior position Adam assumes can thus also be connected to the power certain individuals – specifically masculine men like Adam – are granted in the regulatory practice of compulsory heteronormativity.

His emotional detachment, which is another attribute that is still commonly associated with masculinity (Bird 125), emphasizes this position. Adam’s first appearance on the show in the first episode of season one presents him with a straight face during sex. Ultimately, this depicts him as emotionally detached, even in extremely intimate situations. Throughout the first season, his straight face remains Adam’s most common facial expression; he rarely smiles or shows emotions apart from aggression. The emotional detachment and distance this portrayal conveys is supported by bland and mostly gray clothing paired with the brown leather jacket that Adam wears regularly (fig. 1). When compared to other characters who at least wear one colorful piece of clothing – such as the school’s red letterman jacket that the captain of the



Figure 1. Adam’s outfit in the first episode.

swim team usually wears (fig. 2) – Adam’s colorlessness coupled with his lack of emotions stands out. This detachment together with the need for domination and the phallogocentric speech and behavior constructs Adam as the ‘manly’ man whose gender performance repeats and normalizes a heteronormative social setting.



Figure 2. Jackson Marchetti’s (Kedar Williams-Stirling) outfit in the first episode.

Consequently, Adam must have internalized the norms that compulsory heteronormativity governs. They appear natural to him to the extent that he polices spaces and individuals around him. This particularly applies to the openly gay Eric Effiong, who Adam repeatedly frames as being unintelligible to his surroundings. Being gay, Eric’s gender identity does not fit the binary which heteronormativity establishes. In this context, his identity belongs to the ones which cannot exist as “the practice of desire do[es] not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 24). Adam, having internalized this regulatory practice, frequently draws attention to Eric’s unintelligible identity. In the seventh episode of the first season, for instance, he asks him if he came as “a girl,” when Eric shows up to the school dance in colorful clothing and a Nigerian headpiece traditionally worn by women. Adam also directly addresses Eric’s sexual orientation in episode six and asks him if he has “[w]oken up straight,” acknowledging that Eric’s grey clothes in this sequence add to his gender performance and identifying clothing that is as bland as his own as ‘straight’ and thus also as masculine. Fashion, as argued before, clearly influences individuals’ gender performances; it can be compared to “the speaking of a language” as it has a structure that is “agreed upon by those who [speak]’ and [wear] it” (McNeil et al. 1). This scene exemplifies that in the fashion system that is governed by heteronormativity, specific clothing signifies gender conform and masculine behavior. Even more strikingly, the coding of Adam as heteronormative, straight, and masculine is reinforced through another character’s gender performance in this instance. Adam’s behavior towards Eric also implicitly includes the homosexual taboo: not conforming with the gendered norms Adam has internalized and perceives as natural is, in his eyes, not desirable or even acceptable. This is conveyed through the framing of Eric’s unintelligibility and the comparison to the previously outlined gendered ‘norms.’

My analysis of Adam Groff already partly addresses Butler’s question, which asks “[w]hat kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?” (*Gender Trouble* 44). Butler herself notes that “repetition is bound to persist” (44) right before posing this question and later on argues that subversion *must* take place within the law (127). The system which is the ultimate source of the norms reproduced as well as the reproduction itself must be repeated in this show in order to create a realm which allows for any form of cultural subversion. In *Sex Education* this is achieved through Adam Groff, whose gender performance throughout the first season aligns with hegemonic masculinity that is produced by the regulatory quality of heteronormativity. He frequently uses phallogocentric speech which foregrounds men and demonstrates domination through implicitly entailing penetration. The show thus repeatedly draws attention to his ‘manliness’ – not only through his phallogocentric speech but also through physical domination and the portrayal of ‘masculine’ emotional detachment. In transferring these gendered norms onto the social space around him, Adam proves that they are given to him. He enforces a

realm within the law of compulsory heteronormativity which can then function as the foundation for cultural subversion.

A Way into Cultural Possibility

Kylo-Patrick Hart notes that “representation is a form of social action, involving the production of meanings that ultimately have real effects” (61). Representation thus also influences how various social groups are perceived (60). Even if the number of queer characters represented on television is growing, Glyn Davis asserts that these characters “are absorbed into the heterosexuality of the medium and its representations. In relation to television queers always have to find a place in a heterosexual structure and system” (129). While this applies to Netflix’s *Sex Education* at least partly – as has become clear in the previous chapter – this heteronormative realm Davis describes does not prevent the imagination of subversion and new cultural possibilities. I argue that *Sex Education* utilizes this heteronormative framework and aims at a subversion from within through a denaturalization of said heteronormative realm. The show is thereby able to answer the question on “[w]hat kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 44). It simultaneously approaches the question on the nature of such a “subversive enactment” that is able to multiply gender possibilities and “expose and disrupt the binary reifications of gender” (171). Both Adam Groff and Eric Effiong play a decisive role in the show’s subversion of compulsory heteronormativity. Eric noticeably deviates from the norm and is thus expected to become unintelligible to the social space around him. Even though this deviation should stabilize heteronormativity through this unintelligibility, Eric’s gender performance manages to *destabilize* heteronormativity and expose its constructedness. The mixing of stereotypically gay and stereotypically masculine attributes as well as the fact that he is still (partly) legible to his surroundings – not as the heteronormative man but as a new definition of ‘man’ – enables this. Adam then supports this subversion when he exposes the non-existence of this pre-discursive compulsory heteronormativity through his own deviation from it towards the end of season one of *Sex Education*.

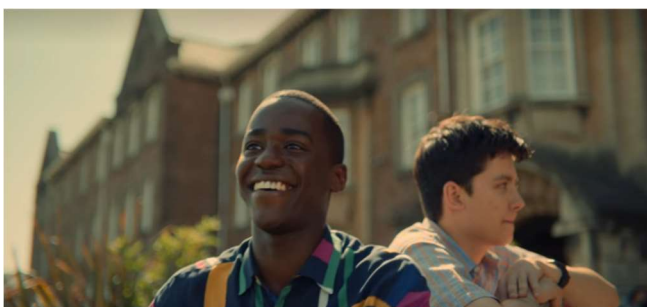


Figure 3. In this scene from episode two, the camera slowly zooms in until Eric is in the center of the frame.

Eric’s most prominent attributes characterize him as queer in the show’s heteronormative realm, as queer is “defined as different or out of what has traditionally or ordinarily been expected” (Poole 280). At first sight, particularly characteristics such as his quirkiness, his open portrayal of various emotions, and his lack of ‘masculine’ aggression thus work together in creating the stereotypically gay or “sissy” (280) character. His happy personality is introduced in his first scene in the first episode, in which he laughs loudly while happy, upbeat music is playing in the background. In this moment, the camera is slowly zooming in on Eric, which results in his reaction being increasingly foregrounded and taking up more space in

the shot (fig. 3). Another scene, in episode two, presents him as being unable to contain his excitement and dancing to express it. His behavior is further highlighted by his exaggerated facial expressions in these scenes. Apart from these happy and excited reactions, Eric is not suppressing his emotions of sadness or hurt. In episode five, he is depicted crying twice within approximately five minutes screen time. The first instance takes place in public and in front of strangers who are trying to help Eric out after being physically assaulted; the second is considerably more private when Eric is alone in his room after fighting with his best friend Otis (Asa Butterfield). Even though the scenes differ – in the setting, in the reason for Eric’s emotional response, and in the emotional response itself – the fact that he does not hide his feelings (that are centered through close-ups) adds to the anti-masculine notion because such “expressions of intimacy” and emotions are considered to be “feminine” in a heteronormative setting (Bird 125). Compared to heteronormative male homosocial groups in which the expression of “emotions signifies weakness and is devalued” (Bird 125), Eric’s behavior greatly deviates from hegemonic masculinity. Comparing Eric’s behavior to Adam’s emotional detachment, as outlined before, sheds further light on this observation.

Eric’s deviation from hegemonic masculinity is emphasized by his lack of aggression and phallogocentrism that is so prominent in Adam’s speech. As opposed to Adam, Eric refrains from using curse words, particularly those which derive from active sexual penetration. Eric’s anger is passive and centered within himself rather than projected onto his surroundings; in one moment in the second episode, he only utters that he is “sick of this behavior, man.” His reactions generally lack words like ‘fuck’ and thereby also seem to lack the aggression Adam portrays with his anger. Eric’s noticeably calmer tone that ultimately keeps him from signifying the same domination that Adam does supports this. In direct comparison, Adam, as pointed out before, dominates, whereas Eric is the one whose behavior seems to allow domination, which pushes him even further into ‘feminine’ ideals. Combined with the fact that Eric is openly gay, these attributes constitute him as unintelligible within the show’s heteronormative framework as the requirement for “the univocity of each of the gendered terms” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31) does not apply to his character.

Eric’s performance nonetheless shifts drastically after the physical assault he experiences in episode five. In a moment of crisis that follows in the following sixth episode, Eric intentionally alters his performance, including his speech. Now, he shouts “[d]on’t fucking touch me” and exclaims that he is “sick of everyone treating [him] like shit.” Eric’s speech in this particular moment includes the aggressivity and phallogocentrism that his speech lacked earlier in the series and is coupled with drab clothing that Adam codes as “straight” as well as the lack of smiles and laughter that are characteristic for Adam (fig. 4). His clothing and his behavior now clearly resemble Adam and thus also fit the category of hegemonic masculinity. Even though this shift happens when



Figure 4. Eric in drab clothing in episode six.

Eric tries to distance himself from his identity and also achieves to be read as heteronormative by Adam, this drastic change nonetheless complicates his gender performance and already partly achieves what Butler envisions: “If the notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction

produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences, then it seems that gender as substance, the viability of man and woman as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In this situation, the stereotypes which I outlined and analyzed earlier are therefore used to initiate a destabilization of heteronormative ideals when Eric’s gender performance has both stereotypically masculine and feminine attributes. Simultaneously, the fact that Eric can so freely and consciously alter his gender performance and thereby also his intelligibility while his sexuality remains the same also questions the ‘given’ nature of heteronormative ideas of gender.

Eric’s performance appears even more complicated when his physical appearance, apart from episode six, is considered. When compared to the dull and grayish clothes Adam wears throughout the first season, Eric’s colorful clothing stands out. The first outfit Eric wears in episode one consists of checked pants and a colorful sweater (fig. 5). While the items can be seen as rather neutral, the colors and patterns Eric chooses differ greatly from other male characters on the show, particularly from Adam. But what stands out even more is Eric’s use of make-up, which is still stereotypically understood as a feminine practice. In the beginning of the first season, Eric secretly applies makeup while being alone in his room in episode one; throughout the season this secrecy decreases, when he first wears makeup in front of one of his friends while wearing an animal-print dress and a hot pink feather scarf in episode three and later puts on bold makeup and a Nigerian head piece traditionally worn by women to the school dance in episode seven. Eric consequently becomes more confident with showing ‘feminine’ attributes in public places over the course of the season.



Figure 5. Eric’s outfit in the first episode.

This can be linked to a growing acceptance and recognition within Eric’s social space. While his father seems disappointed after seeing that Eric wears makeup and a dress in episode three, Eric later gains his father’s recognition. In episode seven, his father says that he is “learning from his brave son.” Apart from the significance this moment has for their relationship, it simultaneously indicates a realm in which Eric’s gender performance at least partly becomes legible. Still, the heteronormative framework which Adam creates is supported through various actions of people around Eric, such as the physical assault that takes place in the fifth episode of season one while he is dressed up in ‘women’s clothes.’ This complication of his performance, which moves between heteronormative notions of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ nonetheless starts to destabilize this realm: Eric is becoming less secretive about his performance and is recognized for being neither ‘man’ nor ‘woman’ by his family and other individuals around him. Instead, he is perceived as “brave,” which also indicates strength.



Figure 6. Eric dressed up as Hedwig in episode five.



Figure 7. Otis dressed up as Hedwig in episode five.

and the Angry Inch works to create spaces in which the gendered structures of our society are opened up to allow for behavior that the very same society does not regard as adherent to its norms” (35). Incorporating this character into the series thus also functions to highlight the ideas the show itself tries to communicate: allowing gender identities which exceed the heteronormative definition of man and woman.

Eric furthermore stays intelligible in these clothes. Adam’s policing of Eric’s gender performance in comparably feminine clothes, which stabilizes the heteronormative realm, loses its stability when Eric is still recognized as a man in the Hedwig costume. In the same episode, another group of strangers refers to Eric with “mate” in a moment when he cries and does not suppress his emotions. This exemplifies how accidental gendered attributes are. Butler writes that “[i]f it is possible to speak of a ‘man’ with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a ‘man’ with a feminine attribute [...] but to still maintain the integrity of the gender” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In these scenes, *Sex Education* does exactly this and thereby denaturalizes the gendered attributes which were previously perceived as given.

Eric’s generally rather ‘feminine’ performance throughout the series is also repeatedly enriched by more subtle actions that can be interpreted as rather masculine when looking at them through a heteronormative lens. The shift in Adam’s behavior undoubtedly plays into this, but Eric also shows other elements of stereotypical ‘masculine’ behavior without changing the rest of his performance. The most influential attribute is his ability to dominate other individuals – more precisely, other men. Interestingly, this dominant behavior is the most powerful when he wears his school dance outfit in episode seven: a colorful suit, bold makeup, big earrings and the Nigerian

Eric’s portrayal of heteronormatively defined ‘feminine’ attributes climaxes in the fifth episode of season one when he dresses up as Hedwig, the protagonist of the musical and film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (fig. 6), which tells the story of a trans* woman from East Berlin. Even though he tells his father that “it’s just a costume,” his clothes and make up are distinctly ‘feminine,’ particularly when compared to his best friend Otis, who also dresses up as the same character but looks considerably less feminine (fig. 7). While Otis wears sneakers and a cheap wig, Eric’s wig looks noticeably more expensive and he wears heels as well as tights. Choosing this character further adds to the subversion of compulsory heteronormativity as Hedwig “is a genderqueer character who challenges and ultimately transcends the boundaries of gender on stage” (Geitlinger 3). Furthermore, “*Hedwig*

headpiece. In this outfit, he is finally able to dominate Adam who regularly polices him for deviating from the norm. When Adam does so in this moment, and utters that he is “gonna fucking kill” Eric, Eric does not obey but steps up to Adam and asks whether he is “gonna do it now or later.” The fact that Adam does not respond to this question and Eric refuses to



Figure 8. Eric facing Adam in episode seven.

back away demonstrates that Eric is in power of the situation. During this shot, the camera moves around them in a circular motion while staying at Eric’s eye level, which results in centering Eric rather than the usually more dominant Adam (fig. 8). Later during the same episode, Eric also more implicitly dominates his best friend Otis when he tells him that “[they] both know that [Eric] lead[s]” the dance, signaling that Eric has the upper hand. What is noteworthy in these situations is that Eric, unlike Adam, is able to dominate without aggression and phallogocentrism.

The sexual domination that this episode lacks is nonetheless added in episode eight when Eric and Adam first fight and then end up having oral sex. At first sight, Eric seems to be



Figure 9. The camera zooming in on Eric in episode eight.

dominated by Adam because he is on top. But it is Eric who plays the ‘male’ part, which can be understood as sexual domination over Adam, who, according to Poole, steps into a submissive role when the focus shifts away from his penis to Eric’s (283). Eric’s dominating position becomes even more apparent when taking into account that Adam’s features are blurred while the camera zooms in on Eric, which eventually results in a close-up of his face (fig. 9). All of these behaviors, as well as the drastic shift outlined before, signify hegemonic masculinity which centers dominant behavior amongst others (Lotz 34) and thus complicate Eric’s gender performance even further.

In creating this maze of gendered attributes within Eric’s character, the show is able to subvert compulsory heteronormativity. It is exactly this mixing of differently gendered stereotypes that ultimately unmask the constructed nature of the system. In repeating stereotypical attributes in this exact way, *Sex Education* does what Butler is looking for when asking “[w]hat kind of subversive repetition” is able to question “the regulatory practice of identity itself” (*Gender Trouble* 44). While repeating particular attributes that are coded as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine,’ the show simultaneously

mixes ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ notions within one character who is then still legible to parts of his surroundings. Furthermore, the portrayal of ‘feminine’ attributes does not keep Eric from also portraying masculinity – the moment at the school dance when attributes that are frequently assigned to either of the binary genders mix the most is the moment when Eric’s masculinity climaxes. Eric’s depiction thus subverts the idea of the binary genders’ univocity, as the mixing of attributes of both genders within his character does not affect his legibility nor his masculinity and he is even able to dominate the character who represents the heteronormative framework in the first place. Consequently, the gendering of attributes which constructs the binary categories *must* be a construct itself. Eric’s gender performance thus also suggests a new gender possibility: a man who can portray masculinity but at the same time also have attributes which are traditionally – but still accidentally – assigned to women. This idea is supported by the song Eric and Otis dance to during the scene in which Eric dominates Otis. “Origin of Love” from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* thematizes a legend according to which there used to be three genders (Geitlinger 18) and marks another reference to the film and musical, which functions beyond the framework of a binary gender system. The song thereby furthers the subversive character of this distinct scene and the show in general as well as the possibility for genders beyond the heteronormative idea of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’

After Eric’s gender performance already denaturalized and destabilized compulsory heteronormativity, the show makes the system collapse in on itself when Adam deviates from the heteronormative framework that he himself enforces throughout the first season. The sex scene between Adam and Eric at the end of season one is – apart from how it impacts Eric’s character – also highly relevant for Adam. This scene ultimately constructs Adam as not fitting into the binary categories and thus as unintelligible within a heteronormative framework. His deviation reveals the non-existence of heteronormativity before the law and therefore completes the subversion of this exact realm. Lastly, it is crucial to understand that both Eric and Adam who are supposed to be illegible are still only described with attributes that can be traced back to the already subverted heteronormativity, which is exposed to be anything but pre-discursive by this exact practice. Eric’s and Adam’s gender performances throughout the first season consequently first destabilize and eventually subvert and collapse compulsory heteronormativity.

The first season of Netflix’s *Sex Education* evidently executes exactly what Butler predicts: subversion is able to take place “when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations on itself” (*Gender Trouble* 127). At first sight, the show works with stereotypes of ‘the straight guy’ and ‘the gay guy,’ but what actually happens is that these stereotypes are mixed with opposing attributes that complicate particularly Eric’s gender performance and succeed in revealing the constructed nature of the gendering of attributes. Butler also names the understanding of these attributes as accidental and a key to cultural subversion (33). The subversion that takes place during the first season of *Sex Education* thus functions through a repetition that denaturalizes the norms that are repeated. After answering Butler’s first question with this strategy, the show is also able to answer the second, which is concerned with the nature of a subversive enactment that takes place when gender possibilities are multiplied (171): exposing heteronormativity and multiplying gender possibilities go hand in hand. Eric’s gender performance does both simultaneously. His behavior as well as the reactions to his behavior disrupt compulsory heteronormativity while he already suggests a possibility that the old system renders unintelligible. Adam’s deviation then finishes the process of cultural subversion when he reveals the actual non-existence of the heteronormative law. The first season of the show thus subverts compulsory heteronormativity with what is actually already a new cultural possibility.

Conclusion

Butler, in the preface to *Gender Trouble*, writes that they “continue to hope for a coalition of sexual minorities that will transcend the simple categories of identity” (xxvii). But thirty years after the first version of the book was published, most media representations still depict heteronormative ideals of what is ‘feminine’ and what is ‘masculine’ (Poole 289). And even though queer characters are now being depicted, most of them still have to find their place in a heteronormative realm (Davis 129). However, this is not surprising since the regulatory practice of gender constantly repeats itself and is thereby naturalized in society (Butler, “Performative Acts” 526). As media representations are a social act that inevitably influences social reality (Hart 61), shows like Netflix’s *Sex Education* technically have the ability to initiate a subversion of the heteronormativity that limits the range of identities that can and cannot exist.

The subversion of the heteronormative matrix that Butler aims at must take place within the realm of compulsory heteronormativity. In the show, this realm is created through the character Adam Groff, who behaves according to hegemonic masculine norms which center domination (Poole 282), “a quick temper” (284) and “emotional detachment” (Bird 125). Adam also projects this heteronormative ideal onto his social sphere through policing other characters’ behavior. The realm that Adam’s behavior constructs is then utilized to enable cultural subversion through Eric Effiong who already deviates from heteronormativity because he is openly gay. His most prominent attributes directly oppose Adam’s and thereby are ‘feminine’ by default and construct a stereotypically “sissy” character (Poole 280). The cultural subversion takes place when this stereotype is mixed with multiple attributes that fit the definition of hegemonic masculinity. Against the law of compulsory heteronormativity, Eric still remains legible and thus resembles a new gender possibility that can portray ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes at the same time while also unmasking the ultimately constructed nature of the gendering of these attributes. The subversive nature of Eric’s character is then supported by Adam, which further collapses the system he himself enforces within the show when he deviates from the norm. Compulsory heteronormativity is therefore subverted by repeating and then de-naturalizing existing norms while simultaneously introducing a new cultural possibility. *Sex Education* thus responds to Butler’s work and re-imagines their ideas while thinking beyond the heteronormative definitions of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’

Besides Adam and Eric, the show also represents multiple other queer characters over the course of its (currently) three seasons. An engagement with more than these two characters and beyond the first season could reveal how the show re-imagines gender in different situations, particularly as the general framework of the show can be expected to shift considerably after Adam’s outing. Multiple scholars also note that in representing queer characters, television tends to repeat heterosexual norms in a queer context (Poole 284; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43). As Butler points this out as another means of revealing the constructed nature of heteronormativity (*Gender Trouble* 43), investigating this in *Sex Education* might allow to gain even further insight into the show’s understanding of gender.

Author Biography

Nathalie Rennhack is a graduate student of North American Studies and the Teacher Training Program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). In 2021, she received a bachelor’s degree in English and Biology from Leibniz University Hannover. Her research interests are in the fields of Gender Studies and women’s representations in Early American literature. In her bachelor’s thesis,

she analyzed the genre markers of sentimental literature and domestic fiction in Sukey Vickery's *Emily Hamilton* with a particular focus on representations of women's mental health.

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Thinking Alternatives in Science Fiction: Octavia Butler Meets Judith Butler

Theresa Maria Forche

Abstract

This paper starts from the premise that the capitalist system is inherently violent and destructive. The only way to a future lies in its abolition. With the help of capitalism's numerous gatekeepers, the system has constantly perpetuated itself. However, maintaining narrow ideologies that establish what is sold as the norm makes the system extremely fragile. I argue that tackling one of capitalism's agents, such as gender, has the potential to crush the whole system. Radically imagining different societies, worlds, and spaces, threatens capitalism's monopoly on what is sold as natural and normative. An ideal space to do that is science fiction. Octavia Butler's novels think through and beyond capitalistic notions of gender by offering alternatives. That is why I put her novels *Wild Seed* and *Lilith's Brood* in conversation with Judith Butler's binary-breaking work *Gender Trouble*.

Keywords

Science Fiction – Abolition – Gender Studies – Decolonial Feminism – Critique of Capitalism

Science Fiction to the Rescue

"We are living in a series of intersecting and overlapping catastrophes."
– Maynard, *"Living in Reciprocity"*

The globally dominating capitalist system is in its core detrimental and life threatening to humans, animals, and nature, with its multiple "overlapping catastrophes" (Maynard 00:33:17), its "myriad oppressions" (Andreotti et al. 27). Racism, exploitation, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, hostility towards queer people, mental health stigmas, the imminent climate catastrophe, etc., all are interlinked and relate back to capitalism, which "is the crisis" (Haiven and Khasnabish ii). Still, this inherently violent and toxic system thrives by masquerading as natural and thus unchangeable. Capitalist ideology conceals the very fact that the boundaries, borders, and limits we live in are

³ Kameelah Janan Rasheed recommended to cite where you get ideas from (even though these are stories or thoughts rather than texts) to boost your creative process. That is why I include introductory quotes that inspired my chapters in a not necessarily obvious way. With that, I intend to challenge purely academic approaches to literary studies that claim to be objective.

artificial, human-made inventions. Krishan Kumar remarks that “[t]he whole point about an ideology, after all, is that it is disguised, that we are the last people to know that it is working on us” (321). Capitalism’s numerous gatekeepers, such as the gender binary, use this strategy of naturalization, too, which allows its “death machines and life-ending forces” to always reproduce themselves (Maynard 01:50:44).

The only way to live in a world in which “life is precious” (Simpson 00:54:41) is the abolition of capitalism. Recognizing the system’s artificiality and imagining (a) beyond the status quo disrupts its self-ascribed finality and immutability. A space for radically imagining different worlds, creating, and building them, is science fiction. According to Cixin Liu, “[t]he most basic task of science fiction is world-building – that is, establishing the fundamental framework, laws, and rules of a story’s imaginary world” (29). Liu distinguishes between science fiction and mainstream literature by suggesting that “there is no need for world-building [in the latter as] the world it describes already exists” (29). Approaching this from a slightly different angle, I argue that science fiction literature provides the space to think about and experiment with alternatives for the already existing world that could ultimately transform it.

Instead of tackling the whole system all at once, I narrow my analysis down to gender. My premise is that challenging one agent of capitalism has the potential to topple the whole system. (Imagine a Jenga tower: removing more and more building blocks destabilizes the entire structure until the tower finally collapses.) I will contextualize how gender relates to its larger capitalist context first. My approach to finding alternatives in science fiction is to break with what is usually thought of as primary and secondary texts and instead blur the boundaries between literature and theory. That is why Octavia Butler and her novels *Wild Seed* and *Lilith’s Brood* as well as Judith Butler and their *Gender Trouble* embody the centerpieces of my theoretical framework and analysis.

The capitalist system facilitates *white*⁴ supremacy and heteropatriarchy in a way that favors people who come closest to being what is sold as the norm. The invented norm, however, is neither addressed nor spoken about, but universalized, naturalized, and thus disguised. Only people who deviate from the norm are named as such. In an attempt to counter this, it is necessary to mention that I as a *white*, cisgendered, straight university student already reproduce these structures by writing this paper.

Kaleidoscoping Gender

*“This world could be fed,
this world could be fun,
this should be love for everyone.”
– Queen, “Heaven for Everyone”*

By presenting itself as a law of nature, capitalism has managed to create a complex system of interwoven power structures, hierarchies, and pitfalls. In Ashley J. Bohrer’s words, “the systems of capitalism, colonization, racism, and heteropatriarchy aren’t separate systems that collide or collude

⁴ To emphasize in writing that race is a political and social construction rather than a biological one, I follow the anti-racism activist Tupoka Ogette in her approach to “italicize white intentionally in order to emphasize that it is a political description, not a designation of color” (14; my translation). Ogette continues, “[t]he term People of Color and the term Black (which I also capitalize intentionally in this context) are self-designations and refer to common experiences of racism” (15; my translation).

to produce the present moment; they are mutually interlocking and reciprocally constructive. Capital *is* the colonizer, just as it *is* heteropatriarchal and racist” (xii). Focusing on gender as a separate object of study is impossible. However, addressing everything at once while being as specific as possible is a challenge, too. An approach that allows me to do that is decolonial feminism. Françoise Vergès elegantly describes the ‘all of this at once’ as a “kaleidoscope narrative [that] encompasses broad swatches of time and territory to valorize the unstoppable struggles that challenges the legacies of colonial slavery and racism amid a new age of endless wars” (ix). Decolonial feminism aims at “smash[ing] sexism, racism, capitalism, and imperialism” (vii), and is hence abolitionist. Furthermore, it centers colonialism as the developing force for capitalism.

Colonialism enabled capitalism to rise, expand, and entrench itself globally as “it would have been impossible without the appropriation of land and resources, without the enslavement of millions of racialized people, without the introduction of a social fabric of white, European domination” (Bohrer xii). Ever since, colonizers have regarded difference as a threat to the norm they have aimed to impose in order to guarantee their superiority.⁵ With extreme violence, they have assimilated whole peoples to what they deem ‘the standard.’ As Greg Thomas puts it, “[a] basic anthropological hierarchy cultivates the will to universalize for the benefit of white Western dominance and hegemony. The ‘master race’ of Europe is canonized as the paragon of social and biological development inasmuch as it pretends to embody certain universal laws” (4). Thomas continues that “[t]he white world is always renaturalized as a universal standard of human civilization” (23). As a result, humanness is measured depending on a person’s approximation of what is manufactured as universal. Following this line of thought, colonizers justify violence, oppression, and discrimination towards people whom they have dehumanized in the first place.

Gender is an example of that. According to Shama Rangwala, “ancestral societ[ies] had multiple genders before colonization,” which marks “gender” – specifically the gender binary – as “a colonial formation” (00:58:30).

[The very] diversity of systems of gender, sex, and sexuality [...] around the world [...], the very fact of having a non-binary, non-patriarchal, and non-hetero compulsive social organization of sex, gender, and sexuality was used as ‘proof’ that indigenous communities ‘needed’ to be dominated by colonization, disciplined into the capitalist economy, and ‘civilized’ through forced conversion to Christianity. (Bohrer xii)

This exposes that gender, the gender binary, gender roles and expectations, as well as “the category of sex and the naturalized institution of heterosexuality are constructs, socially instituted and socially regulated fantasies or ‘fetishes,’ not natural categories, but political ones” (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 161). On top of this, it renders them as incredibly violent.

Though capitalism employs both race and gender as markers of difference, it is essential to acknowledge their intersections, their overlaps. Judith Butler contends that “racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit, but that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies” (xvi). Therefore, I follow Greta LaFleur in her approach to avoid “‘like-race’ narratives” (26) and instead treat race and gender as a “vexed symbiosis that [has] bound sex to racial difference” (7). This allows for analyzing gender without “eras[ing] the history of race and empire from [its] critical frame of reference” (Thomas 4).

⁵ I deliberately use the present perfect when referring to colonialism because “[c]oloniality, the structural and embedded global power relations that remained after the elimination of many (not all) forms of direct colonization, remains the condition of the possibility of capitalism’s continuity” (Bohrer xii).

Butler & Butler

“Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”
 – Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (29)

So far, I have used terms such as sex, gender, and sexuality almost interchangeably. That is because I follow Judith Butler who suggests in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) “that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (11) since both are equally constructed. Furthermore, the gender binary imposed by capitalism dictates the matrix of intelligibility and merges sexual desire to gender and vice versa. The capitalist system thrives by dividing the world into binaries. That is why non-normativity, such as being queer, “[t]he ‘unthinkable[,]’ is [...] fully excluded from dominant culture” (99). Normativity, on the other hand, constantly manifests itself by asserting “a compulsion to repeat” (185). Like capitalism’s other gatekeepers, this “process of repetition [...] both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (185), and thereby masquerades as natural. Repeating what is manufactured as the norm causes associations of how to think gendered bodies. Gender perpetuates itself only “through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (xv) and is consequently nothing but a performance which is culturally, socially, capitalistically, attributed with meaning. As stated by Butler, “there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (178).

In order to break with the system of restrictions, Butler’s “aim [is] to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (*Gender Trouble* viii). Their approach to an alternative lies in the failure to repeat what normativity targets to implement. A way to do that is repeating what contradicts the norm, and hence repeating differently as “‘agency’ [...] is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (185). Changing the patterns of repetition leads to subverting the norms. In Butler’s words, “[t]he more insidious and effective strategy it seems is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves, not merely to contest ‘sex,’ but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of ‘identity’ in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic” (163). In short, Judith Butler’s approach to change is to smash the categories. In line with my premise from the beginning, this *could* ultimately be a step to abolish the whole system. Continuing to open up possibilities, alternatives, and futures, they end their work *Gender Trouble* with a question, which reads, “[w]hat other local strategies for engaging the ‘unnatural’ might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such?” (190). My take on this question is: what other strategies might lead to the denaturalization of capitalist ideology, such as gender, that could take the whole system down? (In this paper, I cannot provide an answer to this question but an attempt to.)

Hoda M. Zaki claims that Octavia Butler “does not place gender concerns conspicuously at the center of her novels” (246). I disagree and argue instead that Octavia Butler’s novels not only expose the gender binary as artificial but also provide a space to think alternatives. That her novels are widely regarded as Afrofuturist especially allows for the latter because “Afrofuturism is [not only] an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (Womack 9) but also “a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens” (I. LaFleur 00:01:15). Afrofuturist literature radically imagines alternatives to the current system. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish define radical imagination as “the ability to believe that things can be better” (iii).

Khasnabish further specifies that “our capacity to conceive of the world as it might be otherwise” implies the possibility of social change (1). I extend their argument by contending that radical imagination has the potential to abolish gridlocked structures of gender *by* thinking alternatives. This, however, does not imply that Octavia Butler’s novels exist in a vacuum untouched by reality. *Wild Seed* and *Lilith’s Brood* still exhibit existing power structures, such as heteronormativity. Leaving binary thinking to capitalism, perpetuating capitalist notions of gender *while* offering alternatives for them is possible at once. To express this, I use Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti et al.’s vocabulary for decolonizing the university and adapt it to science fiction novels. I focus on the ‘beyond-reform space’ that recognizes “that the modern system itself is perceived as inherently violent, exploitative, [...] unsustainable,” and therefore unsavable (27). This entails “three primary responses: system walk out, hacking, or ‘hospicing’” (27). Especially the first two responses bear the risk of “reproducing modernity’s violence” (27). Still, I will employ these ‘responses’ as methods that enable me to read Octavia Butler’s suggestions for alternatives.

Most of the secondary literature I have read on Octavia Butler was concerned with interpreting what she might have wanted to address with her works. However, Butler is the only person who could have spoken for herself. That is where literature as a medium comes to the rescue since it allows for many possible readings, of which my reading only constitutes one such possibility. Instead of completely abandoning the author, however, I experiment with putting Octavia Butler and her novels in conversation with Judith Butler and their theoretical work. This means that I will read Octavia Butler as a theorist and accordingly the novels both as theories as well as literary works.

Wild Seed: Wrenching from the System

*“A poem in which yesterday never comes; a poem in which we love at the speed of utopia,
leaving our shipwrecked country no time to begin anew.”*
– Belcourt, “Hypotheses” (68)

My first associations with science fiction are other worlds, aliens, and the future. *Wild Seed*, however, is set in the past of this world. Published in 1980 as the fourth book of the *Patternist* series, it is chronologically the first one in the series. Starting in 1690, it covers a time span until the mid-nineteenth century. Placing the setting of a novel that offers alternatives to thinking gender in the past already shatters the standardized, universalized, western version of history by suggesting that other ways of living have always been possible. Especially *Wild Seed*’s community of outsiders to the system is an example of what Andreotti et al. call ‘system walk out.’ Though the novel perpetuates heteronormativity to an extent, it employs system hacking by completely subverting the gender binary.

System Walk Out

According to Andreotti et al., “[s]ystem walk out [...] enunciates a commitment to develop alternatives to modernity” (27). These “[a]lternative communities [...] are developed or reclaimed in spaces that may be external or marginal to mainstream institutions, either as supplementary, transitional, or wholesale alternatives” (27). *Wild Seed* embodies such a wholesale alternative by constructing a community of outsiders. At its center are the two protagonists and shifting focalizers Anyanwu, a shapeshifter, who can transform her body into other humans and animals, and Doro,

who can take over people's bodies. While Anyanwu has a body of her own, to which she can make changes using a DNA-sample of another living being, Doro is dependent on finding new bodies to live in. The moment he inhabits a body, the person inside this body dies. The body follows suit once Doro takes on a new one. Together with the other characters, whose abilities include mindreading, manipulating and sensing emotions, seeing the past, controlling the winds, etc., they contradict society's norms and expectations and are thus perceived as witches. Society's take on difference poses a risk to the characters' lives. Showing their abilities, as Isaac (one of Doro's sons) does in New York Harbor, could lead to him being "shot out of the air or trapped, jailed, and eventually executed for witchcraft" (86).

Doro, on the other hand, deliberately searches for people with "witchcraft or the potential for witchcraft. [...] [P]eople possessed or mad or just a little strange [who] heard voices, saw visions, other things" (160). Though they are being taken without their consent, the "seed villages" (3), such as Wheatley, provide a safe space in which they can express themselves without being persecuted. While "blackness [is imposed as] a mark of slavery" (101) by settlers all over Turtle Island, Wheatley refrains from structuring its community along racist hierarchies. Anyanwu realizes soon after her arrival in New York harbor that "this is not an easy place to be black" (84). Doro, however, assures her that she can be herself "with [him], and with [his] people [as] [o]nly [his] people live [in Wheatley], and they do not enslave each other" (84). The novel's settings, Wheatley being located somewhere "up the 'Hudson River'" (83), Doro's ship, and Anyanwu's "[plantation] in Avoyelles Parish in the state of Louisiana" (180), promote this reading of an alternative community at the margins of society. They are predominantly enclosed areas – geographically within the system but ideologically breaking with it. Anyanwu's safe space, which she creates after fleeing from Doro, represents an even more ideal community. As her farm is a plantation disguise only, she, too, takes in people who otherwise would have been "put in an asylum" (192) for being mad, or she frees enslaved people by buying them (187). Doro threatens people in order to subdue them, whereas Anyanwu heals people who want to stay with her voluntarily.

System Hacking

Andreotti et al. describe system hacking as "creating spaces within the system, using its resources [which] requires 'playing the game' of institutions at the same time that rules are bent to generate alternative outcomes" (27). *Wild Seed* exemplifies system hacking by using the concept of marriage but breaking with its association of strict monogamy. In "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State," Friedrich Engels identifies the idea of monogamous marriage as patriarchal as it "comes on the scene as the subjugation of one sex by the other" (129). Moreover, the concept of monogamy is interwoven with enslavement and property from the start. Engels states that "the existence of slavery side by side with monogamy, the presence of young, beautiful [enslaved women] belonging unreservedly to the man, that stamps monogamy from the very beginning with its specific character of monogamy for the woman only, but not for the man" (129). That gender and race are too merged to ever be separated is illustrated in *Wild Seed* by Anyanwu's remark that "[w]hite men leave brown children all about, but a white woman who does this becomes almost an animal in the eyes of other whites" (194). Given that *white* men have been the ones in power, the property owners, *white* women are regarded as property that needs to be defended. Hence, "[w]hite women must be protected" (194) and "[p]reserved for the use of owners alone" (194). Black men and women are regarded as property, too. On top of that, *whites* dehumanize and objectify Black people and use them as ultimate others, as "sentient beings against which Humanity is defined" (Wilderson 167), to justify enslavement.

Doro's communities depict monogamous marriages only on first sight. On closer inspection, both men and women have sex outside their marriages – not for pleasure but for procreation. Doro's focus on genetic pairing defies the capitalist concept of monogamous marriage by employing polygamy. It is doubtful, though, if the idea of having human property in any way – even if it's not structured along race and gender – ever is an alternative. *Wild Seed* reconsiders gender more radically, which requires us to first analyze how the novel perpetuates what it capsizes.

Reproducing Heteronormativity

According to Veronica Hollinger, “[a]ll too often, heteronormativity is embedded in both theory and fiction as ‘natural’ and ‘universal,’ a kind of barely glimpsed default gender setting which remains unquestioned and untheorized” (23). *Wild Seed*'s character constellation that mainly depicts gender conforming characters, in its center the protagonists, who desire the respectively opposite of the two genders (male, female) designates that. In Judith Butler's words, “institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire” (*Gender Trouble* 30). An example of that in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* is when Anyanwu changes her body to become “thoroughly male” (14) to repel Doro and “beg[ins] to grow breasts” (20) when wanting to be desirable for him and his male body. Furthermore, she is disgusted by Doro's idea to have sex while “[he] will become a woman and find out whether [Anyanwu] make[s] an especially talented man” and regards that as “abomination” (89). This expresses the “totalizing ideological hold heterosexuality has on our culture's ability to imagine itself otherwise” (Hollinger 24).

This heteronormativity affects the character construction, too, as characters follow gender expectations that “restrict [...] the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity” (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* vii) and the stereotypes that come with that. The very first sentence of the novel is already loaded with masculinist notions: “Doro discovered the woman by accident when he went to see what was left of one of his seed villages” (O. Butler, *Wild Seed* 3). ‘Discovering’ grants Doro the role of the active subject while the unnamed woman (who turns out to be Anyanwu) stays passive. Moreover, the ‘seed villages’ evoke associations of the ascribed ‘male’ part in reproduction. In line with that, Doro's character is patriarchal in that he expects his wife to “obey” him (34), acts based on his own selfish needs, and uses others as he wishes. In order to fulfill his breeding project, he kidnaps people and demands their “loyalty” (10), which is a gaslighting way to say subordination. The depiction of female characters, such as Sarah Cutler (98), is an example of that. Stereotypically, they cook, clean, and care for their children and husbands within the private sphere of the household.

Despite all this, I agree with Hollinger who claims that “[s]cience fiction would seem to be ideally suited, as a narrative mode, to the construction of imaginative challenges to the smoothly oiled technologies of heteronormativity, especially when/as these almost invisible technologies are pressed into the service of a coercive regime of compulsory heterosexuality” (24). *Wild Seed* is such a space because it tackles heteronormativity by exposing the gender binary as an artificial construct.

Subversion

Wild Seed undermines the heteronormativity it perpetuates on several layers. First, Doro's character construction as a patriarch is challenged by Anyanwu being a protagonist, too. Over the course of

the novel, her character develops, becomes more and more independent, so that she is not only equal to Doro but convinces him to consider the violence he commits. Second, *Wild Seed* macerates gendered stereotypes by constructing Anyanwu as “as strong as many men” (55), which emphasizes that “‘sex’ imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes” (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 146). Third, institutional heterosexuality is split open by Anyanwu being a woman who can shapeshift into a man and “ha[ve] wives” (O. Butler, *Wild Seed* 237) while keeping she/her pronouns. Though she had referred to the idea of having sex as a male body with a woman as ‘abomination’ and was not able to feel pleasure the first time Doro forces her to do it (142), she remarks that “[her wife Denice] was a good woman [and they] pleased each other” (192).

Wild Seed does more than challenge heteronormativity. It disrupts its very foundation: the body. The only thing that points to Doro’s and Anyanwu’s respective gender are their pronouns that do not change throughout the novel no matter what their bodies look like. Their bodies are completely flexible in their physical appearance. Consequentially, a body cannot be seen as a fixed entity or reflection of a person’s gender. The protagonists’ abilities destabilize any reading that determines the body along the lines of tracing gender back to what genitalia a person is born with. That is expressed by Doro “wear[ing] his body like a cloth” (11). With a new body, Doro completely adapts to that body’s biological outset. He takes over the bodies of women, too, as he expresses that “[he] ha[s] been a woman often enough to know how uncomfortable women’s clothing can be” (87). This proves his intentional failure to adhere to one of the two genders and, thus, disrupts the entire binary. Anyanwu and the enslaver Daly perceive Doro as unhuman, a “spirit” (11) or “the devil himself” (37), because of his ability. This indicates that “the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23). While Doro’s ability to take over bodies breaks the gender binary open, Anyanwu’s shapeshifting completely subverts it. She can *transform* her whole body into other humans or animals by changing parts of her body. These changes happen externally, such as turning her hand “to bird claws, long-fingered, withered, and bony [...] to grow smooth and young-looking” (O. Butler, *Wild Seed* 13) again or “absorb[ing] her legs almost completely, leaving only the useless detached hip bones natural to her dolphin body” (77), as well as internally, such as being able to “father a child” (14) or becoming infertile by “disconnect[ing] the two small tubes through which her own seed travelled to her womb” (108).

Accordingly, “gender is always a doing,” as Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* (33). It is not something biologically determined but performative. Gender is rather “manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures” (xv). Thus, “[i]ntelligible’ genders are [...] thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly [...] produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice” (23). In other words, the protagonists’ doing of gender along the lines of being male and female is not in any way determined except by what societies deem as natural. On top of this, their ability to take on, to be, any gender illuminates that “if the category of ‘sex’ is established through repeated acts, then conversely, the social action of bodies within the cultural field can withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested in the category” (158). In *Wild Seed*’s case, it is not about

repeating differently but debunking the need to repeat, to fit into invented categories that have been instituted to uphold power structures.

Lilith's Brood: Thinking Change

“LET'S START WITH THE END of the world, why don't we?
Get it over with and move on to more interesting things.”
– Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (1)

Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, consisting of the novels *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, *Imago*, is set in the future long after humanity has succeeded in destroying the earth. An extraterrestrial species, the Oankali, save the few human survivors and revive the planet by establishing a completely different society. “[T]rading villages” (271) are the setting of this new society, in which humans and Oankali form families and have children with each other. These children of human and Oankali parents are called ‘construct children.’ Lilith, one of the human survivors and protagonist of *Dawn*, and Nikanj, her Oankali partner, are one of the first characters to have construct children together. Two of their construct children are the protagonists in the latter novels, Akin in *Adulthood Rites*, and Jodahs in *Imago*. Hence, *Lilith's Brood* employs system ‘hospicing,’ which entails “sitting with a system in decline, learning from its history, offering palliative care, seeing oneself in that which is dying, attending to the integrity of the process, dealing with tantrums, incontinence, anger and hopelessness, ‘cleaning up,’ and clearing the space for something new” (Andreotti et al. 28). Applying this to science fiction literature, it resembles what Connor Pitetti calls “[p]ostapocalyptic [n]arrative [or] ‘To Pull Something Out of the Ashes’” (444). As stated by Pitetti, “postapocalyptic narratives [such as the Xenogenesis trilogy] do justice to history by pointing beyond themselves to a world that is more dynamic and complex than their own limited textual frames can adequately contain” (451). Combining Pitetti and Andreotti et al., I argue that *Lilith's Brood*, as a postapocalyptic narrative, uses system hospicing in order to think gender differently, and with that radically imagines an alternative society.

Rethinking Gender

In *Lilith's Brood*, the foundation to an alternative, which is not repeating the gender binary but extending it, features the Oankali who have a third gender beside male and female: the ooloi. Ooloi are neither masculine nor feminine and use the pronoun ‘it.’⁶ The only first-person narration in the novel is by Jodahs, the first human-Oankali ooloi. The agency that comes with the first-person narration breaks with any associations of objects or things relating to the pronoun ‘it’ (523). Furthermore, Oankali children as well as construct children are initially sexless, not having “any sex at all” (562) until they enter their metamorphosis (427). Their appearance does not reflect their gender. In their sexless phase as a child, everyone assumes that Jodahs will become male (including himself) – except for Nikanj, who remarks that “you were never male, no matter how you looked” (536). This transformation of the body, of becoming an adult, of being one of three genders, happens when “their bodies are ready, not at some specific age” (528). Up to this point, it is unclear

⁶ Though ooloi refer to themselves with the pronoun ‘it,’ I struggle with repeating that and instead will refer to them with a singular they pronoun. This is not to diminish the validity of persons’ pronouns but an attempt to counter the discriminatory and dehumanizing use of the pronoun ‘it’ for non-binary people in the current world, of which I am part.

“if [a construct] become[s] female” (473; compare 370) or male. Their gender is not biologically determined but something they are able to choose. An example of this is Ayre, who can decide whether they “want to be male” at all (435). That is why being a child is accompanied with gender uncertainty. This concept, however, is hard to grasp for humans who ask a construct child if “[she] will be a woman someday,” to which they can only respond with “I don’t know” (581). While in Oankali language there is a word to describe sexless children as “eka” (536), humans use the pronouns he or she because they are familiar to them. This implies that pronouns are not fixed either but flexible, changeable. As soon as the children determine their gender in metamorphosis, the pronouns change in accordance with their decision, and everyone goes along with it.

Rethinking Family and Relationships

Thinking gender alternatively affects families, too. Family structures are expanded and entirely abandon the liberal idea of a nuclear family. Instead of having a “two-atom molecule: one man and one woman” (Engels 164) who have children together, the novel’s ‘construct families’ consist of a human male and female, an Oankali male and female, and an ooloi. All children of the family are considered siblings and all parents are equally responsible for their upbringing. Éva Federmayer suggests that the “trilogy apparently foregrounds the maternal qualities of birthing, reproduction, nurturing, caring, healing, and symbiotic relationship, traditionally attributed to women” (111). However, *Lilith’s Brood* does not exclusively focus on the mother as the primary caregiver but extends the responsibilities to all parents – male, female, ooloi. All three genders are required for procreation, too. The ooloi inhabits a special position, since sex can only happen when they are present, otherwise men and women cannot touch each other without feeling repulsed. Jim Miller claims that this “goes beyond traditional notions of sex and gender [because] sex with the ooloi puts the male in a passive position” (344), for the ooloi is the active agent who mixes the genes of the fetus. In addition, “sex with the Oankali involves more than two people and gives a kind of pleasure that was previously unimaginable for humans. [...] This letting go, this loss of selfhood is a kind of polymorphously [...] transcendent moment that is not only beyond the ‘natural’ heterosexual experience, but beyond the human” (344). I follow Miller who concludes that “the non-gendered ooloi who bring pleasure to all are the ultimate cyborgs, existing at the boundary between/beyond gender” (344).

The first experiences with humans in Oankali families on the ship also demonstrate that family is not biologically dictated but rather an emotional bond that can grow without being related. When an Oankali family adopts a human survivor into their family structure, Lilith is outraged that he is all alone and “had nothing” (101). Nikanj responds that “[y]et [the Oankali] are his family [...]. They have accepted him and he has accepted them. He has no other family but he has them” (101).

Rethinking Society

Being structured into smaller family units that are equitable and interdependent already suggests the structure of the larger society. Oankali, as a species, embody an antidote to capitalism at its core because they are designed to promote life with every part of their being – even their ship is alive (O. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* 30). Oankali describe that as being “powerfully acquisitive [in that they] acquire new life – seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it” (31) since “[l]ife was treasure. The only treasure” (564). They cannot help but live in symbiosis with the planet and other living beings. This necessitates respect, appreciation, and empathy for others, which is expressed by them

“[e]mbrac[ing] difference” (329) and valuing consent. For instance, Lilith is assured that “[n]o one will touch [her] without [her] consent” (39). This enables them to lead the system hospicing, to clean up the world, allow it to heal, and implement alternative, non-destructive ways of living. Hoda M. Zaki describes their “model of community [as] a cooperative society which emphasizes the organic nature of its ties and the overriding importance of the common good, enjoys a high degree of unity and cohesion, and is liable to no serious tension between the individual and the larger community” (245). This entails abandoning capitalism’s striving for individualism, which induces selfish, profit-based behavior rather than focusing on a collective of living beings. While capitalism functions by exploiting bodies and nature for the sake of the benefitting few, Oankali are ready to put themselves in – to “trade [them]selves” (24) – to do the work. According to Sarah Outterson, their “enforcement of radical change on the humans in Xenogenesis propels them together and brings them to a more welcoming and intersubjective community” (442). This, however, applies only to the Oankali-human community.

Since the Oankali-human community does not enforce participation, there are humans who refuse to mingle with the Oankali. The so-called resisters display that change is not easily realized but hard work that is connected to “tantrums, incontinence, anger and hopelessness” (Andreotti et al. 28). In resister communities, violence, hierarchies, rape, weapons, and death prevail. The ideologies, socializations, and norms the capitalist system enforced on them, hold them captive from experiencing something new, possibly better, definitely different from what they know. Therefore, they hold on to the familiar, for example patriarchy. Instead of accepting that the gender binary is not set in stone but that there is a third gender physically in front of them, they continue to universalize man as the standard of humanity and misgender the ooloi as male because they “look too much like a man” (O. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* 581). Furthermore, they cannot grasp the idea of “ethical political and social models that value interdependence and reciprocal care” (Obourn 111) for they “had no idea how completely Oankali and construct society was made up of groups of two or more people” (O. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* 437) and what harm they cause by refusing Akin this community.

This brings us back to Pitetti’s concept of postapocalyptic narratives: Pitetti argues that they “are necessarily destabilizing. [...] [T]hey offer only the obligation to find a way to engage with contingent processes of change. At the same time [, they] open [...] up an endless series of opportunities to participate in those processes and contribute to determining the always-changing shape of the open-ended future” (451). Change does not come with an easy step by step instruction. Quite the contrary, changing is hard work, it is frustrating, it hurts and there is not even a guarantee that “it will make us better [...] [o]nly different” (O. Butler, *Lilith’s Brood* 34). However, *Lilith’s Brood* illustrates that transformation can start anywhere with embracing difference, disrupting gridlocked notions of gender, with valuing life. As humans are “filled with so much life and death and potential for change” (80), we may not even need an extraterrestrial species for that. We can start now because “[w]ays of living must change” (160).

Conclusion

“The world don’t change. People change it.”
– Angel Evangelista, “In My Heels” (S2 E10 of Pose)

Reading Octavia Butler’s novels as theories hand in hand with Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* not only allowed me to explore in detail how much of an invention capitalism is but also to think more hopefully about abolishing it. Octavia Butler’s novels do not romanticize change nor the alternatives that come after. They rather “stare [...] into the abyss of the dystopian future and reinvent [...] the desire for a better world” (Miller 336). My analysis has proven that her novels experiment with alternatives to the system, with what change, abolition, and transformation could look like. This is an example of science fiction as a space for “try[ing] on new narratives about the future and consider various alternatives” (338). It is not a “soften[ed] [...] critique that situates [Octavia Butler’s] utopia beyond human reach” (Zaki 247) but radically imagining possible futures. In case it is not obvious by now, I love quoting. I admire how people use language in such beautiful and yet to the point ways my paraphrasing of their words could never add up to. To be consistent, I end this paper with Liu’s quote:

There are many sf settings [...] that confront the reader with challenges to [their] own values – such as settings with multiple genders, multiple selves, or question of rulership (humanity ruled by a more advanced or mechanical civilization). Diving deeper into these imaginary worlds, we can see that, when faced with the cold laws of the universe, things that had previously been accepted as utterly inviolable can collapse at the first cosmic blow. (30)

As they should.

Author Biography

Theresa Maria Forche (she/her) is currently planning her master thesis in American Studies. She studies the double degree Master of Education (English and Religious Studies) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). Her research interests are decolonial feminisms, postcolonial theory, and thinking about all kinds of abolition (from prisons to capitalism as a whole). Theresa is a member of the Decolonial Feminisms Reading Group, a small collective of students and instructors who create a space to discuss the interdependency of current catastrophes by engaging with material ranging from Frank B. Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* to the Netflix documentary *Disclosure*.

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Feminist Retelling of a Greek Myth: Reclaiming the Voice of Penelope

Celina Plaß

Abstract

Rewriting classical myths from a feminist perspective has gained much popularity lately. Since female characters in literature, especially in mythologies, have either been silenced or largely misrepresented, many contemporary writers seek to adapt well-known stories to depict modern concerns and to challenge the prevailing stereotypical representation of women by advocating a feminist ideology that rejects patriarchal bias. One very successful example of such an attempt is Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2007). In this novella, Penelope reclaims her voice to narrate her version of the famous *Odyssey*. By questioning gender roles and class differences, this retelling connects its ancient storyline with contemporary themes and cultural debates. This article aims to demonstrate how such feminist retellings enable women to assert themselves and support the aim of just and equal treatment in society, culture, and literature. Moreover, it illustrates the enduring importance of myths and argues that feminist revisions can change the patriarchal nature of the literary canon.

Keywords

Feminism – Retellings – Greek Myths – Revisionist Mythmaking – Margaret Atwood

Penelope – More than just a Faithful Wife

Everyone has probably heard about Odysseus, the man who had the idea of deceiving the Trojans with a wooden horse, and about his famous ten-year-long journey back home. His so-called 'Odyssey' has even made it into our everyday language: we use the word as an idiomatic expression for a very difficult, long trip that is marked by many changes. However, in this article, Odysseus and his journey will not be the main subject of interest. Instead, it will focus on the women of the myth, namely his wife Penelope and her maids. Compared to other women in classical myths, Penelope is quite popular. She has been labeled the 'ideal' wife by men for centuries. Her loyalty and dedication to her husband have been used as a prime example for other women in both reality and the fictional world of literature and have strongly shaped the perception of female gender roles.

However, the stereotypical, submissive portrayal of Penelope is outdated, inaccurate, and extremely unjust. This is why many authors have attempted to rewrite the *Odyssey*, or parts of it, in a variety of genres. For instance, a collection of poems by Carol Ann Duffy entitled *The World's Wife* (1999) presents stories, myths, and fairy tales from the point of view of neglected and ignored



women. In her poems, Duffy uses witty, satirical, and playful elements to give female characters, such as Penelope, a voice to express their own thoughts and feelings. Duffy's poem about Penelope rejects the traditional interpretation of the patient and desperately waiting wife, and instead criticizes Odysseus' image as a brave and cunning hero. However, not only poetry has been composed to alter the old(-fashioned) narratives of myths. Many contemporary authors have used other genres to create new and different perspectives on these ancient stories – such as the nonfictional *The Gods of Olympus: A History* (2014) by Barbara Graziosi or the dramatic comedy *Eurydice* (2009) by Sarah Ruhl, for example.

Among the most celebrated prose retellings of the *Odyssey* is *The Penelopiad*. This novella by Canadian author Margaret Atwood renders the events of the story from two different points of view: one is Penelope's version of the ancient myth, and the other one is the version told by her maids. Atwood, who is well-known for her gothic writing style and her work on the dangers of ideologies and sexual politics, had been interested in classical myths ever since the publication of her poetry collection *Double Persephone* back in 1961 (Howells 5). According to Atwood, myths are timeless stories that can be altered again and again to meet different needs and purposes: "Strong myths never die. Sometimes they die down, but they don't die out. They double back in the dark, they re-embody themselves, they change costumes, they change key. They speak in new languages; they take on other meanings" (Atwood, "The Myths Series and Me"). This opportunity – to give a voice to unknown, previously neglected, perspectives of a familiar story – motivated her to rewrite the *Odyssey*. However, it is important to mention that many other feminist writers also decided to reclaim women's voices in literature by rewriting well-known stories and classics from a female perspective and based on women's genuine experiences. Other popular adaptations of Greek myths include Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) or *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) by Pat Barker. These so-called 'retellings' are new, often updated or altered versions of an already existing story ("Retelling"). The story is typically "about historical and fictional individuals memorialized for their heroism or holiness, adventurousness or mischief" (Stephens 91). Retellings include the literary domains of fairy tales, myths and mythologies, medieval romance, tales, and even modern classics. By turning away from male-oriented narratives towards the inclusion of women and other previously overlooked characters, retellings also help to create new myths which actually celebrate female experience, individuality, and autonomy. At the same time, through the integration of contemporary themes and language, they adapt old myths to the standards of modern times and thereby preserve the traditional stories for future generations.

Literary scholars such as Alicia Ostriker and Harriet Macmillan have discussed this wish for reinterpreting already existing myths and giving a voice to previously silenced characters under the label of 'feminist revisionism' (Ostriker 87; Macmillan 199). The principle aim of this theoretical approach is the "challenge [...] and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth" (Ostriker 73). By connecting feminist critical engagements with classical myths, these retellings are more than just "responses to the classical [male] tradition" (MacMillan 87); they are "vivid engagements with the modernist literary canon and valuable contributions to ongoing discussions about the generation of meaning in twenty-first century literature" (87). Hence, I argue that feminist revisions of Greek myths have the potential to change the patriarchal nature of literature, culture, and society. Moreover, such retellings give women the possibility to finally pass on their own language, to recognize and appreciate its specific meanings and traditions, and to involve them in the process of culture making.

To illustrate the enduring and powerful importance of myths, I will take a closer look at *The Penelopiad*. By correcting unjust portrayals of women, and by enabling them to finally express

their own emotions, thoughts, and perspectives, this retelling offers a liberating narrative that includes genuine female experiences and supports the equality of the sexes in literature and society alike. Before analyzing the novella, I will first provide a brief account of the original events from Homer's *Odyssey* and his portrayal of Penelope. Then, I will examine how Atwood's novella characterizes Penelope and how her narrative breaks with traditional gender roles. Lastly, I will analyze the function of the maids in *The Penelopiad*.

The Representation of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*

Homer's *Odyssey* is considered one of the greatest works in world literature, with great influence on European literature, especially during the time of the Renaissance (Myrsiades xi). The epic poem consists of twenty-four books and renders the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, who is trying to find his way back home after the end of the Trojan war. *The Odyssey* is widely recognized as the sequel to Homer's first epic poem the *Iliad*.

The plot of the tale does not follow the chronological order of events. The poem starts right in the middle of the story. Previous events are only presented in the form of an analepsis. The first four books are set in Ithaca and describe the life of Penelope, Odysseus's wife, and their young son, Telemachus. Both have to fight off Penelope's suitors who are in doubt of Odysseus's return from Troy and want her to remarry, so that one of them can inherit Odysseus's kingdom and assets (Homer I-IV). The next four books introduce the main character, Odysseus, who is held hostage by the nymph Calypso on the island of Ogygia for seven years. As Calypso finally releases him, Odysseus suffers a shipwreck, caused by the god Poseidon, and lands on the shore of another island, called Scheria, where he is welcomed by the king and queen of the Phaeacians, whom he tells the story of his adventurous return from Troy.

In books nine to twelve, Odysseus recollects the previous events that he and his crew endured. This includes their escape from the Lotus-Eaters with their memory-erasing food, the one-eyed cyclops and son of Poseidon Polyphemus, and the cannibal Laestrygonians, only to end up at the island of the witch-goddess Circe, who turns half of the men into swine. After a year on Circe's island, Odysseus and his remaining men set off again, reaching the western edge of the world, where Odysseus makes a sacrifice to the dead. This summons the old prophet Tiresias and several other spirits, including his own mother, who tells him about the disturbing situation of his household back home in Ithaca. With Circe's help, they are able to pass the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, only to hunt the sacred white cattle of the sun god Helios, who then punishes them with another shipwreck in which everyone but Odysseus dies. Finally, he is washed ashore on Ogygia, where Calypso compels him to be her lover for seven years (IX-XII).

The remaining half (books thirteen to twenty-four) reports Odysseus' arrival in Ithaca, where he has to face Penelope's suitors. After learning about the circumstances of his household, he disguises himself as a beggar. Together with his son, he devises a plan to punish the suitors. Penelope arranges an archery competition for the suitors to finally determine whom she should marry. Odysseus wins that competition and reveals his true identity. While he kills the suitors, he orders Telemachus to assassinate the disloyal maids of Penelope who consorted with the suitors.

Since Penelope is only part of the story in the beginning and in the end, and her character is primarily presented by Odysseus' own rendering, she inhabits a very passive role. At the beginning of the poem, Penelope is simply introduced as "Icarius' daughter" (Homer 79) and the mother of Telemachus, who is a "fine son" (161). Thus, little is revealed about her character. Only when she talks about Odysseus do readers learn about her thoughts and emotions regarding his

absence and the scheming of the suitors, which she has to endure because of it. Her sadness and desperation are expressed throughout the whole poem, as she is either “dissolving in tears” (80) or “sobbing uncontrollably” (158) with a “heart so wrung with sorrow” (162). This portrayal of her implies that she is completely ruled by her emotions and has no influence or control over her actions. This is also shown when her son leaves to search for his father. Once he is gone, “her knees gave way on the spot, her heart too. She stood there speechless [...] tears filling her eyes” (157). Thus, she is depicted as helpless, overemotional, and dependent on either her husband or her son.

Yet, Penelope also successfully deceives her suitors for more than three years. Through the infamous trick with the shroud and her thoughtful behavior towards the men, she manages to manipulate them in order to keep herself and Telemachus safe. After finding out about her scheme, the suitors call her “the matchless queen of cunning” (90) and describe her and her tricks as follows:

For three years now, getting on to four, she’s played it fast and loose with all our hearts, building each man’s hopes – dangling promises, dropping hints to each – but all the while with something else in mind. This was her latest masterpiece of guile: she set up a great loom in the royal halls and she began to weave [a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes], and she would lead us on: Young men, [...] go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until I can finish off this web. [...] So by day, she’d weave at her great and growing web – by night, by the light of torches set beside her, she would unravel all she’d done. (90)

Consequently, Penelope is not completely powerless after all as her tricks demonstrate wit and cleverness and allow her to actively influence her own story.

Despite all those years of his absence and the struggles she has to face, Penelope still praises Odysseus. She calls him her “lionhearted husband” (158) who “excelled in every strength” (158) and whose “fame resounds through [the whole world]” (158). But not only Penelope admires the noble character of Odysseus. The goddess Athena also calls him a “strong” (76) man and tells Telemachus that if he truly is Odysseus’ son, he will be “brave and adept” (98) like him. Thus, Penelope’s devotion, Athena’s praise, and the fact that Calypso and Circe fall in love with him, reinforce the notion that all women want to please men and accept the superiority of the male sex. Meanwhile, the men of the *Odyssey* clearly degrade the women. Odysseus describes his wife to the nymph Calypso with much less pleasing words: “She falls far short of you, your beauty, [your] stature. She is mortal after all and you, you never age or die” (174). When Odysseus summons the prophet Tiresias, the ghost of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, appears as well. He advises Odysseus to “never indulge [his wife] too far” (313). Moreover, he should “[n]ever reveal the whole truth, [...] just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest” (313). Even though Agamemnon declares Penelope a “steady” (314) and “wise” (314) woman, he tells Odysseus that “the time for trusting women’s gone forever!” (314). However, in the end, he praises Penelope once more and says to Odysseus: “[W]hat a fine, faithful wife you won! What good sense resided in your Penelope – how well [she] remembered you [...]. *The fame of her great virtue will never die.* The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind, a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope” (594; emphasis added). Therefore, Penelope is again portrayed as the epitome of faithfulness and praised for fulfilling her wifely duties. Furthermore, the song that Agamemnon mentions would end up being Penelope’s most famous legacy.

Yet, while Odysseus is presented as the brave and glorious hero, conqueror and trickster, Penelope does nothing but wait for his return, unable to move on with her life without him. Therefore, her character is only known for two qualities: Either in the role of the loyal wife who is

only able to weep and cry due to the absence of her beloved husband or as the witty and manipulative trickster who fools her suitors for more than three years. As Judith Fletcher fittingly describes the contrasting manner of the two characters: “He wanders far and wide [...]; she never leaves the house as she longs for his return” (77). Consequently, Penelope never fully transcends the role of the faithful wife in Homer’s *Odyssey* and is thus always linked to Odysseus, even when he is absent.

Rewriting Female Experiences and Breaking Gender Roles in Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*

While Homer’s *Odyssey* focuses first and foremost on Odysseus and only regards Penelope as a side character, Atwood changes the narrative of the story completely. Instead of focusing on the travails of Odysseus and his return from Troy, she decided “to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xix). Through this revisionary narrative, Penelope is able to rectify her own representation. Moreover, she is given the opportunity to point out how Homer misrepresented her in his depictions of her life and character, and how he was quick to judge and expose her female weaknesses.

In the novella, written in the form of a mock-epic, Penelope recounts her life in her afterlife from twenty-first century Hades. As the title suggests, the focus is on Penelope and her struggles. Her narrative begins with her birth and her childhood in Sparta, then moves on to her marriage to Odysseus, his departure, her trouble with the suitors in his absence, and the aftermath of his return. In the end, she describes her life in Hades and the legacy of the characters of the *Odyssey*. It is important to note that, even though Atwood does not diverge much from Homer’s story, the main focus of *The Penelopiad* is not on Odysseus’ adventures, but on what happens at home during his absence (Henriques 442).

While he cheated on her on several occasions, Penelope is the epitome of virtue and faithfulness in Homer’s version of the *Odyssey*. Due to her limitless loyalty and absolute devotion to her husband, she is considered the perfect wife and completely fits into the man-made ideal of the ‘angel-woman,’ which has been used to teach and remind women how they should act upon their ‘natural’ role. Since Penelope’s only purpose is to please a man, in this case Odysseus, her own experience is completely neglected. Moreover, as Avery Crews argues:

Within the original, Penelope has little to no personal impact on the tale and her only true influence is in her defiance of the suitors’ desire to marry her and take her husband’s wealth and kingdom through the weaving and unweaving of Laertes’s funeral shroud. The only role that Penelope plays within *The Odyssey* is that of Odysseus’s wife and Telemachus’s mother with no power that strictly belongs to her. (51)

However, in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope fights against this image of “the quintessential faithful wife” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xvii), and finally abandons her passive roles as a wife and mother. By focusing on her perspective, Atwood challenges the patriarchal aspect of the myth, draws attention to the unjust depiction of women in classical literature, and explores how much gender roles actually affected the poem and its characters.

The novella begins with the introduction of Penelope. She discusses “her roots, the manner in which she came to be Odysseus’s wife, her feelings about her actions, and her depiction of herself as the obedient wife” (Crews 51). Due to the fact that Penelope is one of the central narrators in the retelling, it is possible to include additional information about her, such as her

background, and most importantly, her character. That is why she decides to address the “edifying legend” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 2) that the original story has created about her and gives her own version of events. Through Penelope’s narration, readers learn that she is in fact much more than just Odysseus’ faithful wife. Her opinion influences the manner in which she describes other characters and the events that take place within her version of the epic (Crews 51).

One character, who is portrayed quite differently in comparison to the original, is Odysseus. While Odysseus is the honorable hero in Homer’s version, readers are presented with a different interpretation of his character in *The Penelopiad*. In this retelling, Penelope calls her husband an unscrupulous liar and trickster (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 2-3). She claims that these qualities are also the reason why he was able to make so many people believe his story for centuries: “It was a specialty of his [Odysseus]: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away. He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters” (2).

However, even though she “knew he was tricky and a liar,” she admits that she “believed him” because she never thought that he “would play his tricks and try out his lies on [her]” (2). She simply “wanted happy endings in those days” (3). That is why she either “kept [her] mouth shut; or [...] sang his praises” (3). Yet, in hindsight, she regrets this decision and urges readers – and women in general – to not follow her example (2). After realizing “how many people were laughing behind [her] back,” were “making jokes about [her],” or “turning [her] into [...] several stories,” stories she did not want to hear, she chose to “do a little story-making” herself, in order to finally rectify the presentation of events (3).

Through her portrayal of Odysseus as a man willing to cheat for his personal gain, the character of Penelope disrupts the pre-established gender roles of our society and criticizes conventional assumptions about the superiority of the male sex (Crews 52-53). By degrading his character and describing his actions in a realistic, “non-heroic manner” (51), Atwood breaks away from the standards of traditional masculinity and questions “the validity of the patriarchal system that is in place within society [in ancient Greece] and now” (52).

This also shows when Penelope had to take on some of Odysseus’ roles in the household during his absence. While she was completely overwhelmed with her situation in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Atwood’s Penelope embraces her new position. She gains authority, confidence, and autonomy through it. As she is “running all the vast estates of Odysseus by [herself]” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 85), she also rejects the common notion that all women need to learn domestic crafts such as weaving, while men are the “sword-wielders and spear-throwers” (25). By performing a task that is usually connected to men, Penelope proves that women are not only good at being a mother, a wife or a sister, but that they are also able to thrive in power positions. Therefore, these new responsibilities enable her to break free from the limits imposed on her by Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Yet, Penelope is aware of the fact that taking over male tasks requires a cautious approach to not offend or displease other men. That is why she metaphorically acts like water, a homage to her mother who was a water nymph. Like water, she circumvents obstacles (or problems), is running in between the cracks (of everyone else’s story) and is patient and consistent in her actions (Collins 62). At the same time, Penelope’s ability to take on a man’s role also casts doubt on the traditional concept of marriage. In her opinion, marriage was a mere “arrangement” where the woman was “handed over [...] like a package of meat” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 39) in order to please her husband. While men could simply continue with their life as it was, the only purpose of a marriage for women was to bear as many children as possible, preferably sons, and take care of

the household. As a consequence, their lives never left their familiar surroundings. Nevertheless, Penelope is aware of the important role that children played back then: “Marriages were for having children, and children were not toys and pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along. These things could be kingdoms, rich wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. Through children, alliances were forced; through children, wrongs were avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world” (24).

However, Penelope does not reject all traditional household duties that women were expected to perform. In fact, apart from her “devotion to [her] husband, and [her] discretion” (21), Penelope is also known for her weaving. She describes the craft of weaving as an advantage that proves to be a “great convenience to [her] later on” (8) in the deceit of the suitors. Moreover, as Charlotte Guest points out, weaving symbolizes female power and autonomy in many Greek myths (7). In Atwood’s text, this motif also appears in form of the Fates who write the stories of men at their looms and cut the threads at their deaths, or in the case of Philomela who weaves a tapestry of her rape after her rapist cut out her tongue in order to silence her (7). Thus, weaving works as a way of expressing genuine female experiences. While we never learn the thoughts of Penelope in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in *The Penelopiad*, she is finally able to describe her famous plan herself:

I set up a large piece of weaving on my loom, and said it was a shroud for my father-in-law, Laertes [...]. Not until this sacred work was finished could I even think of choosing a new husband, but once it was completed I would speedily select the lucky man. [...] No one could oppose my task, it was so extremely pious. All day I would work away at my loom, weaving diligently [...]. But at night I would undo what I had accomplished, so the shroud never got any bigger. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 112-13)

Although Penelope owes this trick to her own cleverness, she claims that it was “Athene, goddess of weaving, who’d given [her] this idea” because she knew that “crediting some god for one’s inspiration was always a good way to avoid accusations of pride should the scheme succeed, as well as the blame if it did not” (112). This balancing act of pleasing the suitors and keeping them at bay, without losing her virtue or being unfaithful to her husband, demands more cleverness and wit than Odysseus needed on his adventures (Collins 64).

However, even though she is aware that she is “smart [...] considering the time, very smart” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 21), Penelope also knows that she is not flawless either. While she denies sleeping with any of the suitors (143), she confesses that she enjoyed their compliments (104), and even admits that she had “occasionally daydreamed about which one [she] would rather go to bed with, if it came to that” (105). Interestingly, when she and Odysseus recounted their struggles and she proudly tells him about her “trick with the shroud [...], her deceitful encouragings of the Suitors” (172), including the “skilful ways in which [she] misdirected them” (172-73), and the fact that she “would never have even so much thought of betraying [him]” (173), she refers to *both* of them as “proficient and shameless liars of long standing” (173). This portrayal of her as witty and flawed helps to identify with her more easily. Additionally, the sarcastic and colloquial tone of the narration and the involvement of modern influences, like her knowledge about contemporary culture, politics, and society, make Penelope appear more human. Thus, Atwood succeeded in creating “a bridge between ancient Greece and our modern world” (Henriques 442).

Yet, Penelope is not the only woman in this retelling who is able to fight against her stereotypical, predetermined role. Retellings are not only able to question gender roles but can challenge a variety of injustices. *The Penelopiad* also addresses the issue of class and class relations

by giving a voice to Penelope's maids, whose perspective was completely neglected in Homer's original story.

The Function of the Maids

Atwood herself states that her initial motivation to rewrite the *Odyssey* stemmed from the wish to include characters that have been neglected before: "The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been hunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* xix). So, even though Penelope's narrative aims to prove that the original story is wrong, her own version is also clouded by her attempt to rectify her role which at the same time neglects the perspectives of others, including that of her maids (Collins 59).

Hence, Atwood's purpose in rewriting the *Odyssey* "is not to defend or/and voice one single female but rather to report a collective feminine experience by highlighting the fact that all females regardless to their position in society share a common challenge which is to have the right to be self-represented" (Selt and Kaid Berrahal 65). By using the maids as representatives for women who have suffered abuse and trauma, she demonstrates how the misogynistic attitude of our culture has been utilized to justify violence against women (Richards 186). In addition, the inclusion of a collective voice breaks with common feminist rewriting practices. While Penelope's narrative exemplifies the individual female experience, the narrative of the maids reflects the shared experience of many women and, therefore, supports the claim that one single voice cannot adequately represent the experience of all women (185). Through the use of the chorus, Atwood gives the maids the chance to render their own experiences, impressions, and opinions, and at the same time reveals what life in ancient Greece may have been like for slaves. Moreover, since a chorus in a classical Greek drama was typically used to mock the main action of the play, the maids' chorus also undermines the accuracy of Penelope's narrative (186). By presenting a different perspective and commenting on Penelope's version, their story represents a third, new, and independent point of view on the events. Thus, this additional shift of perspective does not only link questions of gender to class issues, but also exposes the conventionality of the epic and enables the narrative to take on different forms and purposes within the novella.

One of the purposes of the maids' narrative is to show and criticize the social oppression they had to suffer because of their lower class. Compared to Penelope, who grew up as a princess with certain privileges, the maids had a different life since their birth:

We were born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents; parents who sold us, parents from whom we were stolen. These parents were not demi-gods, they were not nymphs or Naiads. We were set to work in the palace, as children; we drudged from dawn to dusk, as children. [...] We were told we were motherless. We were told we were fatherless. [...] We were told we were dirty. We were dirty. Dirt was our concern, dirt was our business, dirt was our specialty, dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 13)

Since they were bought, they were regarded as mere objects which had to please their masters and fulfill their every wishes. This included being available sexually for their masters, which shows that were sexually objectified and humiliated by men. As a consequence, they were subjected to class and gender exploitation. Their voices did not matter and their only duty was to "hear and obey"

(52), not to speak for themselves. Hence, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the maids were not allowed to tell their version of the story, nor permitted to defend themselves.

However, in *The Penelopiad*, the maids are finally able to break free from social convention, gain autonomy and grow beyond their ascribed role. Moreover, they are not described as possessions, but as human beings with feelings, opinions, and personal lives. In contrast to the original story, Atwood's Penelope does not refer to them as her servants, but as her friends and closest confidants during Odysseus' absence. She describes the twelve women as "pleasant girls, full of energy" (113), the "youngest [and most] beautiful" (160) among all her maids. In fact, she trusted them so much that she did not only tell them about her plan to deceive the suitors, but also involved them in its implementation: "They were my most trusted eyes and ears in the palace, and it was they who helped me to pick away at my weaving, behind locked doors, at dead of night, and by torchlight, for more than three years. [...] We told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes. [...] We were almost like sisters" (114).

Whereas the maids in the classical story consorted with the suitors at their own will and were thus killed for their disloyalty to their master, in *The Penelopiad* we learn that "[s]everal of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (115). Even though Penelope "comforted the girls as best as [she] could" (116), she still encouraged them to interact with, and spy on, the suitors to learn about their strategies: "You must pretend to be in love with these men. If they think you have taken their side, they'll confide in you and we'll know their plans. [...] I even instructed them [the maids] to say rude and disrespectful things about me and Telemachus, and about Odysseus as well, in order to further the illusion" (117). With this additional information, Atwood removes the connotation of the unruly maids who merely slept with the suitors as an act of disobedience. Instead, she grants them agency for their actions because they simply fulfilled their duty by carrying out the commands of their mistress (Crews 53). Moreover, this proves that, even though Penelope claims that she loves them, the concept of sisterhood is still overthrown by the power dynamics that exist between different classes and by the patriarchal standards which enforce societal and cultural competition among women (53).

Yet, Penelope takes the blame for how her secret got exposed. While in Homer's version one of the maids is accused of revealing the conspiracy, Atwood's Penelope claims that it was her "own fault" (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 115) that the suitors uncovered her trick and that including her maids in the action was "ill-considered and caused harm" (118). Due to the fact that no one else apart from her and the involved maids knew about her scheme and her instructions to them, the behavior of the maids was deemed as "disloyal" (158), "impertinent" and "rude" (159). Since treachery was considered a major crime back then, and the maids had no chance to defend themselves, they were hanged. Even though Penelope claims that she "never would have hurt them" (115), she was unable to save them: "What could I do? Lamentation wouldn't bring my lovely girls back to life. [...] Dead is dead, I told myself" (160).

However, in *Hades*, the maids use their reclaimed voices to tell a different story – their story. They claim that Penelope was in fact partly responsible for their murder. In contrast to her version, they insist that she actually slept with some of the suitors and hence feared that they might expose her true self (148). Thus, they present Penelope's character in a whole new light. In chapter 21, they recite a dialog between her and Odysseus' former nurse Eurycleia, in which the former tells the latter to "point out those maids as feckless and disloyal" (150), in order to "stop their mouths" (151) and to "save [her] and Odysseus' honour" (150). This portrayal of Penelope as a woman who consciously puts the blame of her mistakes on her maids in order to achieve her own

survival, and to maintain the myth of the virtuous wife, conflicts with the previously described portrayal of herself (Korkmaz 41). As Shannon Carpenter Collins fittingly summarizes: “When choosing sides, she chose the side of the powerful” (65).

Therefore, the narrative of the maids also functions to question the truth of Penelope’s account. Since she is a self-confessed liar (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 173) and the maids assert that “the truth [...] is seldom certain” (148), readers have to repeatedly reconsider the reliability of each perspective. The inconsistencies and contradictions show that all narratives are to a certain extent suspect, subjective, unreliable, and not completely true. This implies that not only “male myth-makers create myths in time but [that women can also] create [them] according to their own agenda as in the case of Penelope, who has consciously deceived humanity under her virtuous wife mask” (Korkmaz 42). In the end, Atwood herself acknowledges that the “true story lies among the other stories, a mess of colors like jumbled clothing thrown off or away” (*Selected Poems* 58), and hence declines to resolve the question of whether to believe Penelope’s self-defense or the maids’ accusation (Suzuki 274).

Yet, the maids do not only contest Penelope’s version but also openly express their hostile attitude toward Odysseus. Now that they are dead, they know that he was the one who “required [their] death” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 193) without an understandable reason. They call it “an act of grudging, [...] an act of spite, [...] an honour killing” (193). By combining paradoxical elements like hyperboles and understatements, and mythic and real influences, Atwood criticizes the class differences and the sexist social practices of ancient Greek in a very humorous way (Khalida and Tabassumb 25). In addition, the use of contemporary settings and customs demonstrates that women and people that belong to a lower class in society still have to face similar problems. One example for this is chapter 26, entitled “The Trial of Odysseus, as Videotaped by the Maids” (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 175), where the maids finally seek justice and send Odysseus to a twenty-first-century tribunal (Brahimi and Ben Djoudi 30). Thus, to use the words of Suzuki, “Atwood re-visions the maids not merely as silent victims sacrificed to the interests of patriarchy [...], but as energetic satirists of the dominant order, who literally put Odysseus on trial” (275).

In this trial, the maids accuse Odysseus of killing them in cold blood for nothing (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 177), whereas he claims that killing the suitors was “self-defence” (177) and that he was “acting within his rights” (178) when he hanged the maids since they had sex with his enemies without his permission. Even though the judge points out that sex without permission is considered rape, and that the maids were “forced to sleep with the Suitors because if they’d resisted they would have been raped anyway, and much more unpleasantly” (182), the case is dismissed because the “[standards] of behaviour were different then” (182) and it would be “unfortunate if this regrettable but *minor incident* were allowed to stand as a blot on an otherwise exceedingly distinguished career” (182; emphasis added). To Howells, this chapter is a “satire on patriarchal institutions” (14), since Odysseus, although he is obviously guilty, is protected by the superiority of the male sex.

Furthermore, this scene shows that although Penelope and her maids have contradicted Odysseus’s version of the *Odyssey* with logical arguments, their voices cannot alter the outcome. Nevertheless, the maids still manage to get their own kind of justice and revenge. By turning them into ghosts, who follow Odysseus everywhere he goes, Atwood rereads them as silenced women whose voices and stories are recovered despite all circumstances (Richards 118):

Now you can’t get rid of us, wherever you go: in your life or in your afterlife or any of your other lives. We can see through all your disguises [...] [We’re] right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke [...] We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. We’re here to

serve you right. We'll never leave you, we'll stick to you like your shadow, soft and relentless as glue. Pretty maids, all in a row. (Atwood, *The Penelopiad* 192-93)

Therefore, they represent all women that have either suffered under the patriarchal standards of society or were denied any protection by it, simply because they were considered 'unworthy' and no one believed them. Through their collective voice, they finally find the strength to call out for justice and directly speak to the conscience of their oppressor (in this case Odysseus).

Conclusion

Even though myths are considered as outdated, fictional stories of the past, this article shows that they hold much more potential and influence than their reputation suggests. Through adaptation and retelling, these old stories can be utilized to uncover and challenge injustices of race, class, and gender. As I have shown in this article, retellings like *The Penelopiad* are able to create a space for female authors to produce alternative narratives which offer women the possibility to fight against stereotypical gender roles and misrepresentations that have been imposed on them by men. Thus, the feminist revision of myths supports the goal of a political, economic, social, and personal equality of the sexes, and aims for a fair representation of women in literature.

The narratives of Penelope and her maids both voice a resistance to the ways in which they have been represented in Homer's *Odyssey* (Richards 187). By breaking free from the canonical (and masculine) epic form, and by constructing new identities for Penelope and the maids, while not straining away from the plot of the *Odyssey* (Henriques 441), Atwood argues for the reappraisal of social and cultural standards that have limited female participation and female voices, back then and now (Crews 54). Even though they are only able to tell their truth after they are dead, because the patriarchal society does not permit women to express their views and attain freedom, both narratives actively challenge the stereotypical gender role of women by "[rewriting] themselves, transgressing histories, spatial and temporal linearities, [...] national identities and cultures, laughing, singing, and colouring, becoming and coming their existences" (Korkmaz 102).

This makes *The Penelopiad* a story worthy of retelling. Through the use of gender and class differences, multiple narrative voices, opinions, and reflections, Atwood creates a complex story that is more relevant than ever. While Homer's Penelope only plays a minor, passive, and man-made role in the legend of her husband, Atwood's Penelope is more than just the epitome of the faithful wife. Instead, she offers an authentic female experience and embodies autonomy, independence, and freedom.

Yet, Penelope is not the only one who is fighting for her voice to be heard and whose perspective has been neglected before. Her version competes with the narrative of her maids, who were unrightfully sacrificed because they obeyed their mistress and followed her orders. Thus, the characters of the maids ask us to undermine the authority, veracity, and importance of stories and narratives in general, and actively expose the issue of class conflict (Richards 239). So ultimately, "[by] unearthing the ancient female voice within us all, [Atwood] creates a new myth that transforms our vision of the world, both internal and external, bringing us closer to feminine truth and self-actualization" (Keating 499), and reserves "the hope for a new world where women can [liberate themselves] from societal constraints and become [autonomous] individuals" (500).

Although the characters are fictional, they still represent and appeal to women nowadays. Through the inclusion of modern influences, the retelling links tradition and fiction with contemporary issues and reality. Thereby, we are able to identify with the characters and the plot.

However, feminist retellings are only the first stage in improving the literary representation of women and women writers. To fully overcome the patriarchal nature of language and literature, we need to further challenge its male domination and find more ways to include genuine female experiences and perspectives into the literary canon. Yet, I am convinced that retellings like *The Penelopiad* enable women to assert themselves, facilitate them to become a part of the imaginary world of literature and remind them of their worth. For women are not defined by any man-made stories, as Penelope and her maids prove: they are perfectly capable of writing their own stories.

Author Biography

Celina Plaß is a student in two master programs at the Leibniz University Hannover, where she also received her bachelor's degree. Her recent academic interests focus primarily on the intersections of cultural studies, history, and gender studies. The article above is based on a revised excerpt from her bachelor thesis titled "Feminist Retellings of Greek Myths: Reclaiming the Voices of Penelope, Circe and Lavinia." When she is not drowning in assignments, she enjoys (non-academic) reading, cuddling her pets, being outdoors, watching movies, and going out with her friends.

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Radicalism of Nonviolence in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Setareh Ghasemireza

Abstract

Non-violent direct action was a method of protest in the U.S.-American civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., among others, used it to contest segregation. In this article, I suggest that King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) deliberately confronts white moderates and aims to highlight the violence against African Americans in the United States. In the letter, King claims that justice does not happen by itself and needs non-violent direct actions. In this respect, King's approach is not that different from Malcolm X's, against which King is traditionally positioned. To make this case, I examine King's perception of civil rights history, engage with the ideology of colorblindness and consider King's non-violent philosophy. Subsequently, the article turns to the radicalism of King's letter and argues that he saw white moderates as problematic in the struggle for racial justice. Finally, I address King's understanding of direct action, which stems from the concept of civil disobedience. In doing so, this article also discusses similarities between King and other civil rights activists like Malcolm X and Mahatma Gandhi with regard to racial movement tactics. I conclude with a discussion of King's philosophy of nonviolence as an immediate action against violence. Ultimately, this article not only discards the idea of King being best understood as a proponent of passiveness but also shows how intellectually active he was in combating racial injustice.

Keywords

Nonviolence – Disobedience – Passiveness – Radicalism – Colorblindness – Justice – Civil Rights

Introduction

Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) is renowned as a civil rights activist. He is known, above all, as a peaceful reformer. However, MLK had a controversial vision at the heart of his non-violent approaches. Violent and non-violent actions are two opposite political poles in the history of the civil rights movement that have been applied by activists like MLK and Malcolm X. MLK called for a non-violent form of activism, while Malcolm X promoted a violent response against the injustice and violence Black people experienced in the United States. While they advocated for different approaches in their mutual quest to achieve justice, King's and Malcolm X's tactics are not entirely dissimilar. Against a common understanding of his work, this article suggests that MLK's approach to the civil rights movement actually combines both poles. More precisely, I argue that MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" expresses a noticeable change in his political vision. I suggest that MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" deliberately confronts white moderates and aims to highlight the violence against African Americans in the United States. More strongly than



before, MLK here claims that justice does not happen by itself and needs non-violent direct actions. In this light, MLK's approach is not that different from Malcolm X's, against which he is traditionally positioned. To make this case, I will first analyze the historical context and investigate significant political incidents that correspond to MLK's main arguments. Then, I will provide a short overview of how the mainstream political authorities have distorted MLK's image. This essay puts forward a critical analysis and highlights MLK's perception of civil rights history through the racial ideology of colorblindness and the concept of nonviolence. Based on this, I will read the letter to examine MLK's new radicalism, emphasizing his increasingly active engagement in the civil rights movement. Afterwards, I will concentrate on MLK's understanding of direct action, which stems from the concept of civil disobedience, as theorized by Henry David Thoreau. In doing so, this paper studies the similarity between MLK and other civil rights activists such as Malcom X and Mahatma Gandhi in terms of their political tactics. I conclude with a discussion of MLK's philosophy of nonviolence as an immediate action against violence. In summary, this article not only discards the idea of MLK as a proponent of passiveness but also shows how intellectually active he was in eradicating racial injustice.

Historical Background

MLK's contribution to the civil rights movement has arguably been the most effective display of nonviolent civil disobedience in African American history. In this section, I outline MLK's early activism and the events leading up to his time in jail and his writing of the "Letter." Historian William King explains the beginning of MLK's activism as follows:

The seeds of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s revolutionary consciousness [...] [were] first planted during his student years at Morehouse College. [...] His radicalism, however, would not fully blossom until after the Selma to Montgomery March which concluded one era of the struggle at the same time that it signaled the beginning of another. In but thirteen short years [...] Martin Luther's local level, as the focus of his activities shifted from the Southern stage to a global level, in seeking to spread social justice in human affairs. (2)

The Birmingham Campaign was an outstanding example of nonviolent resistance by MLK. The protest was directed against racial segregation in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. "Under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the organization King founded in 1957 to coordinate direct action campaigns, the nonviolent method would revolutionize race relations in the South" (Colaiacovo, "Paradox" 20). As minister of the SCLC, MLK was invited to "Birmingham to participate in nonviolent efforts to secure equal rights for blacks" (Colaiaco, "The American Dream" 4). Unfortunately, the campaign was followed by serious consequences for MLK and his fellow Black protestors as Barbara Maranzani outlines:

On April 12, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and nearly 50 other protestors and civil rights leaders were arrested after leading a Good Friday demonstration as part of the Birmingham Campaign, designed to bring national attention to the brutal, racist treatment suffered by blacks in one of the most segregated cities in America [...].

MLK, however, was not to be silenced and continued his activism from inside the jail. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," James A. Colaiaco explains, "was written in response to 'An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,' published by eight white Alabama clergymen in the Birmingham News, charging that the recent direct actions in the city had been 'unwise and untimely'" (Colaiaco,

"The American Dream" 2). Not only did the clergy members' criticism of MLK's direct action not suppress him, but it was a reason for him to oppose racism more radically.

Martin Luther King, Colorblindness, and Nonviolence

People honor the peaceful civil rights leader who delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech. Yet, the public is often unaware of the rebellious and assertive figure who dedicated his life to achieving political and economic equality. Stewart Burns notes that political forces "no doubt contributed to the general public's image of King as if frozen in time delivering his dream at Lincoln Memorial on August 28th, 1963, which has left the wrong impression that King's political idea and vision did not develop significantly in his last half-decade" (7). Not only has his famous speech not been widely read by the public – most of his legacies, including his calls for human rights and racial and economic equality, have also been misrepresented by some conservatives. Ronald Turner refers to "the misuse of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s image and legacy by liberals, neoliberals, conservatives, and neoconservatives who cheaply invoke Dr. King's words even as they kill the substance and spirit of his radical message" (107). Along similar lines, Jeanne Theoharis observes with regard to Martin Luther King Day that "[t]here is a year-round American habit of stripping King of his radicalism and altering him to fit or agree with a wide range of ideas in need of credibility or cover from allegations of bigotry" (Theoharis qtd. in Ross). According to Theoharis, white conservatives in particular have distorted MLK's legacy and diminished the extent of his controversial attitude against racism – usually by picking and choosing parts of MLK's rhetoric that fit their purpose. As result, not only has MLK's image time and again been misinterpreted through the ideology of racial colorblindness, but the radical aspect of his legacy is also "forgotten" despite his annual "remembrance" in the context of Martin Luther King Day (Hall 1234).

The ideology of colorblindness suggests that people living in a society should not acknowledge skin color. "Colorblindness assumes that social identities, specifically race, are constantly downplayed by individuals who are outside of a specific racial/ethnic minority group" (Fergus 2). Accordingly, the public is led to believe that colorblindness results in ending racial discrimination and injustice. Through colorblindness, MLK expected society not just to be ignorant of skin color but to embrace freedom and justice for Black people. For MLK, the practice of colorblindness would bring white and Black people together as a united society, a society in which justice and equality would not be reduced to the color of skin.

Even though MLK's message went well beyond calls for cross-racial unity, his activism is often conveniently reduced to his ideology of racial colorblindness alone. As American activist Mary Berry observes: "Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that whatever the need for provocative or appealing rhetoric, the society has never been color-blind, and the Constitution from the beginning permitted discrimination based on color and sex" (142). The misconception is that MLK cared only about racial issues when he, in fact, talked about controversial issues ranging from imperialism to socialism to the Vietnam War. In this regard, Hall writes:

We hear little of the King who believed that "the racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem" and who attacked segregation in the urban North. Erased altogether is the King who opposed the Vietnam War and linked racism at home to militarism and imperialism abroad. Gone is King the democratic and socialist who advocated unionization, planned the Poor People's Campaign, and was assassinated in 1968 while supporting a sanitation workers' strike. (1234)

As Hall argues, MLK did not only fight against racism but supported many struggles, including struggles against poverty and for global liberty. Civil rights historian Steven F. Lawson likewise stresses that, later in his career, MLK “no longer fought exclusively for civil rights, but for human rights as well” (249). MLK can therefore both be seen as a Black pastor who pursued equality for Black people and be understood as an activist whose rhetoric and tactics were put in service of a more general struggle for human rights.

Similar to MLK’s ideology of colorblindness, his strategy of nonviolence was later misinterpreted as well. As an advocate of nonviolence as a political strategy, MLK understood it as a method of resistance that was “passive physically but strongly active” (qtd. in Miller 82). Subsequently, however, the idea of nonviolence was utilized to promote a peaceful image of MLK that undermined his rebellious actions. In other words, even though MLK indeed preached nonviolent resistance as the basis of his civil rights activism, the reasoning behind this strategy should not be ignored. As MLK writes:

In any nonviolent campaign, there are four basic steps: a collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action [...] You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. (Letter from Birmingham Jail 1)

MLK here clarifies that this strategy seeks to effect change through the moral means of “negotiation” and “self-purification” (1) and thereby established that nonviolence does not mean being submissive and calmly waiting for justice. On the contrary, he envisions forceful change through morality. Despite this, MLK’s emphasis on love has made the public portray him as overly peaceful rather than assertive. Arguably, this aspect of MLK’s activism is misunderstood because of public misconceptions about his religion. Elsewhere in the letter, MLK discusses love with regard to Jesus Christ: “Was not Jesus an extremist for love: ‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them’[,] [...] [w]as not Martin Luther an extremist: Here I stand” (6). Understood against this backdrop, MLK’s concept of love means fighting for human rights in every respect of life. Of course, it might have been difficult for the public to distinguish between, on the one hand, a man of God who applied direct action and the image conservatives and politicians created on the other. As Adam Roberts clarifies about the function of love in MLK’s discourse: “King’s emphasis on ‘love’ was similarly liable to cause misunderstanding about the nature of non-violent action” (231). As a religious figure, MLK became an icon for the public whose resistance did not go beyond peaceful rhetoric and praises. Similarly, Timothy B. Tyson agrees that “Martin Luther King’s message was not unlike that of a gospel singer who goes from church to church, making a joyful noise unto the Lord, lifting people’s hearts and giving them the strength to do what they know needs doing” (97). MLK’s peaceful rhetoric thus caused people to fail to realize the real purpose behind his strategy of nonviolence.

A “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to the World

MLK called for justice and equality for Black people and worked toward realizing a united society. This view of justice is also evident in his letter when he contends: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (1). MLK’s commitment to racial equality did not mean that he was guided by white

rules or acted the way white people wanted him to act. Theologian James H. Cone clarifies MLK's view: "Since Martin spoke a message that appealed to whites, they saw their image in him and embraced what they saw. That is why they joined with Blacks to make King's birthday a national public holiday" (36). Many white moderates thus considered him a peaceful reformer who focused only on race. Maia Niguel Hoskin, however, argues that MLK's legacy is about more than race. However, "[w]hat many others misinterpret in King's emphasis on love is that he believed love would change people and inspire them to dismantle unjust laws and systems of oppression" (Hoskin). Simultaneously, "King was blamed" by other white moderates blamed "for race riots, blamed for black children going to jail, blamed for the bombing that killed the four girls in a Birmingham church, even blamed for his own death. Long before he was murdered, his character was assassinated" (Crow Museum). There are misinterpretations of MLK's movement by white moderates. Of late, these misinterpretations of MLK's activism have been joined by disagreements among African Americans who believe his nonviolent approach to be. Arguably, however, this group of people fails to see MLK's radicalism – a radicalism that becomes more pronounced in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which also takes a stand against the colorblindness of white moderates. Identifying the white community as part of the problem, MLK here gives up this own language of colorblindness to explicitly condemn the white moderates' actions. MLK's letter thus takes direct aim at white moderates for their support of a racist system: "Unfortunately, demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the [Black] community with no alternative" (1). MLK also calls out the white moderates for their ignorance, noting that voices of the black community have not been heard by a white public invested in "monologue rather than dialogue" (2) In another part, he refers to "the inexpressible cruelties of slavery" (9) to present tangible reasons for direct action.

Nevertheless, he contends: "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the [Black man's] great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice" (5). Explicitly, MLK here attacks white moderates for their preference of a tranquil status quo, characterizing them as "dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress" (5). MLK's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" also offers a strong argumentative response to the clergymen's criticism discussed earlier. In this regard, MLK takes particular issue with the idea that the direct action of the Birmingham Campaign was "untimely" (2): "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every [Black person] with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never'" (3). Arguably, MLK's writing here expresses a shift from hopeful leader to rebellious reformer who demands to finally see some change. As Barbara Allen asserts, "King asked Americans to judge themselves and their institutions according to values and commitments that transcended and informed constitutional choice" (72). Along these lines, MLK judged white moderates for their past (in)action and asked for a reasonable response. At the same time, MLK's letter addresses white moderates with urgency: "justice too long delayed is justice denied... I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time concerning the struggle" (3). MLK explicitly refers to 'delay' to inform white moderates that there is no justice. Implicitly, the letter accuses white moderates of consistently pretending to live in peace and denying the reality of racial segregation. MLK's radicalism becomes more noticeable when he ironically closes his letter by stating "I am afraid it is much too long to take your precious time" (9). Of course, reading the letter might take the clergyman's "precious time," but MLK and his people were waiting for their "God-given rights" for about "340 years" (3).

Overall, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” shows a noticeable change in MLK’s perspective and a transition from an optimistic reformer to a subversive critic. As a civil rights activist, MLK paved many ways and spent nights in jail to advocate for a peaceful life with equal rights and justice for Blacks and whites. MLK states that for him there was

no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community [...] we repeatedly asked ourselves: “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” [...] “Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?” (2)

In contrast to what has been known about MLK as a passive character, MLK’s willingness to ‘present his body’ illustrates the nonviolent radicalism of his approach – a dimension that also comes to the fore, for instance, when he asserts that “when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters” (3) with impunity, direct action becomes necessary.

It is impossible to pinpoint precisely where MLK’s radicalism started in his political life. However, his radicalism flourishes in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” when the results do not meet his expectations – for example, when white moderates break their promises and Black people become “the victims” (2) of white moderates’ ignorance. Reviewing work by MLK scholar David Garrow, historian Steven Lawson, noted that, while “[t]he Two-Kings concept” – which contrasts an early, supposedly more peaceful MLK with his later, apparently more radical self – “is a valuable one, [...] it should not be interpreted too rigidly. King’s later thinking reflected ideas he had harbored previously” (Lawson 253). Arguably, however, MLK’s new radicalism is notable in the letter, when his revolutionary sense increases gradually along his accumulating experience of ‘broken promises,’ and erupts when the clergymen criticize his direct action as “precipitat[ing] violence.” (King 5).

Throughout his letter, MLK’s rhetoric reveals his persuasiveness and eloquence – for instance, when he defends his reasoning by claiming to “merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive” (5). In using straightforward language to accuse and remind the white moderates of the violence that had been meted out against Black people, MLK, as Mott states, relied on “his ability to gently answer charges that he is impatient, radical, an ‘outside agitator’; to surprise the reader into an unexpected awareness of what the charges imply and to transform the very charges leveled against him” (416). At the same time, MLK’s tone remained deeply informative and courteous, allowing him to shed light on the most significant issues. Not coincidentally, Cone states that “King’s shift to progressive and radical social thought was a permanent feature of his mature civil protest” (qtd. in Dyson 56).

MLK and Two Other Radical Activists

MLK’s new radicalism grew stronger when he failed to see an end to the long-time oppression of Black people. Increasingly, he relied on the idea of civil disobedience, seeking to shape nonviolent action into a resistance that could be much stronger against firmly rooted racism. Brent Powell states that “Martin Luther King, ‘fascinated’ and ‘deeply moved’ by Thoreau’s essay [on the subject], built upon the work of both Thoreau and Gandhi” (26). In this sense, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” reflects Henry David Thoreau’s theory, as “King embodied much of what Thoreau advocated. As with Thoreau, King’s conscience guided him” (Powell 27). Hence, Thoreau’s theory of civil disobedience can be understood as an important influence for MLK’s

activism. In his letter, for instance, MLK directly underlines each individual's responsibility as a conscious societal element, mirroring Thoreau's approach. About civil disobedience, MLK claims that "[o]ne has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws" (King 3). MLK further justifies his reason for breaking the law, which is similar to Thoreau's approach. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," MLK thus goes beyond being a cautious and peaceful leader and takes a radical stance. He urges white moderates to achieve justice, saying: "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed [...] There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair" (3). In such a situation, of disobeying unjust laws becomes a necessity.

MLK's nonviolent civil rights movement strategy also resembles Mahatma Gandhi's in terms of its morals. This similarity is noticeable, for example, when King notes: "A just law is a manufactured code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code out of harmony with moral law. An unjust law is a human law not rooted in eternal and natural law" (3-4). For MLK, the concept of civil disobedience was therefore not only reliant on Thoreau's ideas alone; Thoreau's civil disobedience theory inspired Gandhi as well, and similar ideas eventually informed both Gandhi's and King's political activism. In this regard, Barbara LaBossiere asserts:

While Thoreau coined the phrase "civil disobedience" Gandhi and King outlined the characteristics that presumably distinguish it from other forms of principled resistance. According to this classic version of civil disobedience, it must at least meet certain moral criteria to be justified, if not defined, as civil disobedience. (318)

MLK, like Gandhi before him, refers to the purity of nonviolence through moral means derived from his religious views. MLK claims that "nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek" (85). Even Gandhi, who was an advocate of nonviolence, considered the possibility of controlled tension that could be directed toward the oppressors. Susan Hacker explains that "Gandhi hoped to achieve not through traditional forms of warfare but through a new pattern of action which would allow for a 'basic tension'" (119). Like Gandhi, MLK was committed to moral values. However, while MLK adopted Thoreau's strategy because of the racism African Americans faced at the time, he followed Gandhi's thoughts. For instance, in his letter, MLK contends that "we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society" (2). Thus, "Gandhi and King chose their methods based on the social conditions of their day, the general political ideals of liberty and equality, and certain concurrent moral commitments that they held before they decided to resist" (LaBossiere 320). Ultimately, MLK used both Thoreau's and Gandhi's thoughts as sources, bringing together the most significant values needed to establish a civil rights movement.

Comparisons between MLK and Malcom X usually underline the differences between the two figures. It is commonly perceived that MLK was a peaceful and passive leader, while Malcom X is frequently presented as an active leader who promoted a violent response to racial inequality. However, as mentioned before, a closer look at MLK's letter shows that he was a rebellious man who supported forceful challenges to injustice. Other similarities between MLK's and Malcom X's approaches exist as well. For instance, in his letter, MLK informs white moderates that "[o]ppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever" (King 6). Similarly, Malcom X famously asserts that: "[i]t is time for [Black people] to defend themselves" (qtd. in Condit and Lucaites 291). Many critics, like Rod Bush, agree that "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s views increasingly came to resemble those of Malcolm X" (49). Accordingly, there have always been doubts about whether to

consider Malcom X and MLK within the same political spectrum or to place them on two opposite poles. Significantly, MLK at times also uses provocative language in his letter, for example when he notes that he is “not afraid of the word ‘tension’” (King 2). Not coincidentally, Cone suggests that “[t]he radical Martin King sounds like Malcolm X” (32). Cone indeed sees MLK as a rather radical figure: “It is interesting to note that Martin, the apostle of nonviolence, did more to create violence between blacks and whites than Malcolm” (34). Along similar lines, Stewart Burns argues that “King seemed to be following the example of Malcolm X, in his last year spoke compellingly of the need to ‘expand the civil-struggle to a higher level to the level of human rights’” (11). That is not to say that MLK imitated Malcom X’s celebration of Blackness; but, at the same time, MLK’s call for resistance often appears to echo Malcom X’s rhetoric -- for instance, when MLK informs white moderates that “[i]f [...] repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history” (6). Addressing this tendency, Adam Roberts insightfully notes:

Although Martin Luther King opposed the use of violence in politics generally, and although he opposed it strongly and eloquently the struggle for civil rights, his was not an absolute ethical rejection of violence for all circumstances. He did slowly move towards the latter position, but his rejection of violence was never complete [...]. And he recognized that sometimes the threat of violence in the background may have contributed to winning concessions from opponents. (230)

While MLK was loyal to his nonviolent approach until his death, this approach should thus not be misunderstood as one invested in passivity; instead his transition from a hopeful leader to a more radical reformer arguably signaled his growing appreciation for a more forceful brand of political activism.

Conclusion

MLK wrote “Letter from Birmingham Jail” using a piece of paper, and “[w]hat emerges’ from these scraps of paper is a literary, legal and religious masterpiece, an apology for civil disobedience” (Tiefenbrun 255). The letter is complex and has been considered by many contemporary historians and scholars to be an important political document of the civil rights era. The letter furthermore documents MLK’s unique traits as a civil rights activist, as well as his conceptual indebtedness to Thoreau and Gandhi.

Though MLK’s ideology of colorblindness has been misinterpreted, his writing sheds light on the utterly radical role he played in pursuing justice and racial equality. In particular, his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” served to show that he was committed to his religious values but could nonetheless be disobedient when necessary. It also illustrates his provocative yet non-aggressive tone, which became more evident after his unsuccessful attempts to reason with white moderates. Despite the general public understanding, MLK and Malcom X were thus similar in their approaches to resistance and provocation. Overall, the letter’s undeniable counterargument for justice and the elimination of discrimination thus paint MLK rebellious reformer – and not as a submissive pacifist.

Author Biography

Setareh Ghasemireza is a student in the Advanced Anglophone Studies Master's program at Leibniz University Hannover and currently in her last semester. Her main areas of interest are media, literature, and philosophy. Two of her previous papers have dealt with movies, one a philosophical argument and the other a theoretical concept of Autofiction. Setareh's other interests include writing scripts and criticizing. Despite having little interest in politics, writing about Martin Luther King's movement encouraged her to learn more about it.

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Independent Studies: Autofiction

Introduction: Autofiction

Eiman Alkhatib, Lukas Fender, and Michelle Pitson

“As soon as I write myself, I invent myself.”
– Serge Doubrovsky

Autofiction is a literary genre that combines the traditional genres of fiction and autobiography. The term autofiction was coined in the 1970s by the French author Serge Doubrovsky. According to Claudia Gronemann, the term autofiction appeared for the first time on the cover of Doubrovsky’s published novel, where it was defined as “Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement reels; si l’on veut *autofiction*’ [‘Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like’]” (241).

In Doubrovsky’s perception, the blending of fictional elements with autobiographical ones is no dichotomy in life writing. However, Karen Ferreira-Meyers argues that such a blend poses a paradox in the conventional perception of genre (203-4). Moreover, autofiction is not as simple a term as its name would suggest since it is used in various fields and has been defined differently by critics (204-5). As Ferreira-Meyers states, Doubrovsky argues that “autofiction fictionalises a character which really lived” (205) whereas James zu Hüningen describes it as a first-person narrative that is told as if it were an autobiography. The author, hence, plays a significant role because the narrator is seen as a substitute for the author (zu Hüningen). While zu Hüningen also depicts autofictional texts as authorial enactments of autobiographical expression, in which the author reveals and disguises himself, Claire Lynch argues that “an autobiographer writes with the objective of publication” (211). Therefore, life-story writing can be a form of “proclaiming a public identity” and serving, as Linda Anderson states, as a “representative of a particular marginalized group” (qtd. in Lynch 211). Thus, the author’s experiences “become a source of empowerment and public recognition” (Lynch 211). In other words, besides their expected uniqueness as self-experiences, autobiographical texts can be read and treated as sounding boards for the reader. On the other hand, the fictional aspect of the genre is not to be equated with sheer invention but rather “the avoidance of intentional subjectivity” (Gronemann 241). In line with that, Toni Morrison offers a compelling comparison with memory, describing memory as “a form of willed creation” that aims “to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (385). Autofiction as a genre thus moves between fact and fiction and blurs the boundaries between them. The different approaches to various genres, narrative forms, and forms of text demonstrate the large range of autofiction as a genre.

The three autofictional texts in this section stem from a class on “Autofiction,” taught by Lujain Youssef in the summer term 2022, which engaged with the genre and encouraged students to produce their own creative writing. The three pieces collected here vary in style and form as well as in content. In “Lady Bird and Firebird,” Jia Shen Lim takes the reader through a night of dancing

to the poetic beats of techno music, unexpected acquaintances, and the taste of vodka-infused energy drinks. “In Theory” by Tina Pahnke tells the story of Lisa and her family, challenging the reader’s perception of memory and reality through interjections from the first-person narrator. In “The Story Untold” by Sahar Al Kharsa, the reader is encouraged to feel the process of self-invention – literally, as being a real character, and metaphorically, as if the text depicts a self emerging from its cocoon. Taken together, the three texts utilize the genre of autofiction in their own unique ways and create an astounding harmony between reality and fiction. Their different approaches to narrative and textual forms demonstrate the large range of autofiction as a genre.

Author Biographies

Eiman Alkhatib is a Syrian student. She is pursuing a master’s degree in North American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2016, she received her bachelor’s degree in English Literature from Damascus University, Syria. Her research interests are cultural studies, drama, and media studies.

Lukas Fender studies the double degree Master of Education (History & English) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2020, he received his bachelor’s degree in History and English from the University of Mannheim. His research interests are memory studies with a strong focus on nostalgia, colonial history and postcolonial theory, and racism critical education. He is currently working as a research assistant at the Institute for Didactics of Democracy at Leibniz University Hannover.

Michelle Pitson is currently enrolled in the North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2021, she received her bachelor’s degree in English Literature and Culture and American Studies from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. She spent one semester each as an exchange student at Bangor University in Wales during her bachelor studies and at Ewha Womans University in Seoul during her master studies. Her research interests are in the fields of queer and feminist studies.

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Lady Bird and Firebird

Jia Shen Lim

Saturday, 5 June 2022

I tend to indulge myself in a religious-pseudo pilgrimage for communication and interaction during the weekends, a ceremonial site where redeemers and disciples congregate in a state of physical and spiritual ecstasy as they rise to apocryphal literature.

It is there that collective corporeality and consciousness express themselves, and it is also there that I have fallen in love on the dance floor yesterday.

The DJ takes the role of the archaic priest and holy spirits take possession of dancing human bodies through the medium of techno music. Repetitive rhythms of the music convulse the heavenly bodies while light machines simultaneously paint the sacred space, sending the masses of dancers into a trance. As I moved along the percussive and monotone music, for a split second, I caught someone looking at me from a distance and our gazes met briefly.

Perhaps it was my imagination, maybe I was a little drunk, but our eyes locked for the second time.

In need of another drink, I slipped past the crowd while grooving to the music and made my way to the bar.

“Ich hätte gern einmal Vodka Red Bull bitte,” I said to the bartender with my best effort at trying to speak German. *“Ich auch!”* someone with a deep voice said, to which I turned my head towards the person ordering the same drink as me. And there he is, the same tall and slender guy with blonde curly hair that I saw on the dancefloor is now standing right next to me. I was mesmerized by his blue-hazel eyes under the spotlight. He knew that I was looking at him and smirked at me, in a way that I found suspicious but hot and cute at the same time, and then he proceeded to murmur something in German. I replied with a very confused expression, *“Entschuldigung, ich spreche kein Deutsch.”*

“Ah, but I heard you speaking German.”

“Ja, aber nur ein bisschen,” I responded.

“It was really good though. I wanted to say that you have a nice outfit.”

His hands wrapped around his glass of Vodka Red Bull and lips parted ready to take a sip, he had his eyes on me. Without giving a second thought, I mimicked him but emptied half of my glass in

one go. Boy, was I thirsty, or was I feeling anxious? One thing I know for sure was that the effect of the drink was instantaneous.

I wiped my mouth with my shirtsleeve, not realizing how foolish I looked, and asked, “Want a cigarette?” before we made our way outside the club.

Joining a crowd of smokers, we could still hear the music from the club.

Meanwhile, in a corner, I saw my friends chatting away and laughing uncontrollably but they did not notice me.

“Do you live here in Hannover?” Guy asked.

“Yea, I study here,” I replied.

Guy, because for some unknown reason, we did not introduce ourselves to each other. Guy studies Latin, Greek and philosophy, and is involved in performing arts. Despite being in a state of drunkenness, we talked and exchanged ideas, and shared our favorite books and music playlists. It was unforced. It was nice.

“I really like talking to you. Should we exchange numbers?” Guy asked.

I smiled shyly and blushed a little, and said “I’d like that very much,” then proceeded to take my phone out of my pocket with a blank contact page opened and passed it to him. Our hands touched as Guy grabbed my phone to put in his number and then give it back to me.

I took a look at his name and stared at him bewilderedly, “Lady Bird?”

“Yes. I am Lady Bird. What is your name?” he asked in return.

At that moment, I remembered a similar name from a film I had watched a few nights before, and I said, “Firebird. My name is Firebird.”

Lady Bird had not expected that. He looked back at me with the same bewildered expression I had had before, “I see where this is going,” while nodding his head with a devilish smirk on his face.

We grabbed another drink before heading back to the dance floor. This time, the dance floor was spinning twice as fast, or should I say my head was spinning twice as fast. The music was different now. Some dark techno was playing, so it must have been after 4 a.m.

Techno’s exaggerated structuring of time and tempo was stretched out to its limits. It creates a sense of timelessness. I remember dancing to the music with no intense build-ups or beat drops. It was then that I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was my friends, Michiel, Abigail and Sonia. We embraced each other with a big hug as if we had just bumped into each other by pure coincidence even though the four of us had come to the club together.

They were dancing on one side, Lady Bird and I on the other. Amid the electrical grandeur from the stage lights, Lady Bird wrapped his hands around my waist, leaning close. Our minds and bodies had realized and felt what was coming. There was nothing left for us but to kiss.

Outside the club, it was dawn. Lady Bird said to me, “Yourself a specter, how would you see others as alive?”

“Wow. That was very poetic and profound. Did you just come up with that?” I asked.

“No,” he responded, “it was a quote from my favorite book.”

... “Should we go back home?”

As we were walking in the same direction, “so where do you live?” I asked.

“I live just around the corner. And you?”

“Same” I responded. By then, we were already standing right in front of the building where I live.

“Wait a second, you live in this building?” Lady Bird interjected, “How have I not seen you around?”

I woke up the next day to a WhatsApp text from Lady Bird. It was a Spotify playlist titled “*im einklang mit der zeit und den göttern*,” followed by a message saying “for you <3.”

Author Biography

Jia Shen Lim is a student in the MA North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). Prior to his enrolment at LUH, he received his BA in Graphic Design and Art History from the University of Hertfordshire, UK, then went on to work as a fashion and art writer for a newspaper. His job was invigorating and fun but it was not enough – intellectually speaking –, so he decided to leave his job to study again. His research interests include gender and transcultural identities in visual art, periodical culture, and the combination of close reading techniques with critical theory.

In Theory

Tina Pahnke

There are some things you just know, without even knowing where you learned about them. For example, that the shallow part in a lake is warmer than the deep ends. Maybe you learned it in school, but some things are just there, with this certainty that they are true, they are here, and there is no real explanation for why they billow in your mind. It's the certainty like in dreams, when you simply know that you are talking to the king of Switzerland (without that even being a real title anymore), when you never even heard of the man. This certainty applies to many things, not only to fun facts about nature (or Swiss nobility).

Lisa knew she would fail in the future. She didn't know how or what exactly, just that there was a great disappointment waiting for her. It's not that bad to know that about yourself, really. You can prepare. Every time she got handed a bad grade, a friend stood her up or she burned her food, she expected the worst. Oh well, that's it. The end of my good strain. Maybe the house will burn down, but that doesn't sound too exciting.

*Our house did nearly catch on fire one time,
but nearly isn't really exciting enough, isn't
it? Anyway, it didn't even happen when I was
home. I guess I leave it out.*

See, that's the other thing Lisa was certain about – yes, her life would turn horribly upside down in a way, she would lose something, maybe, but it would be something truly tragic. Something in the scale of, lo and behold, what shit happened here. Houses burning down, friends leaving you, barely graduating, those are all basic tragedies. You can't call them tragedies, they are nuisances, obstacles you can overcome, you can come back from (yes, even a house burning down, although, admittedly, that's a little more annoying).

Could sound belittling. Oh well. It's fiction!

Lisa waited for something bigger. The kind of drama you see on Netflix, in a documentary, or a biopic, the kind you read about in novels. She never waited patiently, nor did she actively try to challenge fate and risk, provoking whoever or whatever to prove her premonitions to be true. After some time, she learned to live with that ever-present looming feeling and got on with her life. There was nothing to do about it anyway.

Her mom always felt it, too. The minute she learned about her pregnancy (“Twins, oh god, are you sure? Can you check again?”), her life shifted in multiple directions at the same time – being a mom, the main breadwinner, a wife. Directions she probably would have gone anyway, but so early? And with two kids already? There were things she wanted to do that now seemed impossible

and maybe even ridiculously childish. Florida, the only vacation she had photos of, now became a memory of another woman who had had the time and the resources to say “Yes, I would like to see the world (and yes, I will pay you back for the trip).” Lisa’s mom knew that her life would change drastically when she got the news of the twins, of course it would, but that was not the moment when she had the same premonition of Lisa’s terrible failure, at that time, she still seemed to have some sort of hope for her unborn children. Life struck her already when she was a child, so why should it happen again? Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, or how does the saying go?

Ian Fleming also said: “Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. The third time it’s enemy action.” The enemy, in this case, my sister’s and my entering academia.

The thing is, it didn’t strike in the same place twice, but close enough for her to feel the impact. This time, lightning hit her ex-husband, Lisa’s father. Back then both were still invested, or rather interested, in each other’s lives, there was even some love left for them to feed on. The twins were in kindergarten, mom and dad had jobs, their apartment was nice and close to the city. Lisa still remembers the exact layout of their rooms, their way to kindergarten, the train they used to go shopping. She doesn’t remember when exactly her dad lost his job and started staying home all day, playing video games and watching TV.

Mom didn’t mind this at first. Her job paid enough for them to get through this, and she liked the idea of her children spending some time with their dad. Whenever she thinks of this time now, she can’t help but feel regret, in some way. She once nearly admitted this, when Lisa started getting bitchy, and puberty hit her hard. She sees a lot of her ex in her kids, especially in Lisa. But that was later, when they were already divorced and trying to make things work for the children. Dad’s unemployment was the switch for all of this.

There are unemployed people with very happy marriages. Maybe I simplify things too much here.

To this day, Lisa never understood how her parents ended up together in the first place. She knows there was some kind of party, and she assumes that they had been a couple for some time. She assumes that because she can’t think of another explanation why somebody would try to make a marriage work when they don’t know each other. But then again, she remembers her father and is not so sure about any of this. Dad was, either way, a role model and pillar in Lisa’s life, he still is, despite everything.

Unlike Lisa’s mom, her dad worked many different jobs. Her dad was in the military, but she doesn’t remember that because this was before he even met her mom, so it never seemed to matter that much. There were some stories she recalls, things he saw and described with a distant look in his eyes, but other than those stories and a tattoo of a grim reaper on his arm, Lisa never had proof for this time in his life. Her dad was a cook, but that is also a time she barely has memories of. She personally hates cooking, and whenever she and her sister were at his place – after the divorce he lived in a small apartment above his parents – dad tried to cook somewhat healthy meals. Somewhat healthy in the sense that he knew that his children took after him and preferred glutamate over green beans any time. Then, if she got the time right, her dad was unemployed. He played video games, bloody ones, that is, and the twins were watching him and

cheering whenever something exploded on screen. Mom kind of knew that, but she didn't do anything about it. She also knew that her children were watching *The X-Files* in secret, hidden behind the door and barely able to make out what was happening. This seemed to be enough of an age restriction. Her dad was a butcher, and Lisa remembers an argument with a school friend about that. That friend really hated the idea of somebody killing animals for a living, it was disgusting, how could you not be ashamed of your father? She brought sandwiches with salami to school every day, and Lisa spent many afternoons with her family eating chicken nuggets and mashed potatoes. For a brief moment, Lisa felt ashamed, but she couldn't place that feeling in a secure box and so she swallowed it down. That was easy, without having to argue or, God forbid, even having to admit mistakes, and so she started to swallow more than just shame. But that is not the point of this part.

Now, if she was informed correctly, her dad was a postal worker. In the same branch as her mom, ironically, but ultimately this didn't matter as he could be working anywhere, and he would be as far out of reach as he is anyway.

I'm not sure why I should include this. I continue this part later.

Anyhow, nothing really weird happened with her parents. Every family has its drama, and the real tragedy hadn't happened yet. Lisa was still watching out for it, but it got a bit lost in her mind. Now and then it resurfaced, but the time between its disappearances got longer. She called that peace sometimes.

It re-entered her mind during the first semester of college. She started later than her sister and most of her friends because she finished school later, worked for a year, and then didn't know what to do. Something with English, something with Art. Why not both. It's not that she didn't have the time, wasn't that so?

Just thinking about this time makes me feel like I'm losing time. Too many years spent on something, but alas. I also got to play video games as much as I wanted.

The most irritating question was whether she was going to become a teacher later. God, no. Oh Jesus. No way. She answered the questions exactly like this, most of the time. There were a lot of uncertainties in Lisa's life, but becoming a teacher was the one thing she always knew would never happen. Speaking in front of people? Voluntarily? For her, that meant existing in the ninth circle of hell.

Could also be another circle. Never read "Dante's Inferno." But you get the idea. It sounds dramatic but speaking in front of an audience was hell for me back then. Now it's still horrible, but more of a limbo than actual hell. Well, depends on the group size.

Constantly being asked about your future and not having a precise answer gets tiring after some time. Lisa knew that a lot of people didn't have any idea about what to do later, but that didn't stop her from thinking she should do something about it. She was in her early twenties and already time seemed to be slipping. She only found out later that that's the thing with your twenties. Everybody feels like a failure and like being just too late for everything, every time, while everyone else already

has a concrete plan. In your twenties you also learn that people talk a lot of bullshit when they feel this way.

That's the very definition of a vicious circle. People acting as if they know it all, infecting others and bringing them to talk too much about their "plans," which are vague ideas, at best. All this just to not confess that you don't have a plan, really. Nobody wanted to be the only person in their closer circle with no plan for the future. Especially Lisa, who couldn't even stand the judge-y looks when she, once again, bought conventional sunscreen even though her friend had told her that the Great Barrier Reef died because of this sunscreen, and no, anybody could afford to buy the more expensive kind. If they couldn't maybe they shouldn't use sunscreen.

*I could go on with this, but I don't want to.
Would taint too many fond memories with friends.
It's also not that interesting.*

Then, most of the time blurred and faded into one big deep breath of trying to make it to the next semester. Lisa enjoyed her studies, but somehow nothing really seemed to matter, anyway. English was great, but there was a lot of educational theory involved, so every seminar became less and less interesting. Same thing with Art.

*Ugh, maybe I don't want to think about this time too much. It
was fun, yeah, and draining, and also so so long. I want to tell
something more fun.*

Lisa's time in her bachelor studies was fun. She went to parties, made some new friends, and as already mentioned somewhere above, she played a lot of video games. That was her idea of fun.

*But this gets somewhat tedious now. This whole college spiel. Let's focus on
something different.*

Lisa tried to find some meaning in her story. In the beginning, she felt a tragedy looming over her, ready to strike any time. It still wasn't gone. Sometimes, when she was lying down at night, she imagined the most bizarre catastrophes, freak accidents, disasters ...

That's not entirely true. There were also dreams about nice things. Many.

Lisa's mind rummaged through every tragedy she ever heard of, bent it, melted it, absorbed it, even, until she could think of a lifetime where it could happen to her. Every night, things became more realistic. More tangible. Sometimes it felt as if they already happened to her, in a distant lifetime, getting closer and closer to her. One time, she dreamed about being burnt at the stake in the Middle Ages, like Joan of Arc; the next week, she was part of Marie Antoinette's court. Not long until she dreamt about being aboard the *Britannic* (which was more or less like the *Titanic*). Her dreams would catch up with the real world very soon.

*What the hell. That's not even remotely true. There
were only dreams about stuff like that when I read it
on Wikipedia the night before, and you can't*

spin this to be some kind of self-destructive mind game I would play on myself. Also, the Britannic wasn't "more or less like the Titanic." Less people died, and I think it wasn't because of an iceberg. Though I need to google that.

Lisa's dreams were only loosely grounded in reality.

Even being "loosely grounded in reality" means getting some facts straight. That's not happening here. This whole story was supposed to do something different.

She felt a shift. As if there was something speaking to her from far away. But it didn't feel like it felt in her dreams.

Of course, it doesn't. I'm talking. To Lisa. You. Whatever.

Lisa wondered if her parents had nights like these, too. Her mom was always very practical. Her dad however read a lot of Science Fiction. It wouldn't surprise her if he sometimes lay awake, imagining to be part of the first moon landing and to explore the galaxy for humanity, like Perry Rhodan.

Mom read a lot of Stephen King. I bet she had fantasies like that, too.

Lisa remembered her mom's dreamier side, too. It just wasn't as apparent as with her dad.

Is this going anywhere? I mean, it started off ok-ish, I guess, but you sort of lost me when this whole dream business started. It's just not what happened. I could go back and forth like this forever. But why should I. Really. My parents had their issues and I guess passed them down unto me and my sister, who, by the way, never gets mentioned here anyway, so that's the first problem, really, because I can't ignore my twin sister, who is also my roommate, and also experienced all of this too, so she should probably play a bigger part in this. I digress. Also, I start to dislike the name "Lisa." I mean, it was supposed to feel like a different person and not me, but this detachment has gone too far. I never really saw myself as a Lisa. Toni would be cool. Or Mary-Sue, that sounds so whimsical for a 26-year-old German girl.

Mary-Sue and her sister lived through all of this, and her sister had this looming feeling hanging above her, too.

Yeah, no, that's not it. Doesn't work for me.

She could always try something different.

Maybe. But not here. She should focus on some other part of her life, I think.

Her adolescence was also a time of great anxiety for her.

I would be glad to not open this can of worms. I mean, in theory I could talk about any time in my life. The future! Oh, now that would be fun. Put some sci-fi in it. Would that count as autofiction? Technically, yes, maybe?

When she got older, she saw things clearer. Her friends had completely different lives, with their kids, and pretty houses, worrying about mortgages and about where to spend their next vacation.

I forget that the future implies me getting older. And my friends. And, oh god, my parents. No, don't want to think about that either.

There were few things Lisa/Toni/Mary-Sue liked to think about.

Not true, again. But, in a way, maybe. I'm starting to dislike your attitude. You know, I can just end the text whenever I want to.

She knew that it had to feel right. Whenever wouldn't work for her.

This feels right. Right now. Precisely in this moment. This is the last thing now. Can't think of anything now, anyway.

Author Biography

Tina Pahnke grew up in a small village, busying herself with movies, a lot of books and an unhealthy amount of video games. She turned those passions into an academic career, getting her bachelor's degree with majors in English and Art and is now pursuing a master's degree in North American Studies. Her studies are mostly focused on film theory and game studies, but she loves to ponder about gender and everything queer too.

The Story Untold

Sahar Al Kharsa

... And a million years of suffering, is my age ...
And a million tears
And ages of sorrow ...
Why was I that stupid?
Remember?
The words with power? The wings you gifted me
Once and said: you are the queen
Of all that is mine

You are the beats of my heart ...
The blood in my veins?
How could those wings be fake? How could I reach that height?
Remember? How fast I fell ...
Well ... I thought I would be only standing here
Collecting the shattered pieces of mine ...

No, no ...
Here I am
I can feel my hands,
 My body,
 My all ...
Not shattered, not broken, no
I'm all ... unexpurgated
The songs, the music, I can hear
I can feel,
All alone
It's palpable, without even you. Imagine!!
It can still have meaning. No. it has a better meaning, without you.

No, no ...
It wasn't you!
It was me.
I was me.
I was the one.
Oh! I didn't know I grew wings!
Oh, I had wings!



I can fly,
 I can be ...
 I can piece together me,
 I am me ...
You have never been,
 And though: you will never be!!!

Author Biography

Sahar Al Kharsa is a Lebanese German who finished her studies in English Literature back in Lebanon, took a longer (family) break, and then got back to pursue her dream of finishing her master's degree in American Studies at Leibniz University Hannover. She is now in her third semester and the tutor for the master's program North American Studies. Being born in a country of diversity that has undergone many invasions throughout the ages, Sahar has grown up to be a person that is open to different languages and cultures. This is partly why her favorite research areas are diaspora and cultural studies.

Independent Studies: Love, Power & Academia. An Event Report about a Student Project at the *WortLaut* Festival 2022

Elisa Bongartz, Evelyn Dossa, Mruga Kelkar, and Celina Plaß

In the 2022 summer term, Anna-Lena Oldehus and master students of the English Department at the Leibniz University of Hannover (LUH) conceptualized a student project that was later realized in the context of the annual *WortLaut* festival (fig. 1) – an event that aims to showcase Hannover’s literary, linguistic, and intercultural diversity and seeks to inspire enthusiasm about language, reading, and words. The festival took place in October 2022 and offered an opportunity for Hannover residents to actively shape the festival program – and also for the students participating in Anna-Lena Oldehus’ independent studies course.

The seminar participants eventually conceived an evening at the local community center Freizeithem Linden that included an exhibition of several different creative and interactive student projects as well as an interview with porn scholar Madita Oeming. Overall, the evening set out to explore the relationship between love, power, and academia, seeking to answer questions like: How does academia address love and where does love find its place in the academic field? Where does love become problematic and where is it indispensable? The evening’s exhibition included installations made by the students that engaged with the complexity, ubiquity, and emotionality of love, power, and academia. These included a videotaped dance performance, posters, personal stories, and interactive parts designed to involve the festival audience and their opinions, ideas and perceptions. All installations emphasized different facets of the interplay between these evening’s central concepts. The aim of a video installation by one of the seminar participants, for instance, was to draw attention to the sensitive issue of emotional abuse (fig. 2). Flanked by explanatory posters, the pre-recorded video tried to portray emotions and struggles caused by abuse and asked the audience to reflect on their own experiences and feelings regarding the topic. While this exhibit dealt with themes of (self-)love and power, other students chose a different approach to portray the (sometimes problematic) relationship between love and power in academia. Another set of posters, for instance, was dedicated to queerness in academia and showcased the lives and struggles of a few famous scientists: the astrophysicist and first American woman in space Sally Ride (1951-2012), the British mathematician and father of modern computer sciences Alan Turing (1912-1954), and the American physician and pioneer of X-ray photography Alan L. Hart (1890-1962) (fig. 3). Using the examples of queer scientists like Ride, Turing, and Hart – who had to pretend to be heterosexual and live a double life in order to escape discrimination and pursue their careers – the posters called attention to how queer love was, and still is, subject to discrimination, hate, and persecution.

Another project explored the relationship between academia and power by collecting snippets of conversations of about work from academics all over Germany. This project positioned itself in the context of the grassroots initiative *#IchBinHanna* (“I am Hanna”) that has been addressing and publicizing the precarious working conditions in German academia since 2021. The hashtag emerged in response to a promotional video by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) explaining the alleged benefits of the notorious *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz* (the Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act). Under *#IchBinHanna*, thousands of academics have reported their experiences with fixed-term contracts in German academia. Many of them shared that permanent positions at German universities have become extremely scarce and are mainly available to candidates at the professorial level. Yet, highly skilled scholars and scientists are still needed to do teaching, research, and lab work. As a result, these specialized, highly educated researchers at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels find themselves in a cycle of moving from institution to institution without ever signing a permanent contract. The snippets presented at the event raised awareness for the *#IchbinHanna* campaign and the underlying problems by connecting them to some personal thoughts and anecdotes of academics who struggle with work under the present conditions.

Some student projects also actively involved the visitors of the exhibition. For one project, for example, guests were invited to enter a room full of mirrors. To do so, visitors had to pass through a black curtain decorated with notes that represented insecurities, fears, and self-doubts that had to be actively pushed aside in order to reach the safe place within (fig. 4). Once inside, visitors were invited to write down on a sticky note what they loved about themselves or something they were proud of and leave it on one of the mirrors (fig. 5). In this manner, the installation invited visitors to physically leave negative thoughts behind and step into a safe space in which they could feel accepted just the way they were.

Some of the questions about the relationship between love, power, and academia raised by the students’ installations were also picked up again in the final event of the evening: an interview that Anna-Lena Oldehus conducted with porn scholar Madita Oeming (fig. 6).



Figure 1. Anna-Lena Oldehus (second from left) and WortLaut festival organizers Verena Pape, Isabell Petter, and Thimm Bubbel (from left to right).

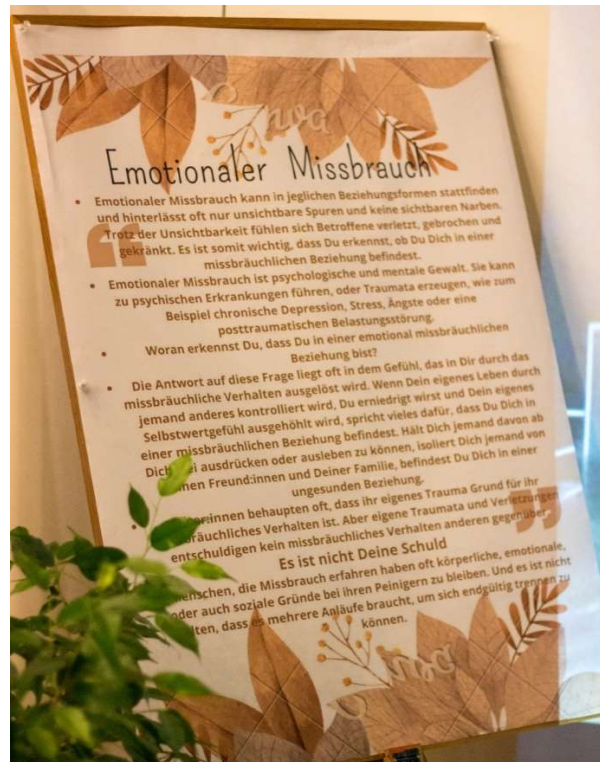


Figure 2. Introductory text to the video installation about emotional abuse.

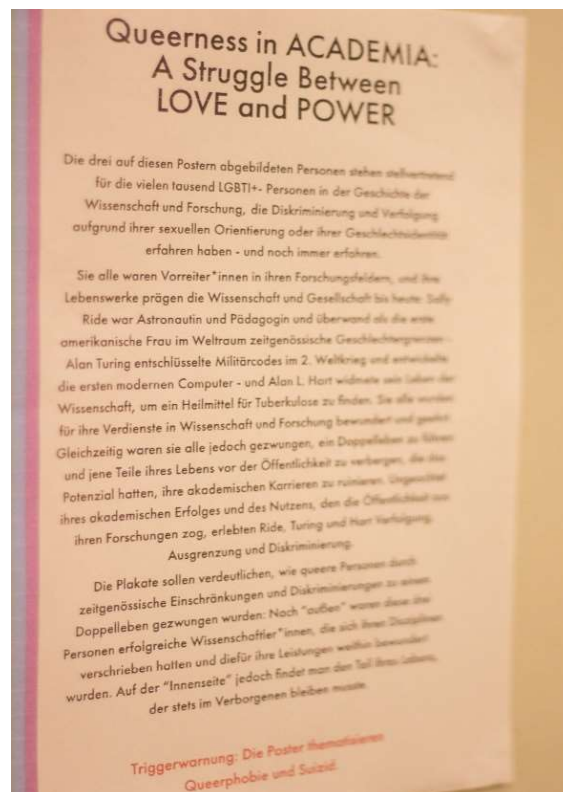


Figure 3. Queerness in Academia – A Struggle between Love and Power. Introductory text to posters about Sally Ride, Alan Turing and Alan L. Hart.

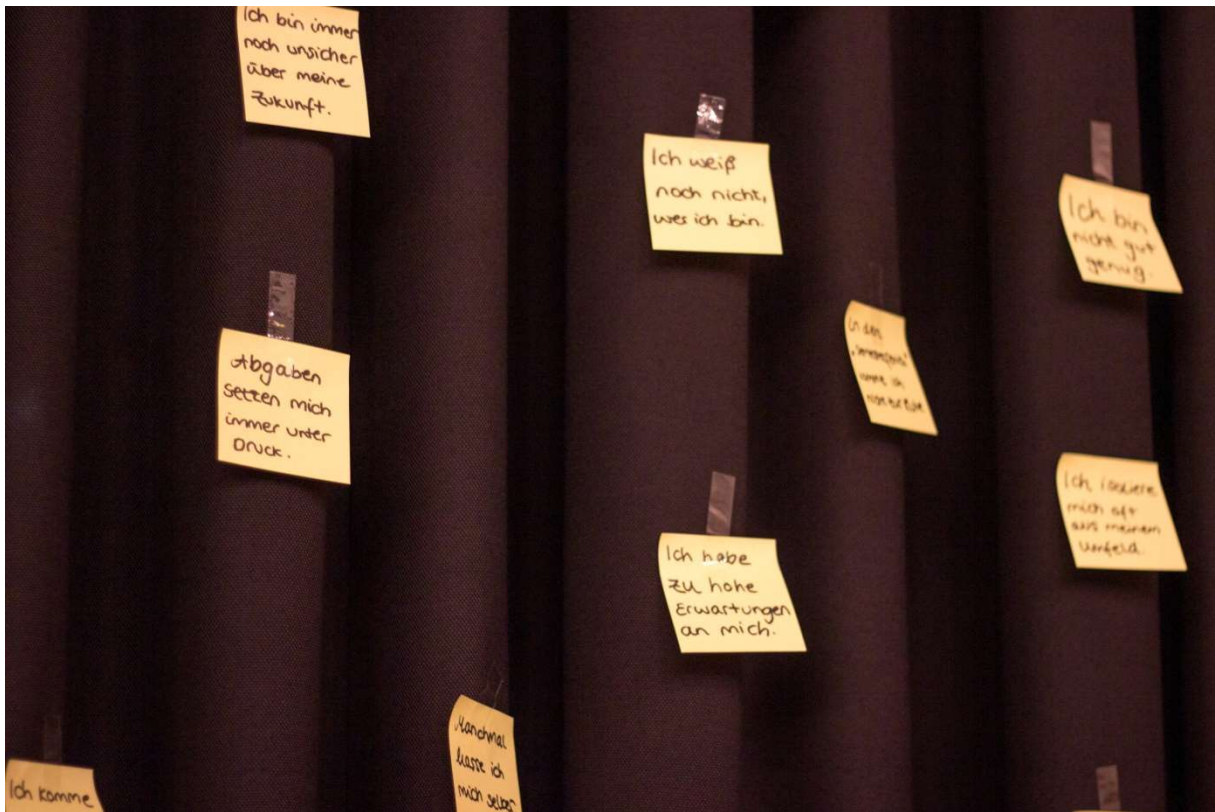


Figure 4. Pushing through fears, insecurities, struggles, and self-doubts in order to reach the safe space within.

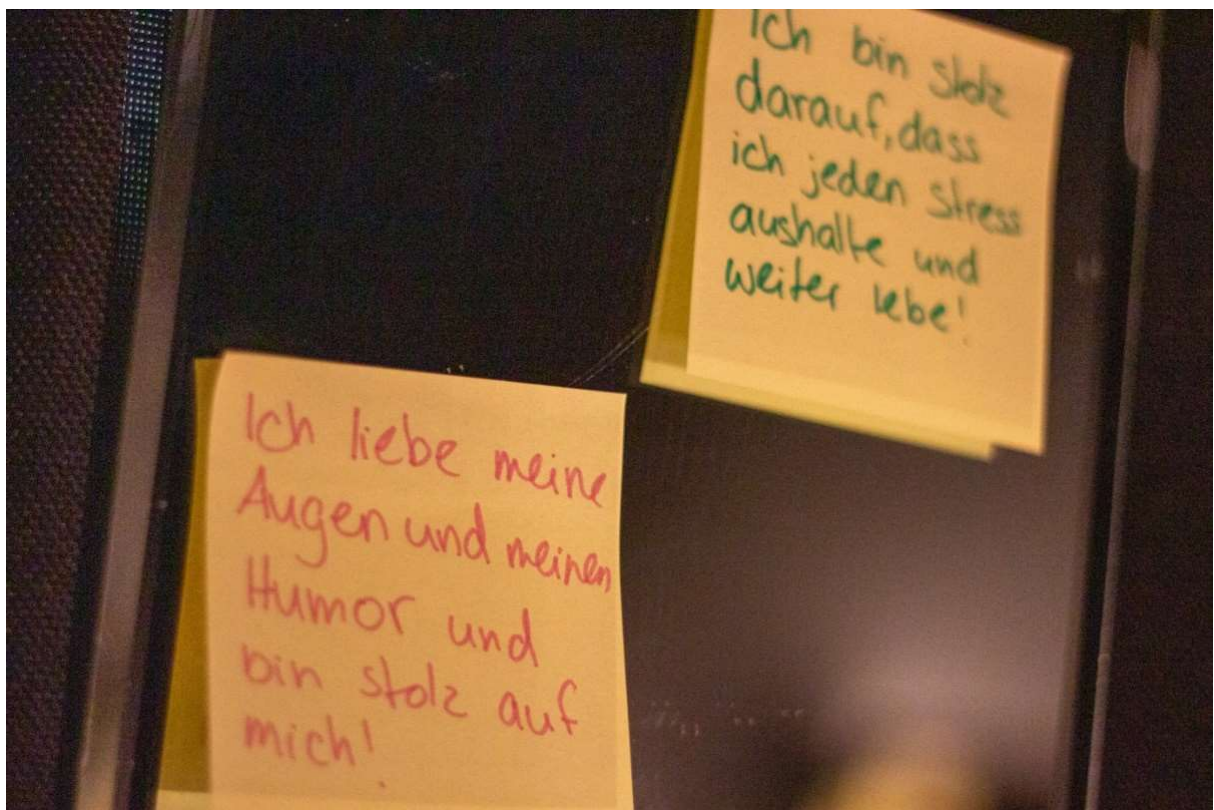


Figure 5. Involving the audience – self-affirming statements on a mirror.

Interview with Porn Scholar Madita Oeming

Transcribed and translated by Elisa Bongartz and Evelyn Dossa

Madita Oeming is a German cultural studies scholar who has specialized in the field of porn studies. She received her Master's degree in American Studies at the University of Göttingen with a master thesis entitled "Moby's Dick." Her work on this project introduced Madita Oeming to the field of porn studies, which continues to be the focus of her work and research today. She taught American literature and cultural history as well as the first seminar on porn at the Institute of American Studies at the University of Paderborn. Since then, she has appeared on various stages and in various media – from print to radio and television – to shape the public discourse about pornography. Madita Oeming has published in academic journals like *Porn Studies*, given lectures across Germany as well as on the international stage, and taught at several German universities, including Paderborn, Münster, and Berlin. In the context of the *Teach LOVE* sexual education project at the University of Flensburg, she offered a "driver's license" for watching porn. In addition, Madita Oeming was a guest on the television show *Talk aus Berlin*, moderated *Sex Talk Tuesday* for the porn website Sssh.com, and acted as a jury member for the *Pornfilmfestival Berlin*.

As part of the *WortLaut* festival, Anna-Lena Oldehus invited Madita Oeming to talk about her personal experience within the university, about the subject of pornography, and her relationship with academia in general – including what she loves about it, her struggles with it, and what she thinks it lacks. The following is an excerpt of a much longer interview.

Anna-Lena Oldehus: *What do you love about working in academia?*

Madita Oeming: I now realize that, having done so much journalism and so many 'you have two minutes of radio time to explain something' things, I love the depth of academic work. The complexity, the cleanliness, the carefulness. Especially with complex topics, tied into great narratives and ambivalences. To have things organized, in black and white, with citations (laughs), there's something very calming about that. That's what I like about scholarly work. When you really think about writing processes and the deep immersion in particular subject. To really deal with a topic for a long time and to lose yourself in all kinds of research. Sometimes you really get into a gold-digger mode and I love that. And when you think of scholarly work more generally, teaching was or is something I always enjoy, except for when I'm correcting papers (laughs). Because you can just get into the exchange of ideas. Especially with my topic it's so rewarding to get into a group of young people and just watch how their heads are spinning, how they question their worldview. I find that very, very rewarding.

Anna-Lena Oldehus: *Is the academic space a difficult space for self-love?*



Madita Oeming: Absolutely. Because it's just not a space that leaves a lot of room for personal needs. Like, self-love in the most basic sense of 'I take care of myself' means: I sleep, I eat healthy, I'm active, I get fresh air. So, concerning the working process there is already a lot of sitting and screen time, oftentimes alone, a lot of pressure, and there are no fixed working hours. There are always unspoken laws about what you have to achieve that you can never adhere to. You're never really done and you're somehow always too late with everything. It's practically already set up in such a way that nobody sticks to a deadline when it comes to submitting publications and so on. I almost think that this whole system is, in many aspects, so stress-oriented. It's extremely difficult to somehow maintain healthy routines through it all. In that respect, I think it is a difficult space for self-love. And of course, there's a lot of competition, especially if you're in the humanities, where there is little funding, few positions, and everyone is in a relationship of dependency.

Anna-Lena Oldehus: *During your time in and on your way into academia, were there certain texts or scholars that inspired you? Any 'academic rock stars' that you idolized a little bit?*

Madita Oeming: Well, not necessarily 'rock stars.' I mean, it's a question of how you define that, right? (laughs) It's more in the small encounters. More in seminars, with someone who then somehow really infected me with an enthusiasm for a topic. For me, a rock star is Professor Greta Olson from the University of Gießen. When she went on stage for the first time, she just took over the whole stage with such an American omnipresence and said: "I'm tenured, I'm gonna do whatever the fuck I want." And we were just like: 'Wow. Fuck yeah.' That spirit just got to you right away. She's so not afraid of a loss of authority. I was in her seminar once, for a guest session, and it was Thanksgiving and she just walked in with a turkey hat on her head. I was so in awe of her then because she wasn't even a bit inconsistent in her demeanor or less serious that day. I thought that was insanely impressive. With things like that, you can seriously impress me. (laughs)

Anna-Lena Oldehus: *I think she was at a conference that one time, sitting in the panel, right? She sat next to me and I was instantly super nervous. A person with infinite charisma. And I would still have been nervous, even if she had a turkey hat on.*

Madita Oeming: Definitely. And at the same time, she's warm and empathetic. I find that rare in academic role models. To me, this shows that it doesn't always have to be: have success and demand respect in this uncomfortable, toxic manner. She is such a supportive person, and I've only met a small handful of people like that in the years that I moved in those academic circles. But you really need those kind of people.

Anna-Lena Oldehus: *Now that you've left the university, how much did your working life change? I'd guess you still work alone most of the time?*

Madita Oeming: It is different now that I'm self-employed but only recently so. I guess I'm not a perfect example as I'm still teaching every now and then. But it's a lot easier to work interdisciplinarily in the media and outside of university. I get invited a lot more to conferences in, for example, the medical field. I'm really enjoying this a lot. My schedule now is quite strange, one day I'm at the erotic fair and the next I'm giving a talk in a therapeutic context. It's both exiting and exhausting to be in so many different worlds at the same time, it's demanding and liberating. Sometimes I feel insecure about having to write in a more accessible, popular science manner and

not in the academic way I'm used to. But overall, I know that I wouldn't be able to do the media work I'm doing now without my academic background. So, I don't regret the path I took.

Anna-Lena Oldehus: *So, would you recommend pursuing a career in academia?*

Madita Oeming: Yes and no, I don't think there is a universal answer to that. It always depends on circumstances, motivation, and the like. Studying is also different from deciding to really work in academia. If you make that choice, I'd always recommend also experiencing something else, maybe getting a job as a waiter or something. Because there are people that do their PhD and never experience life outside of university, and it can be difficult to then connect to 'normal life'. It also gives you another sense of security to know that, through other work experience, you can find employment beyond the restrictive academic field.



Figure 6. Madita Oeming and Anna-Lena Oldehus talk openly about the struggles of academia.

Open Section: Love and Joy

Various Insights into the Relationship between Love and Joy

Jessica Hille, Jia Shen Lim, Nathalie Rennhack, Ahmet Servet, Harishnavi Sriskanthan, and Marielle Tomasic

“When I was a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love” (hooks ix). The simple notion of the love we experience as children grows and changes as we ourselves grow and change; it develops alongside us. We learn that ‘love’ is not a simple entity but rather comes in a multitude of ways. It is complex and beautiful, strong and painful. It can be examined analytically, picked apart at the seams, sewn back together with threads of happiness and joy, tears and sorrow. It is a deeply personal, abstract construct that can only be experienced in an incredibly subjective, yet oddly universal way. We long for love, to love someone, something, anything? We long for someone to love *us* and are willing to endure whatever that might entail. “As we grow we can give and receive attention, affection, and joy. Whether we learn how to love ourselves and others will depend on the presence of a loving environment” (hooks 53). At the end of the day, there is no way to accurately describe what ‘love’ actually is. Describing it would entail *understanding* it. And fully understanding love seems to be almost as impossible as filling eternal happiness into a bottle and taking a sip whenever we feel like it.

Nonetheless, this sense of happiness or joy seems to be intricately intertwined with the notion of love. Without love there cannot be joy. And without joy there cannot be love. “We all long for loving community. It enhances life’s joy” (hooks 140). But joy by itself is just as complex as love. We might understand joy to be synonymous with happiness, but joy can be beauty, beauty can be love, love can be pain – rather confusing, don’t you think? All these entities necessarily take up a large portion of our lives. In their light, we “begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves capable of” (Lorde 57). In this Open Section, we have attempted to bring together the complexities and paradoxes entailed by the notions of love and joy. We have chosen different forms to express what love is, what it does, and what it can be. We have tried to capture the various ways in which love surfaces and attempted to connect it to its intricate joy without losing sight of the complexities of these notions.

The first piece, “An Autotheoretical Approach to Trauma and Love,” captures the painful reckoning with intergenerational trauma and the love and longing that accompany the relationships born out of this trauma. It shows the difficulties of finding a place of one’s own in a new world, with a head full of dreams but without losing the grip on reality. The text expresses the passion, joy, and love that can be found amongst the pain and the trauma with a drive to achieve something



and to build something new, all the while showcasing the impossibility of leaving the past behind, since “even in the worst places one finds beauty” (Hartman 22).

Next, the short story “The Game,” written by Marielle Tomasic, follows two people while they fight their way through a world that does not lovingly open its arms to welcome them in. At its core, the story engages with the following questions: How can those who are not meant to find love, joy, or even acceptance survive the harsh reality that is their life? What do we do when we are not granted a loving community, when day in and day out we are being reminded of not being wanted and not belonging? How can we deal with the pain that comes with this? And is there a way to find joy when we were never meant to do so? “The Game” paints a vision of resistance for those who have always been denied access to love and joy.

The short story is followed by the poem “Big Bright Eyes,” which explores childhood memories from an adult’s point of view. While centering the experiences made as a child, a now-grown woman reflects on change – particularly on how her experience of joy has changed over the years. “Big Bright Eyes” confronts the adult woman with this shift and with her childhood self while she tries to gain back the ease with which she experienced joy as a child.

The curatorial essay “The Photographic Construction of Kissing, Late 19th to Mid-20th Centuries” by Jia Shen Lim asks questions about the illusions that masquerade a kiss shared between a couple in order to lay claim to the idea of love. The text alongside the photographs foremost serves to raise an aesthetic awareness that simultaneously displaces our reality and alters emotions associated with seeing people kiss. Therefore, an art-historical approach to the subject matter adopts qualities beyond its commonly related meanings that are not explicitly expressed.

With their seemingly contradictory nature, the two poems “You” and “Note to Myself” by Jessica Hille demonstrate the ambivalent relationship between love and joy. Being in love means making yourself vulnerable and exposing your deepest emotions; a fear of being hurt. However, it is also a powerful feeling that enables dimensions of joy we might not find elsewhere – this power lies at the heart of “You.” Love is not always tied to a second person, though. “Note to Myself” is a way of processing years of struggling with self-love. It shows that the resulting wounds may never heal completely yet accepting them and finally giving yourself the love you deserve will bring you peace.

Finally, a short piece of writing by Ahmet Servet, titled “Another Attempt: The Chemistry between Love and Joy,” tries to explain the complex relationship between love and joy. Time, experience, reality, truth, and happiness are complementing love and joy. There are no straight roads that may reach the frontiers of love and joy but only intuitions. Souls, locations, and times are dynamic elements; love is unpredictable, it is unique, and it is independent. It is always a mixture of reality and illusion.

Taken together, the contributions to this Open Section break down the dualisms so often associated with concepts of love and joy. Where there is joy, sorrow may not be far away, and love is often closely tied to heartbreak. Just as love and joy so often appear to be feeding of each other, the contributions bring to light the possibilities of love and joy to exist in rougher circumstances. Even if we do not know how to define love and joy, and even when it seems that they have been buried a long time ago, there is always the chance that just when we least expect it, they sneak up on us and surprise us in all their complex yet beautiful ways, making our lives and hearts richer once again.

Author Biographies

Jessica Hille studied English and Geography at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH) to pursue a career in education. After finishing her B.A., she decided to focus on English literature and is now in her third semester of the M.A. program North American Studies. In her previous research, she focused on television and feminist media studies.

Jia Shen Lim is a student in the MA North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). Prior to his enrolment at LUH, he received his BA in Graphic Design and Art History from the University of Hertfordshire, UK, then went on to work as a fashion and art writer for a newspaper. His job was invigorating and fun but it was not enough – intellectually speaking –, so he decided to leave his job to study again. His research interests include gender and transcultural identities in visual art, periodical culture, and the combination of close reading techniques with critical theory.

Nathalie Rennhack is a graduate student of North American Studies and the Teacher Training Program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). In 2021, she received a bachelor's degree in English and Biology from Leibniz University Hannover. Her research interests are in the fields of Gender Studies and women's representations in Early American literature. In her bachelor's thesis, she analyzed the genre markers of sentimental literature and domestic fiction in Sukey Vickery's *Emily Hamilton* with a particular focus on representations of women's mental health.

Ahmet Servet has previously studied International Relations at Eastern Mediterranean University (Turkey) where he received his B.A. as well as an M.A. degree. During his previous studies, he served as a teaching and research assistant for two years. In 2012, Ahmet was part of an Erasmus exchange program at the University of Osnabrück, doing research in Political Science. In 2015, Ahmet joined the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover (FIPH) as an Erasmus exchange student for further research and for attending seminars until September 2016. Ahmet is currently a student in the master's program Atlantic Studies in History, Culture and Society at Leibniz University of Hannover (LUH).

Harishnavi Sriskanthan is a graduate student of North American Studies and the Teacher Training Program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). Her research interests are Early American and Settler Colonial Studies with a focus on inter- and transgenerational (settler) trauma. Moreover, she is interested in African American Studies and Black Feminism, where she is particularly intrigued by Saidiya Hartman's and Marisa Fuentes' works on the archive. In 2021, she received a bachelor's degree in English and German Studies from LUH. Her bachelor's thesis engages with settler colonial trauma in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* with a focus on the spatial and psychological effects of settler trauma and Indigenous erasure that can be found in the novel as a result of its struggle against its own historical context.

Marielle Tomasic is a master student of North American Studies and holds a B.A. in English and Philosophy from Leibniz University Hannover. Besides being a student, she is also an editorial assistant for a publishing house. In her research, she is particularly interested in literature that crosses the boundaries of fact and fiction as well as those between the personal and the theoretical, and thus focuses on studies of autotheory, autofiction, life writing and liminal studies.

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Some Things Remain Forever Unsaid. Others, However, Just Stay Untitled. *An Autotheoretical Approach to Trauma and Love.*

Anonymous

“Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory” (Caruth 151). Trauma in itself is never simple. A simple trauma would be a paradox in itself. *Understanding* trauma is easy. *Experiencing* it, however, recollecting it, trying to grasp and hold on to traumatic memories seems nearly impossible. What kinds of memories are these? Memories of hot weather, of everyone around you looking like you, of being happy, of having a *healthy* family?

Running. Horror. Existential Dread. People in the streets. Parents grabbing their playing children, abandoned toys and vehicles – the *kiramam* turns into a ghost town within seconds. “*Amma*, I’m scared!” *Go hide in the bunker. Quick, grab your passport, else you’re never getting out of here.* Screaming everywhere. Under the ground, in the bunker, four girls huddled together, staring at the suitcase they have always packed in case the house burns down. Each of them wondering to themselves if they packed their most treasured item. The answer is probably no. You can’t lock your life away because it could end every other second – or can you?

“[T]rauma is the confrontation with [...] a history, that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (Caruth 153).

How do you understand a history you don’t possess? A history you can neither place, nor grasp, nor experience – that actually isn’t really there? But ...

If it isn’t there ...

How can it reoccur like a haunting?

How can it haunt you when you are watching a movie, when you are lying in bed, when a plane flies by, when you’re standing still even though the world keeps spinning and the people around you keep moving while you’ve come to a screeching halt?

“Where’s *Amma*?!” “Getting *Ammama*.” “And *Appa*?” “He didn’t make it home in time, pray he found shelter somewhere.”

You are all praying. For *Amma* and *Appa*, for your friends and family, for yourselves. One is thinking about her husband in France, who is waiting for her to follow. The other is silently mourning the education she never got; it was simply too dangerous with all those soldiers in the streets. What will your life be like in 10, 20, 40 years?

boom.

All thoughts are gone. The snakes between your feet, on the walls, on the ceilings, don't matter. Nothing matters. The threatening sound of the planes hovers above and around you. It seems to absorb you.

boom.

Another deafening explosion. You and your sisters cover your ears to soften the unbearable sound.

boom.

Another. More screams. People are crying. Suddenly it is not the bombs anymore, but the sound of gunshots. Where are they coming from? You saw what those bullets can do on your cousin's body. And what their batons can do, when you found him on the floor, mouth full of blood and no more teeth. It doesn't matter, don't cry, we can get you new ones. It's not your fault you were born a minority. The Gods had their reasons.

What am I doing here? Composing a narrative. How can something academic be a narrative? *I don't know*. What even defines what "something academic" means? *I don't know*. I just try to "narrate the unnarratable" (Whitehead 4). By claiming stories that aren't mine, yet these stories compose my entire being – are they mine to claim, then? Or am I appropriating a trauma that was never mine to take?

You are too scared to go out. You would rather stay with the snakes, and spiders, and scorpions. What is waiting on the outside? More blood? More fire? More bodies to bury?

Another crash. You are at a friend's home. Days are blurring and melting into each other, every day is just the same. "QUICK! Get under the bed with me. Didn't your *Appa* teach you to hide under the bed when planes are coming?" But you haven't seen *Appa* in so long, that's not fair. He is away in Saudi, trying to make more money. Having four girls in this time is rough. It's scary to be alone like that, vulnerable, left behind. Dependent on relatives' good graces. Yes, you know it's out of love for you. And yes, you know you're from a well-respected caste but does it matter if no one can pay the dowry for your marriage? Who will pay the dowry if not your parents? The man who hid *Appa's* letters from *Amma* and made you all believe he had died for several months? The relatives who are facing similar troubles with their daughters? The people fleeing west in hope of a better life? *West*. You want to go west, too.

"Trauma carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities" (Whitehead 5). Breaks and edges and a narrative that doesn't make sense. Why does something I cannot see keep me from being coherent? Is it keeping me from being coherent? Or is this just the way this needs to be? How do narratives and traumas and the "non-experience[s]" (5) of a girl come together in another's mind where they struggle to create professional and coherent writing? Where does love and affection and an all-consuming need to protect the ones you would live and die and hurt for, over and over again without realizing what and who you're destroying in your wake, come into play?

West. You are in Germany now. No bombs. No bunkers. No snakes. You still flinch when you hear planes go by. *Didn't you come here in a plane? What an irrational fear.* Suddenly no one looks like you. No one understands you. You don't have the other three girls anymore, you don't have *Amma* or *Appa*, they all left, too. You only have this little boy of yours and your husband – a husband you married for love. A husband you suffered for. Longed for. Cried for when he was dragged away to prison the day you got married. A love that led you to sell your *thali* so you could go *west*. A love you will grow to loathe, that will spark a fire in your mind, an ever-growing feeling of ire and hatred that will plant its seed so deep within you that it will leave you as an empty shell. A love you will grow to regret. You wish you had a little girl of your own. Maybe she could be a doctor, or an engineer. Have an education, make you proud, show the others how far *you* have come. Maybe, just maybe, you will forget that you are in a different country. That your little girl will build her own mind and her own hopes, wishes, and dreams.

You don't understand. *You refuse to see.*
She does not understand. *She refuses to give in.*
They will never understand.

But now, I don't understand either.

Doctor? No, no biology. Rather something creative. Or languages. I like languages. Love languages? Something that helps me express myself. Something that I *love*. That I need and crave and long for. Something that might bring me joy? All those words and thoughts and unnamed phantoms floating through my mind need an outlet.

Trauma, theory, film – no not film, I don't like film. Or do I? Books, race, gender, class, Foucault, Bourdieu – Bourdieu? I have heard of him before. Discourse theory, I very much dislike discourse theory (*that's a trauma from my first term that will most certainly haunt me forever*). Autotheory... something that mixes theory, memory, and autobiography all together and forms something new. A new paper? *Another paper?* Haven't I written enough papers for a lifetime now? What even is a paper? All I do is write and think and write down what I think just so I get to write one more paper and then another paper and then one final paper but actually there are five more papers waiting around the corner. *But I love it so much.* What are papers even made of? What constitutes materiality? Does it really matter?

How and why do you analyze fiction that was written 223 years ago? How do you argue that the girl in the novel had mental issues because of a trauma that occurred before she was born, a trauma she never fully experienced, a trauma that consumed all of her family and left her on the brink of death again and again until there is nothing else to die for, it is all fiction (*but is it?*), it is all in the past (*but is it?*), how does it all matter (*how can it not?*)?

Why do you care about the past, about what is written, about what is *not* written, about what people refuse to tell you, and why are you understanding of people's actions when all it causes you is pain, why do you keep going back even though all you want to do is cease to exist when you hear their screams again?

Well.

Why not? Why would it not matter, why would the war and the trauma and the girl not matter, why would that *ugly, painful, all-consuming love* not matter, why is it that "why?" is always a legitimate

question and “because I want to,” “because I need to,” and “*just because*” never an appropriate answer?

Writing is hard. Never easy. But still, I get lost in it. Lost – like I get in my mind, in my thoughts, in the endless loops of my brain. Lost to an extent that I think “I completely forgot what this was actually all about, does any of this even matter?” Lost in the sources I read, in the films I watch because somehow there is a category of film that, apparently, I do like, lost in my tasks and losing track of time once again – “Weren’t you going to hand that in on Tuesday?”

Yes. I was. And I can’t make my own personal deadline. Once again. But that is okay. Because amidst all the crashes, and explosions, and losses, and tears, and traumas, it is okay that writing is hard. And that it takes longer. And that *I cannot stop loving it*. And that it looks and feels incoherent more often than I would like to admit. Because some things cannot stay untitled. They need names, and structures, and outlines, coherences, and, most importantly – as one might argue (*I am one*) – they cannot show the lack of simplicity your trauma likes to show off.

They are the things that do not go unsaid.

Not forever.

Just –

for a little while ...

... longer.

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The Game

Marielle Tomasic

For K

They were not supposed to be happy.

Seeing them walk the streets of this world, you could already read *other* scrawled all over them. But even in their private spaces, happiness was not supposed to associate with them. This message was written everywhere: on their genes, on the ways in which they had grown up, on the state of the world, even on the tongues of their families and in the depth of their bones. Where there should have been love in their lives, there was absence, and where there should have been joy, there was sorrow.

And how was one supposed to be happy, really, when, from their very first breath, they were shown and told that they were not welcome? Not by the world, and perhaps even less so by their family. Even when something good did happen to Alegria, when something excited them, when there was anything good at all, their siblings made sure to nip it in the bud as soon as Alegria made just the slightest mention of it.

As for Radost ... yes, there had once been happiness, even love, but that belonged to a past life, one that felt like it was part of a story (a fairytale really), but not theirs, one they had been told, not experienced themselves. The world was cruel in that way.

And yet. Somehow, through what could only be called a series of unfortunate events, they had ended up in each other's lives. What united them was the way in which life, they agreed, was not made for them, or they for it, really. How wicked a thing to be thrown into this world, they agreed. They could not imagine anything worse. And yet here they were.

At first, they were simply glad to have found someone who understood the ways in which misery can grab your heart and hold it so tight that you walk around with a constant ache in the left corner of your chest. Someone who understood that, despite this, you depended on sorrow. You depended on it because the very minute it decided to loosen its grip on your heart, there would be nothing that could hold together the millions of pieces into which it had long been shattered by then. Without the pain, there would be nothing left but death. It was easy to see which of the two was the better option, they agreed. How frustrating that they were not even granted this. It appeared that they had no choice but to continue going through the motions, to get up each day, regardless, to put on their masks, to live. They understood that, for people like them, simply being alive was an act of resistance. Of course, they did. They just weren't sure if that was a price worth paying. They were not sure if they were able to sacrifice themselves much longer.

And then, something changed. They saw the other's pain and, they were sure of it, it was the most beautiful thing they had ever experienced. To be allowed to witness. To see behind the shiny surface, which had only ever been a mirror for everyone else's reflection, but, in each other's eyes, had turned to glass.

In the beginning, they tried to fight it, each in their own way.

Alegria had always known herself to be incapable of love.

Radost had always had a habit of loving too much and paying for this with heartbreak. Surely, this was the next unfortunate event awaiting them. They would not be able to make this work, so they did what every reasonable person would have done: They tried to smother their love. Their love resisted. After all, it was just as stubborn as they were. They tried harder. Together, they sat down and came up with lists, strategies, plans. But the harder they tried to push love out of their lives, the softer they became.

One night they found themselves lying together on the soft rug in Radost's living room, plans and ideas scattered around them. Taking in the chaos that surrounded them, Radost was the first to break into tears. "Alegria, what are we going to do? I am trying so incredibly hard, but I cannot help it. I know you had different plans. Leaving the world as quietly as you entered it. Leaving it unchanged. But I fear that it's too late for that." Alegria responded to this with tears that started running down their cheeks silently. In the space that was their and Radost's relationship, something had sneaked inside of Alegria's body, and, silently, replaced the hand that had been gripping their heart so tightly for their entire life. In its place, Alegria now found nothing but this: warmth. Nothing but warmth, and, despite the absence of the cold grip of the hand: aliveness.

"You know what, Radost? My family, damn it, the entire world, would be fuming if they knew about our love. Somehow, I really feel like this is the best revenge for everything that we have been put through, don't you think?" and at this, Radost could not help but break into the kind of laughter one usually leaves behind with their childhood. Belly-aching, soul-caressing, ever-lasting, infectious laughter.

This would be their weapon.

When Alegria was yet again insulted by a client at work, they made extra sure to leave everyone they encountered with a warm feeling in their heart and a smile on their lips.

When Radost was spat at by a stranger at the train station, Alegria and Radost took this as inspiration to start a "who can spit the furthest" contest out in their favorite fields.

When the gray days of fall did not seem to end, and the sun appeared to have been kidnapped by another species, they painted their apartment in the happiest shade of yellow that they could find.

When the heating broke in the depths of winter, they built a fort in the corner of their living room, decorating it with fairy lights, filling it with all the blankets and pillows they could find before cuddling up together with their dogs and the cat that had one day shown up on their doorstep and never since left for longer than a few hours at a time.

When they were overcome by anxiety about the state of the world, Alegria danced through their apartment for hours. They were still dancing when Radost came home from work and, without asking for the cause of the joyous whirls, simply joined Alegria until they both collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep slumber.

When Radost's chronic pain became so intense again that they could no longer hold back their tears and Alegria asked, concern in their voice, what the matter was, Radost replied by breaking into a song:

"I am in paaaaain, oh, so much pain. It hurts so muuuuch, I gotta cryyyyy."

"You are in paaaaain, oh, so much pain. It hurts so muuuuch, you gotta cryyyyy," Alegria immediately tuned in, and they sang with the greatest fervor and turned it into a contest of "how beautiful can we make our pain sound?"

Of course, the world did not stop being cruel. There was no way it ever would, and there was nothing Radost and Alegria could do about this. But they discovered that there was something they could do: For every injustice, for every worry, for every pain, for every bit of misery they encountered, they decided to find ways to increase the joy in their lives. Every single time the world told them that they were not supposed to be happy, they answered: you better bet we are!

It was the most radical thing they could have done.

Author Biography

Marielle Tomasic is a master student of North American Studies and holds a B.A. in English and Philosophy from Leibniz University Hannover. Besides being a student, she is also an editorial assistant for a publishing house. In her research, she is particularly interested in literature that crosses the boundaries of fact and fiction as well as those between the personal and the theoretical, and thus focuses on studies of autotheory, autofiction, life writing and liminal studies.

Big Bright Eyes

Anonymous

What would you do if you could go back in time, back in life?
Looking through those big bright eyes again.
Letting joy sink in deep again,
Letting your heart swell with love again.

What would you do to see what she saw years ago?
Looking through those big bright eyes again.
Feel the dreams in every breath she takes,
Feel the mud with every step she takes.

What do you miss since she left your mind?
Looking through those big bright eyes again.
Joy making her whole warm soul pulsate,
Joy being the shadow that carries all the weight.

What are all the scars you've gained?
Looking through those big bright eyes again.
Wondering about the bliss she felt,
Wondering about the dreams she held.

What would you let her soul endure?
Looking through those big bright eyes again.
Blocking all the tears she'll cry,
Stopping all the screams at night.

What happened to the joy she felt?
Looking through those big bright eyes again.
Blocking out the light she was,
Stopping what she could have had.

Why let guilt rule again?
Let yourself look
through those big bright eyes again.

The Photographic Construction of Kissing, Late 19th to Mid-20th Centuries

Jia Shen Lim

The couple *is*; the couple rarely *are*: this grammatical technicality would suggest that when we ask “what is a couple?” we are talking about two ones that have become a new one and thus should be addressed as an ontological unity. (Brilmyer et al. 223)

“The Photographic Construction of Kissing” contemplates the tension between intimacy, affection, and even antagonism while viewing the ‘couple’ as a unit through various photographic images from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century (see figs. 1-6 included at the end of this article). The trope of ‘kissing’ in photography allows viewers to gaze into others’ reality with a curiosity that also doubles as an intrusion. Yet, we are encouraged to view these photographs with resistance against an avid gaze to re-mystify the kiss, “[as i]f photographs are messages, [and] the message is both transparent and mysterious” (Sontag 86). Be it romantic or platonic, a kiss is an enthralling sight to see that without realizing it, tempts the social voyeur in us. But who is kissing who? And who is allowed to kiss? Does the couple see themselves in similar ways to that of the viewers? Susan Sontag points out that “[p]hotographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote” (127). Thus, despite the fleeting temporality of a kiss, the moment is made to last through photography, as a social documentation that simultaneously enthralls its viewer.

At times, the photographs discussed in this article portray literal expressions of kissing – as in Thomas Edison’s silent film *The Kiss* (1896), also known as the May Irwin Kiss (fig. 1). It is a reenactment of the final scene from the stage musical *The Widow Jones*. The 18-second silent film starring May Irwin and John C. Rice is considered as the first on-screen kiss in cinema, despite only lasting for about two seconds. In another, the literal kiss in Eadweard Muybridge’s *Two Models Shaking Hands and Kissing Each Other* (1887) is part of his larger experiment of motion studies (fig. 2). He invented moving images that capture animals and humans in motion imperceptible to the naked eye.

However, due to the social conventions of the time, Muybridge was restricted from photographing naked men in the same frame as naked women. The Muybridge Online Archive states that this is because “Victorians were extremely sexually prudish by modern standards and commonly considered male homosexuality a serious threat to their society [because] they believed women had little or no sex drive” (qtd. in Zolfagharifard). Additionally, Muybridge’s staging of women in their private moments can be understood as erotic. Cresswell argues that contrary to how the men that Muybridge photographed were being portrayed, women, however, “enact

curious interactions that come close to reflecting standard pornographic male fantasies of harems” (65).

On a similar note of staging photography, in *Antiseptic Kisses in Hollywood*, actors Betty Furness and Dennis Morgan (also known as Stanley Morner and Richard Stanley) pose for the cover of *Look* magazine during the flu epidemic in 1937 to promote the comedy film *Mama Steps Out* and also give the audience a behind-the-scenes of its rehearsal (fig. 3). “To fool the flu, during a recent epidemic, movie kisses were rehearsed behind antiseptic masks. Since each kiss must be rehearsed about 20 times before the cameras turn, it was said that four out of five flu germs would be prevented from spreading” (“Kissing and How It’s Done” 41). The photograph reminds us of how eerily familiar it is in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic and how it engages us to be critical of the kiss. One could argue that rehearsing a kissing scene while wearing a mask is counter-productive but amidst the irony, there is an underlying comic effect within the photograph that speaks to our otherwise restrictive times.

Elsewhere, what appears to be a romantic kiss between a couple to celebrate Japan’s surrender during World War II in New York’s Time Square on August 14, 1945, was, in fact, non-consensual. Alfred Eisenstaedt’s *V-J Day in Times Square* (1945) captures a young U.S. navy sailor impulsively grabbing and kissing a stranger in a white uniform (fig. 4). For the longest time, many came forth claiming to be in the photo, but it has been concluded in various interviews and consultations that George Mendonsa and dental assistant Greta Friedman is most likely the true pair. In an interview in 2005, Friedman said, “I felt he was very strong, he was just holding me tight, and I’m not sure I – about the kiss because, you know, it was just somebody really celebrating. But it wasn’t a romantic event. It was just an event of thank God the war is over. It wasn’t my choice to be kissed. The guy just came over and kissed or grabbed me” (Friedman). The advent of the #MeToo movement has prompted a reevaluation of the kiss, despite Friedman stating that the kiss was a “jubilant act.”

After Friedman’s passing in 2016, her son told the *New York Times* that his mother understood it as a case of an assault but did not view the kiss negatively as a matter of course (Rosenberg). Speaking on behalf of a photographer’s point of view, Sontag says that it does not matter what people see, “having a camera has transformed [the photographer] into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation [...]. It is an Event: something worth seeing—and therefore worth photographing” (Sontag 7). Here, we can conclude that the event – the kiss – stimulates Eisenstaedt’s active voyeuristic impulse, but we may also argue that the photograph similarly does so in rendering viewers as passive voyeurs, just like the spectators seen in the photograph who are very much aware of the pair kissing but without the ambition of a photographer. Thus, photographers “set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events” and their photographs allow viewers to experience the event as if they are participating (Sontag 7).

Shifting to a more figurative depiction, Man Ray’s *The Kiss* (1922) is a camera-less photogram (or Rayograph, as Man Ray called it) of him and his former lover Kiki de Montparnasse, created by placing different objects that acted as stencils on a sheet of photosensitive paper (fig. 5). Sontag regards Man Ray’s rayographs as “marginal exploits in the history of photography” (40). The artist juxtaposes a pair of hands, a pair of heads kissing and two darkroom trays, then exposes the paper to the light three times, with each exposure outlining their silhouettes in a gradation of negative tones. All things considered – the visual cues, the anonymous identities of the figures, and the clear artwork title – we are then left with Man Ray’s repertoire in his manipulation of photography’s surreal and avant-garde elements. Sontag reminds us that “[s]urrealism lies at the

heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naive – the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be” (40). Therefore, at the same time that May Ray blurs the line between the representational and abstraction in his rayograph, one may ask what purpose does the pair of hands serve in the image?

Lastly, Edward Weston’s *Pepper No. 30* (1930) occupies a similar line of thought that straddles between literal and abstract representations, in which the photograph has become one of Weston’s best-known works (fig. 6). When *Pepper No. 30* was made, Weston had already started working on his “still life” series as early as 1927. His partner at the time, Sonya Noskowiak, brought home several green peppers, and for four days from August 2–6, 1930, Weston shot at least thirty different negatives using different backdrops such as plain muslin and white cardboard but was unsatisfied with the results. *Pepper No. 30* “[is] by far the best,” he describes in his book *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, “[i]t is a classic, completely satisfying, – a pepper – but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter. It has no psychological attributes, no human emotions are aroused: this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind” (181). Weston suggests signs of a surrealist modernist at work when photographing the pepper placed inside a tin tunnel. Despite the flatness of the printed photograph, there is three-dimensionality as light within the funnel reflects against the pepper, accentuating the contour of the oddly-shaped and voluptuous form of the fruit that resembles a couple intertwining with each other.

However, Weston himself has voiced his frustration with descriptions that filled his peppers with sexual undertones, noting that “[t]he peppers which are more libeled than anything I have done, in them has been found vulvas, penises or combinations, sexual intercourse, madonna with child, wrestlers, modern sculpture, African carving, ad nauseum, according to the state of mind of the spectator: and I have a lot of fun sizing people up from their findings” (225). It is arguably true that *Pepper No. 30* does not illustrate a couple or a pair of individuals. Still, the human brain has a penchant for imagination to seek forms and attach meanings to abstraction. One cannot help but entertain such vivid imaginations of the brain and see the resemblance of a nude couple embracing each other, just like the romantic marble sculpture of Auguste Rodin’s *The Kiss* (1882).



Figure 1. Film still of *The Kiss* (1896), Thomas Edison.



Figure 2. Animal Locomotion, Plate Number 444. Two Models Shaking Hands and Kissing Each Other (1887), Eadweard Muybridge.



Figure 3. Antiseptic Kisses in Hollywood (1937), from *Look magazine*.

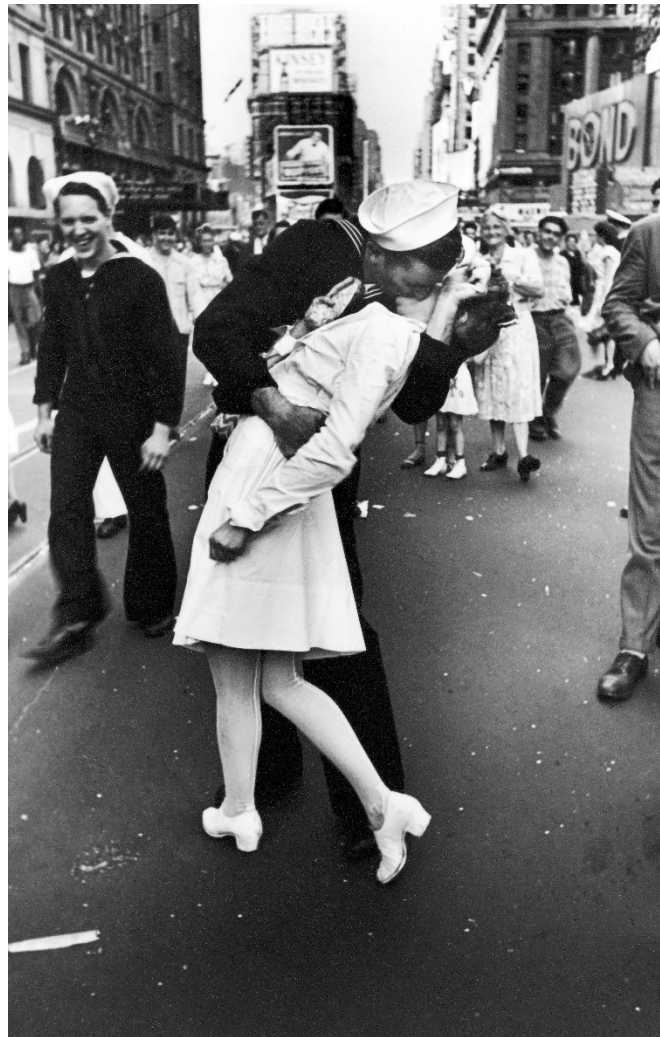


Figure 4. V-J Day in Times Square (1945), Alfred Eisenstaedt.



Figure 5. Rayograph, The Kiss (1922), Man Ray.

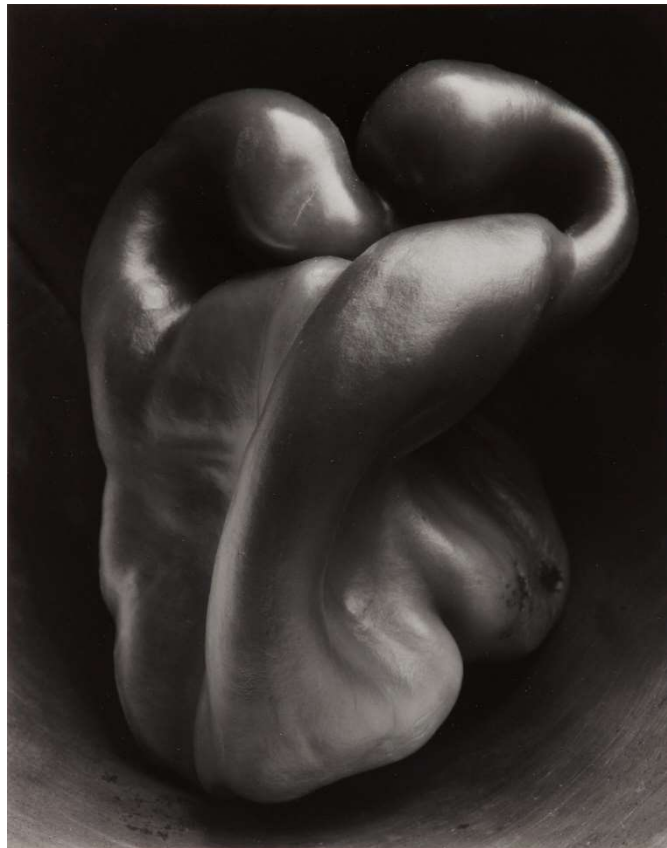


Figure 6. Pepper No. 30 (1930), Edward Weston.

Author Biography

Jia Shen Lim is a student in the MA North American Studies program at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH). Prior to his enrollment at LUH, he received his BA in Graphic Design and Art History from the University of Hertfordshire, UK, then went on to work as a fashion and art writer for a newspaper. His job was invigorating and fun but it was not enough – intellectually speaking –, so he decided to leave his job to study again. His research interests include gender and transcultural identities in visual art, periodical culture, and the combination of close reading techniques with critical theory.

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- Figure 2. Eadweard Muybridge, from *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements, Volume IV, Women (Nude)*. Plate Number 444. Two Models Shaking Hands and Kissing Each Other, 1887. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.220592.html>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.
- Figure 3. Anonymous photographer, *Antiseptic Kisses in Hollywood* from *Look* magazine, U.S., 1937. Internet Archive: Look v01n12 "[1937-08-03] (BONES)" by zatoichi01 is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.
- Figure 4. Alfred Eisenstaedt, *V-J Day in Times Square*, first published in *Life* magazine, U.S., 27 Aug. 1945. Openverse: "Alfred Eisenstaedt" by urcameras is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.
- Figure 5. Man Ray, *The Kiss*, 1922. Openverse: "The Kiss" by www.brevestoriadelcinema.org is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.
- Figure 6. Edward Weston, *Pepper No. 30*, 1930. Openverse: "[W] Edward Weston - Pepper (1930)" by Cea. is marked with CC BY 2.0. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

you

Jessica Hille

they say love is blind
yet only now am I able to see
a look at myself in the mirror
that is: you
did I know love before?
or was I blindfolded

they say love is pain
yet past wounds seem forgotten
a new, blank piece of paper
empty lines waiting for ink
allowing for a new kind of vulnerability
all this room for a pain yet unknown

they say love will save your soul
how could it not?
its pieces I seemed to have lost
found, recognized, known by you
put them back together, not realizing
they're all yours

I don't know the truth about love
I know we'll find our own
love, to me,
is you
has always been
you

note to myself

Jessica Hille

you spent all these days, years, decades
fighting
using every bit of energy
as if it were a competition
that you didn't want to lose

—
but the truth is, you lost
only now do you see
the battlefield you stood on all this time
hidden in the shape of your body
(in)visible

—
these kinds of wounds don't heal easily
do they ever?
can't fix them, so accept them
paint that flag white and raise it

Author Biography

Jessica Hille studied English and Geography at Leibniz University Hannover (LUH) to pursue a career in education. After finishing her B.A., she decided to focus on English literature and is now in her third semester of the M.A. program North American Studies. In her previous research, she focused on television and feminist media studies.

Another Attempt: The Chemistry between Love and Joy

Ahmet Servet

There is no time and there has never been time, indeed. It is all about the imagination. It is all about the senses, they say. At the opposite extreme, it might also have been regarded as totally the other way around by many others. Can anything be real? Or is it all about an illusion? Raising a hand, and uttering a “Who tells the truth?” In the everlasting process of continuity and diligence until the wagons arrive at the next station. Time is an imperative to those who are perpetually moving and acting until the next challenge appears. Wait a second; but is this feasible? They tend to say “Love makes it possible” – at least in an illusionary way. To make this happen, there needs to be passion, determination, confidence, trustworthiness, hard work, intelligence. This illusion brings one’s soul into the frontiers of other souls. The doors are never open to those who wait. Then comes the next hurdle: the pursuit of joy and happiness. It resembles mining. The everlasting struggle to search for and imagine and feel illusionary items in the never thoroughly explored ocean of joy, happiness, love ... and in the end? Disappointment or achievements? In the end temporary or permanent states of ‘joy and love’ dancing together hand in hand, day by day, through the dawn of new days and future hurdles?

To the ones who have reached those high hills, the deepest levels of the oceans, and uninhabited valleys: Does experience matter or is the story always different for those who seek love and joy simultaneously? Let us put coincidence into the equation to make things more miserable. What comes first and what follows afterward? When love appears first, is it a precondition to arrive at the valley of joy? Is there a formula that brings us to the solutions in a straightforward manner? In the pursuit of love and joy, one may need to struggle against the hurdles created by nature itself. Nature is the last thing to blame. Love is floating in the air, where the portions of joy and happiness also disperse. Therefore, it is not usually very easy to find the right chemistry between love and joy in the age of uncertainty and environmental hurdles. Henceforth, optimism struggles against pessimism once again; everything is more complex and complicated than ever.

Like those century-old texts that were found under the *terra incognita*. They offer answers to our curiosity in various ways. Resembling amendments made in the constitutions and laws; how about the rules and laws of love, joy, and happiness? One of the probable answers that might be put



forward is: The relationship between love and joy is in an everlasting changing process, hence it is dynamic. Stories tell the truth and imagine truth about love and joy, and each piece of text about it takes one step forward towards knowing more about love and joy. There has never been a unique formula that offers permanent solutions about the relationship between love and joy. Therefore, the hints and lessons love and joy provide to us are interesting and the outcomes or lessons mean different things to different human beings. The pursuit of love and joy has been reconstructing itself through different souls, locations, times, and personalities.

Author Biography

Ahmet Servet has previously studied International Relations at Eastern Mediterranean University (Turkey) where he received his B.A. as well as an M.A. degree. During his previous studies, he served as a teaching and research assistant for two years. In 2012, Ahmet was part of an Erasmus exchange program at the University of Osnabrück, doing research in Political Science. In 2015, Ahmet joined the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover (FIPH) as an Erasmus exchange student for further research and for attending seminars until September 2016. Ahmet is currently a student in the master's program Atlantic Studies in History, Culture and Society at Leibniz University of Hannover (LUH).