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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Readers,

It gives us great pleasure to present the 9th Volume of The Channel Undergraduate Review. Since 2008, this journal has been proud to shed a spotlight on outstanding academic work being produced in all three English undergraduate streams—English Literature, Drama & Theatre, and Cultural Studies. Following a tumultuous few years, it is heartening to see that nothing—not even a pandemic—can put a halt to the exceptional products of McGill's Department of English. Volume 9 includes something for everyone. The rich thematic variety of our 2022 selections demonstrate the variety in critical frameworks that make up our student body. Each piece offers new and engaging critical insight.

We hope you indulge in these carefully composed works as much as we have. We would like to kindly thank our brilliant writers, our extraordinary editorial staff, and all those who take pleasure in reading their stupendous work. Thank you to the Arts Undergraduate Society for their generous support, and to the Department of English Student Association for collaborating with us to make this issue possible.

Sincerely,
Fernanda Rengel and Sarah Ford
Co-Editors in Chief

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RESIDENT EVIL: DEBT, ZOMBIES, AND THE SUBPRIME MORTGAGE CRISIS

PETER BALL

Edited by Ben Schneider and Justin Shen

It's not a zombie novel without boarded-up windows. Throw in a kook in the basement who thinks boarding up windows is a waste of time, maybe a few zombie hands reaching between the boards, and then busting them apart at the moment of climax, and you have yourself a zombie genre hit. But in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis, when Colson Whitehead's 2011 zombie novel *Zone One* was written, boarded-up windows were more likely to be associated with foreclosure than home defence. As Annie McClanahan argues in her book *Dead Pledges*, amid media reports of "zombie mortgages" and "Frankenstein"-like financial products, it is unsurprising that cultural texts of the early 2010s took up the gothic horror of the financial crisis (McClanahan 143). *Zone One*, with its pre-apocalyptic past of free-floating credit, and its musings on the state of housing in a post-apocalyptic present where "gentrification [has] resumed" (Whitehead 35), shows the tell-tale signs of an end-of-the-world text concerned with the world's recent brush with a near-Great-Depression-level economic rupture. On this point, Whitehead himself has demurred, stating only that he took an interest in the more general "boom and bust" cycles that have characterised New York City in his lifetime (Colbert). Nevertheless, I will demonstrate how *Zone One*, on its own terms, serves undeniably as an allegory and response to the financial crisis; in the book's reflections on the pre-apocalypse, a night at the casino symbolises the global economic system of free flowing credit, and a scene in a New York apartment satirises the hazy plurality of credit-fueled consumption and ownership; in the post-apocalypse, government efforts to secure the wealth and property of elites, as well as corporate attempts to capitalise on the sudden surplus of empty homes, parallel the bail-outs and opportunism in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis. Finally, in reading the novel's ending, I address *Zone One*'s vision of the future in the context of anti-capitalist scholarship of the recession, demonstrating how Whitehead reckons with the contradictions of a time that demands radical political action while threatening people's very survival.

Zombies and capitalism have been linked ever since the original Haitian folk tales, which expressed the anxieties of free slaves over the possibility of a return to enslavement and being literal human capital. In these tales, Vodou sorcerers would curse people who committed suicide, reanimating them as slaves who would work the plantation fields at night in perpetuity (Heneck 65). In *The Zombie Manifesto*, Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry note how in this myth, the zombie represents both the

slave and slave rebellion (Lauro and Embry 98); in its appropriation by Hollywood, it has been modulated such that it now represents "the capitalist worker, but also the consumer" (Lauro and Embry 99). By the time George Romero's classic *Dawn of the Dead* is released in 1978, the zombie's folkloric roots are fully severed, with Dawn's mall-bound zombies instead staging a critique of Americans as consumerist drones. An important consequence of this shift is that the zombie no longer has the means to free itself, as the rebellion does to the slave, but only the ability to facilitate the production of more zombies, as the worker does to the consumer. This shift marks the zombie as a pessimistic figure in modern anti-capitalist literature. In *Capitalist Realism*, for example, Mark Fisher describes capital as a "zombie-maker" where "the living flesh it converts into dead labour is ours, and the zombies it makes are us" (Fisher 15). The zombie has also been seen as an apt metaphor for late-stage capitalism, where the shift from material production to financialization finds parallels in the zombies who are "already-exhausted sources of value… that have been entirely consumed and cast aside" (Shaviro 286), but, I would add, have been reanimated through the spectre of speculative investment. Scholarship of *Zone One* has often figured the novel as a response to capitalist forces: Theodore Martin connects the novel's self-aware and sarcastic deployment of genre tropes to its critique of the monotony of modern work, and Erica Sollazzo brilliantly details the book's connections to both 9/11 and the financial crisis. My work in this paper extends this scholarship by deploying Annie McClanahan's thesis in *Dead Pledges* that post-financial crisis cultural texts articulated their response to the financial crisis through a focus on consumer debt, thus linking both the global financial markets that relied on securitized debt for their growth, and the personal crises that resulted when it came time for those debts to be paid (McClanahan 4).

On his last night before the apocalypse, Mark Spitz visits an Atlantic City casino with his friend: the scene serves as a ripe metaphor for the decades of financial deregulation in the global financial system that led to the 2008 collapse. The neoliberal turn that led to the Great Recession is characterised by an increased reliance on credit, both to offset the rising cost of living in a time of wage stagnation and to fuel new securitized debt products whose sale was an increasingly important source of capital in a waning industrial economy (McClanahan 145). Neoliberal ideology downplayed the risk of growing consumer debt and risky investment in

debt-based products by promoting the fantasy of free-flowing credit and the gamification of market forces (McClanahan 146). *Zone One* stages this free-flow of credit through "chips," a marker of unrealized gain, that structure the internal economy of the casino, with Mark "[tipping] the waitresses in chips" (81). Chips flatten value—every chip is the same size, regardless of worth—and as a result are designed to encourage speculative investment (e.g., gambling on a dice roll) rather than hedging one's bets and exchanging the chips at the casino bank. The casino's chips reflect the shift away from risk-averse banking with deposit-financed mortgages towards riskier practises where lending institutions funded mortgages through the very sale of securitized mortgage debt to global speculators (McLanahan 146). Importantly, the casino structure implicates everyone in risky financial speculation: by receiving their tips in chips, the waitresses are drawn into the gamified economy and may be encouraged to try their fortunes at the table rather than take the money and run.

The scene does more than just restage the economics of free market capitalism; through imagery of separateness and artificiality, the scene accesses the dissociative, demarcated psychology of a neoliberal state. This push towards risk is the very appeal of the casino, and its greatest power: Mark and his friend "[do] not want," the casino meeting their every need while their brains "[fog] over as possibility and failure [enthral] them in a perpetual and tantalising loop" (82). This passage reflects the cosy comforts of neoliberal capitalism, both in terms of the lavish materialism that credit affords and the game-like free-market principles that made bankers comfortable with the increasingly absurd amount of risk they were introducing into the system. Imagery of restriction emphasises how the self-contained logic of free-market capitalism constrains the imagination. The limits of the casino are clearly demarcated, with the gaming house described as both an "enclosure" and an "artificial habitat" (81-82). Both images bear undertones of animal husbandry, suggesting the predatory undercurrents of this system: Mark and his friend are ultimately human capital to be consumed. The constraint also leads to a blindness, with Mark and his friend "[receiving no] news from the outside" (83). This foreboding end to the scene echoes the neoliberal psychology that created the conditions for the financial crisis by obscuring material conditions in favour of an artificial perimeter around a simplistic optimism.

Alongside allegorizing the dangerous economic structures that led to the financial crisis, the casino scene alludes to the cycle of waxing and waning superpowers that fuels capitalist growth. The casino is in an autumnal stage, “emptier than it had been on their earlier missions” with “roulette stands shrouded in plastic,” and is in competition with a new generation of casinos that “burst from the gaping rebar-studded lots where the past-prime establishments had stood” (82). This sense of death and rebirth maps onto an oscillatory pattern in capitalism noted by Giovanni Arrighi, whereby an imperial power will gain hegemonic power through material capital, which, once the material is exhausted, necessitates a turn to financialization as a source of continued growth. In the final stages of this financialization, the hegemon enters a period of crisis and is replaced by a new power with a hand on a new source of material capital. This cycle has played out over the past 400 years, with capitalist power shifting from Italy to the Netherlands to Britain and most recently the United States (McClanahan 14). Accordingly, the passage emphasises the materiality of the new casinos (the lots they stand on) and the lack of participation in the financial system of the old casino (lack of patrons), as well as the old casino’s material decline, with its shuttered roulette table playing the role of the shuttered factory. The passage complicates the above idea by situating the old casinos on the very same lots as their predecessors; this suggests on how imperial power often sourced new pools of material capital not only by finding new populations to exploit, but also by developing new technologies to better exploit the labour of an already subjugated people. In the end, Mark and his friend do not make plans to attend the new casino, wondering if they have “outgrown these enthusiasms,” if their times at the casino are indeed “dead” and they are now becoming aware of “new circumstances” (83). In these musings, Mark questions the viability of the cycle of capitalist production going forward. Modern Marxists have proposed the “value critique,” which argues that late-twentieth century advancements in labour productivity signal an end to capitalism, because all possible material sources of profit have been exhausted (McClanahan 15). This “terminal crisis” is perhaps what Mark is noticing: a movement not towards another iteration of the capitalist feeding frenzy, but the death of that system, and a shift to something new.

Zone One takes up not only the destructive economic system that produced the financial crisis, but also the uncanny form of ownership that a credit-fueled economy

produces. In the hazy plurality of Mark's uncle's apartment, *Zone One* shows how credit consumerism changes ownership from a singular life-long relationship to a state of constant newness. Mark's uncle owns a condo in Manhattan, and outfits it with all the latest gadgets. Everything in his uncle's apartment is represented in the plural: an endless stream of the latest and greatest "televisions" are controlled by a limitless supply of "remotes" (4), and a ceaseless rotation of "girlfriends" transport seltzer water and question Mark about a carousel of "monster movies" (5). By focusing on the plurality of the uncle's material possessions, the text uncouples ownership from the possession of one specific thing, emphasising instead a capacity to possess a class of objects in its newest form. This form of ownership reveals a truth about credit-fueled consumption: when credit gives us the option to make large purchases without saving up or, especially in a deregulated savings and loans industry, even provide evidence that we will pay for it in the future, our commitment to objects is inverted; we get the object and then proceed to pay it off, such that when we have paid for it, the logical option is now to get something new. By applying this consumerist ownership logic not only to televisions but also to girlfriends, the passage reveals the interplay of consumerism and the objectification of women: the apartment is "equipped with rotating bosomy beauties" (6) centring access to women's bodies on the uncle's ability to own a fancy downtown apartment. The girlfriends are also workers, carting seltzer water to and fro, revealing how easily these ownership principles can extend from individual ownership of things to the corporate ownership of people's labour.

The scene's ample body horror imagery realises the anxious incompleteness of modern home ownership. The cityscape Mark beholds oozes with gore: air-conditioning ducts are "hunkered and coiled on the striving high-rises, glistening like extruded guts," while building interiors are "butchered," their "bones melted down to help their replacements surpass them" (5-6). The language reflects the violence of gentrification, as well as the unnatural quality of the modern high rise; their reflective exterior and generic "white-walled" (6) interior make clear that buying a condo in downtown Manhattan is about accumulating debt in service of an immaterial idea, rather than paying cash for a physical reality. This immateriality is manifested when Mark describes the physical sensation of standing in the high-rise as "floating" (7). Meanwhile, the buildings chop the residents up into a kaleidoscope of body parts,

featuring a pair of “splayed pinstriped legs,” “half a lady’s torso,” and “a fist trembling on a titanium desk” (6). Not only are the buildings chopped up, but the residents are too, the landscape of urban real-estate rending them limb from limb, echoing the way in which mortgage-backed securities allowed homeowner’s debt to be chopped up and sold off to speculative investors looking for a hot new asset class. By centering this uncanny, precarious ownership in the body, the novel shows how these impersonal structures produce material wounds in the people pressed into them. Of course, the body horror on display here is clearly also a foreshadowing of the impending zombie apocalypse and the guts and gore that it entails. This raises an important question: why the zombie genre? To answer this question, we must move away from these pre-apocalyptic allegories for the social ills that produced the financial crisis, and consider the post apocalypse which concerns much of the book.

Despite their deep insight, these pre-apocalyptic moments make up only a tiny portion of the novel; rather than the conditions that produced the crisis, *Zone One* proves far more interested in what happens in its wake. The provisional government that arises in Buffalo following the apocalypse displays a protectorial relationship to corporations that echoes both the expectation in neoliberal theory that the government exists in service of the market, and the material realities of government bailouts in the fallout from the subprime mortgage crisis. A central insight of Foucault’s account of neoliberalism is that in dismantling the social state and reducing government regulation, it does not advocate for a world *without* government; rather, it aspires to a government that exists as a steward of the market, oriented on market principles, and also available to rescue a market in crisis (Brown 20). In keeping with its allegorical rendering of pre- and post-crisis neoliberalism, one of the first rules we learn about in the novel is the provisional government’s edict that no product may be looted from the dead city’s endless derelict stores unless it has first been sponsored by the corporation that manufactured it (48). The sponsorships are on one level a sarcastic joke about corporate philanthropy, the empty promise Mark Fisher identified in contemporary social justice fundraising that consumerism can solve the ills of society if we buy the “right products” (Fisher 15). Within the framework of allegorizing the financial crisis, however, the sponsorships also stand for the rescue of the corporate class, predicted by critics of neoliberalism and borne out in the decision by governments around the globe to inject

unprecedented levels of cash into collapsing markets and corporations rather than providing direct assistance to citizens.

In addition to restaging the bailout of corporate interests by a neoliberal government, the novel also features corporate and individual opportunism that brought about a sudden increase in housing stock, echoing the nihilistic investments in foreclosed houses that took place following the subprime mortgage crisis. In the years after the financial crisis, private equity and hedge funds spent $36 billion buying foreclosed homes across the United States with the goal of renting them out to the millions of Americans who had themselves been victims of foreclosure. At the time, this cold-hearted tactic was couched in a thick layer of optimism, with lofty goals of stabilising housing markets and "professionalizing" the landlord sector with 24/7 availability (Semuels). A similar optimism is at play in the rhetoric of *Zone One*'s provisional government regarding their own project to repossess millions of homes lost due to societal collapse. The effort to clear out Manhattan real estate is called the "reboot," and the new subjugated class doing this work is the "American Phoenix;" indeed, one of *Zone One*'s main crossovers with the rest of Whitehead's canon is its persistent interest in marketing language. But beneath this glossy image lies working-class anxiety and morally fraught violence. Sweepers, the civilian units in charge of clearing New York City of remaining zombies, are wary of committing mysterious crimes like "defenestration" forcefully put in place by the government to make "the city habitable for the new tenants" (75). Despite the surplus of available housing, the sweepers are unsure if they themselves will be those tenants, with Mark's sweeping partner Gary declaring "they're going to put the rich people here" (89). These tensions reflect the fears of rampant gentrification after the financial crisis, and the sense of powerlessness that comes along with a loss of home ownership and a thrust into the tenant class. There is also of course the violent process by which the government takes command of these apartments, killing the non-violent "straggler" zombies who haunt their former houses; this forced removal of a shell-shocked class generated by a recent crisis has strong parallels with the forced evictions and repossessions that took place in the wake of the financial crisis.

While the past and present of *Zone One* align very clearly with both empirical fact and canonical theory on the Great Recession, the novel's ending diverges from the

utopic anti-capitalist theories popular during the occupy movement, while still developing a radical and prescient vision. On one level, the ending is a despairing picture of the prospects of a positive new direction after the financial crisis. At the end of the novel, the provisional government falls, as the island of Manhattan is overwhelmed by a horde of the dead. Mark Spitz has “the forbidden thought” (318), which we understand to be giving in to the end of the world and committing suicide by zombie. Mark considers swimming across the Hudson River to safety, but ultimately chooses to “walk into the sea of the dead” (322). Join the horde—a nihilistic conclusion to be sure, and not lost on the book’s critics. Theodore Martin, for example, argues that the book’s take on capitalism is a two-layered pessimism: on one level, the novel’s lesson can be summarised in an oft-quoted line, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (quoted in Martin 184), but on another level, by self-consciously writing in a generic and non-specific manner, Whitehead mocks those who would find anything new in this conclusion; this leaves us with the hope neither of escaping the confines of capitalism, nor of finding any new ways to critique it (Martin 184). Mark Spitz’s urge toward suicide gains additional horror due to its resonance with the original Haitian myth, where suicide was the precursor to zombification. Suicide doomed an enslaved person to an eternity of enslavement; that Mark not only gives in, but under Martin’s formulation has no choice but to give in, makes his enlistment in the ranks of the dead a bitter commentary on the modern worker and consumer’s absolute subjugation.

But *Zone One* also emerges from a context when left-wing theory was optimistic on the affordances of the financial crisis for an anti-capitalist future, and makes space alongside the aforementioned pessimism for a radical and prescient vision of what the future after 2008 could be. Mark Fisher, while believing the bank bailouts demonstrated such beliefs to be “unfounded,” nevertheless concluded that “neoliberalism [had], in every sense, been discredited” (Fisher 77), and the moment made room for a “genuinely revitalized left” that could break from well-trodden terrain of historical leftist movements and reassert itself as a real solution to the problems neoliberalism purports to solve (Fisher 71-81). These optimistic notes are present in the book’s ending too; the dead are a multi-racial, classless mob, with “every race, color, and creed … represented in this congregation” (303); their takeover of downtown Manhattan has resonance with the Occupy Movement that

would follow not long after the book was published. Whitehead makes space for this reading in a passage near the end of the novel, in which he invites us to "let the cracks between things widen until they [are] no longer cracks but the new places for things.… The world wasn't ending: it had ended and they were in the new place" (321). This passage emphasises the newness that rupture affords, the tectonic shifts made possible when all systems collapse. In providing this more optimistic reading, *Zone One* manages to hold two things at once: both the gritty realism necessary to survive the depths of economic abjection the crisis unleashed globally, and the giddy, unfettered dreaming that led people to take to the streets in revolution at a time of great personal struggle.

Zone One is an allegory ripe for its time, artfully capturing both the foolhardy economic structures that led to the financial crisis and its material and psychological consequences. In its vision of the future, the novel manages to hold up both the grim real-world prospects and the sanguine dreams at play. Unlike many of Whitehead's previous allegories, this appears to be unintentional: *Zone One* is no *Apex Hides The Hurt*, the tepid reception of which Whitehead jokingly paraphrased as "oh, another racial allegory from the racial allegory guy" (Klein). Instead, Whitehead generally speaks of *Zone One* as more of an exploration of genre – of the things he found particularly interesting about zombies as a long-time George Romero fan (Colbert). Yet on its own terms (and perhaps influenced by its particularly symbolic genre), *Zone One* is the parable Whitehead never intended to write. It is also his last: the three novels that followed, *Underground Railroad*, *Nickel Boys*, and *Harlem Shuffle* all move away from the allegorical writing that he began with in his career. *Underground Railroad* is often discussed as the "turning point" in Whitehead's oeuvre, when he moved from highbrow literary fiction to more straightforward, historical fiction. Perhaps *Zone One* too serves as a turning point, a transition novel from his explicit allegory to a Whitehead who plays it straight. In a time of extreme economic uncertainty, not to mention a real-live pandemic, perhaps in his upcoming work Whitehead's unconscious economic allegory will be reanimated.

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JEWISH-CANADIAN IDENTITY IN LEONARD COHEN'S "THE LAST DANCE AT THE FOUR PENNY"

SAM SHEPHERD

Edited by Leslie Carmelotes and Justin Shen

Between 1947 and 1952, several thousand Holocaust survivors, many of them children, arrived in Montreal, Quebec and settled in the working-class wards of the Lower Plateau. The existing Jewish population established social services, such as the Jeanne Mance House and the Jewish Public Library, to integrate these refugees (Sheftel and Zembrzycki 20). Later in the decade, Jewish-Canadians who had arrived earlier in the century began migrating westward in the city. With more financial capital, more established Jewish families resettled in Montreal suburbs, like Westmount and Côte Saint-Luc (Troper 42-43). Amidst these changes in the Montreal Jewish community, poet Leonard Cohen began composing many of the poems that would eventually make up his first published book of poetry, *The Spice Box of Earth*, in 1961 (Simmons 76). Cohen's poem "The Last Dance at the Four Penny" demonstrates the Montreal Jewish community's connection to their heritage in the aftermath of immigration, the Holocaust, and assimilation into Canadian culture. By writing a text that celebrates Eastern European Jewish culture in a Canadian setting, Cohen asserts that the Jewish people have preserved and revived their traditional identity in the modern world.

The speaker begins each stanza by addressing Irving Layton by a different name, which illustrates how Canadian Jews are connected to their past. Poet Irving Layton was born Israel Lazarovitch in an insular, Romanian small town in 1912. When he was a baby, his family immigrated to Montreal, where they anglicized their names to assimilate into the immigrant community of Saint-Urbain. During Cohen's time at McGill University in the early 1950s, he befriended Layton, who was working for McGill at the time as a member of faculty (Simmons 42-43). In the first stanza, the speaker refers to his friend as "Layton," which establishes the initial setting of the poem as the present day. However, as the poem progresses, Layton gradually transforms into his former, Eastern European self in the eyes of the speaker. In the second stanza, the speaker refers to his friend as "Layton, my friend Lazarovitch," which confirms that Layton still possesses traces of his Jewish roots. The subsequent line "no Jew was ever lost" corroborates that Layton has still retained his innermost religious identity after decades of assimilation. Then, by the third and final stanza, the speaker has envisioned Layton as his past self wholeheartedly, as the speaker exclaims, "Reb Israel Lazarovitch / you no-good Roumanian, you're right!" By referring to Layton directly in his complete Hebrew name, the speaker communicates

that Layton has totally transitioned into his former self. The Hebrew prefix “Reb” denotes an Orthodox man of honour, which implies that Layton has maintained his high esteem and proud connection to his Jewish spirituality. Likewise, the speaker refers to Layton as a “no-good Roumanian.” The spelling of “Roumanian” as opposed to the more modernized “Romanian” indicates that Layton is connected to a distinctly historical vision of Judaism belonging to Eastern European tradition. In a similar vein, the term “no – good” evokes the attitude of a parent scolding a child for being transgressive, as if the speaker is teasing Layton for attempting to abandon or hide his heritage. The gradual, reverse name-change in the poem acts as a slow unravelling of Layton’s Jewish identity. While the speaker begins the poem seeing Layton as a secular man and poet in Montreal, he ends as a religious man of honour in Eastern Europe. Cohen writes this poem in the context of attending a prestigious Canadian university alongside Layton, a fellow English-speaking academic, generations after his family immigrated. Layton’s immigration also occurred during a tremendous wave of immigration of Eastern European Jews to Montreal during the early 1900s, many of whom settled in Saint-Urbain (Gililand and Poutanan 8). Through the line “No Jew was ever lost,” Cohen’s implies that Layton’s transformation is similar to the process of many Jewish Canadians who migrated. Cohen therefore uses Layton’s transformation in the poem as an example of how Jewish immigrants in Montreal, no matter how integrated into dominant Canadian society, are still bound to their Eastern European heritage.

Cohen also uses descriptive imagery throughout the poem to fuse the Montreal setting with elements of traditional Judaism, which highlights how Jewish Canadians are connected to their ancestral roots and have resisted total assimilation. On the one hand, Cohen clearly sets the poem in downtown Montreal during the winter. The title of the poem references The Four Penny Art Gallery on Stanley Street. Cohen founded the gallery with his friends Mort Rosengarten and Leonore Schwartzman during the 1950s within a boarding house, and the gallery showcased works by emerging artists until they were damaged by a fire later in the decade (Nadel 109). The downtown Montreal setting resonates through lines like “sausage-hung kitchens” that reference the interior of the boarding house. The speaker also mentions how “…we two dance joyously / in the French province / cold and oceans west of the Temple,” which establishes that the two men are meeting in Quebec during

wintertime.

On the other hand, Cohen also uses anachronistic imagery of nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewry to intertwine the modern, Montreal setting with elements of the past. As the speaker and Layton dance, “the miracle Rabbis of Prague and Vilna / resume their sawdust thrones.” Since medieval times, the city of Prague has contained one of the largest Jewish communities in all of Europe as it was a major site of the *Haskalach,* or Jewish enlightenment, in the nineteenth century (Pařík). Historians have also referred to the city of Vilna as “the Jerusalem of Lithuania" for its vast, intergenerational Jewish community (Zalkin). Both Vilna and Prague came under Nazi occupation during the Holocaust, and many refugees from both cities immigrated to North America throughout the twentieth century (Pařík; Zalkin). By describing Rabbis from these historically significant Jewish cities as they “resume their sawdust thrones” in Montreal, the speaker conveys how the dancing has transformed Canada into a site to rebuild the formerly vibrant Jewish community of Europe in the aftermath of immigration and the Holocaust. The speaker goes on to liken “the snow canyoned on the twigs” to “forbidden Sabbath manna.” In the Hebrew bible, G-d fed the Hebrew people a flakey, white bread called manna while they were wandering in the desert (Exodus 16:31). By comparing the snow on Quebec trees to a divine bread, Cohen illustrates how Jews have rediscovered some of the most sacred elements of their faith in the unfamiliar Canadian terrain.

Furthermore, the opening line of the poem, “Layton, when we dance our freilach,” is a direct reference to Ashkenazi Jewish *klezmer* music. In Eastern Europe, *freilachs* are a genre of fast-paced, syncopated dance music that are often performed during periods of celebration, such as Bar-Mitzvahs or weddings (Feldman). Cohen mimics the sound of a *freilach* within the metre and rhythm of the poem itself. The first stanza contains lines with eight to eleven syllables, the second stanza contains lines with six to ten syllables, and the third stanza contains lines ranging from five to ten syllables. The gradual shortening of lines as the poem progresses simulates the climax of a *freilach*, in which the music speeds up and the dancers spin in increasingly faster circles.

Cohen also alludes to Jewish dance customs by providing the extended image of

the speaker and Layton holding a "ghostly handkerchief" that changes shape as they dance. In traditional Ashkenazi Jewish weddings, it is customary for a bride and her father to dance in a counterclockwise circle while holding onto opposite ends of a handkerchief (Strom 22). By having the speaker and Layton mimic this custom, Cohen communicates both characters' affectionate, celebratory connection to traditional Judaism. Later in the poem, the waving handkerchief expands into a "burning cloud / measuring all of heaven / with our stitching thumbs." This "burning cloud" is a reference to the Story of Exodus, in which a large pillar of gas representing G-d guides the Hebrew people as they wander through the desert. The pillar takes the form of a cloud during the day and the form of fire during the night (Exodus 40:38). Therefore, the transformation of the handkerchief describes how the speaker and Layton have become so engulfed by the dance that they have moved into a more spiritual realm. Just as the cloud in Exodus moves the Jewish people through the desert to ancient Israel, the handkerchief cloud in "The Last Dance At The Four Penny" guides the speaker and Layton to a new, Jewish home in Canada. The handkerchief transforms again in the third stanza, in which it assumes the form of a "bright white flag." A white flag often signifies surrender. The handkerchief's transformation therefore shows how the speaker and Layton have surrendered their cynicism about faith to the joy and wonder of the freilach. The speaker remarks:

As for the cynical
Such as we were yesterday,
Let them step with us or rot,
In their logical shrouds.

The speaker has become so enraptured by the wonder of the freilach that he reaches a state of enlightenment about religion. While the line "such as we were yesterday" recognizes that he and Layton also used to feel ambivalent about the value of Jewish faith, dancing the freilach with Layton makes him feel emotionally fulfilled and full of life.

In "The Last Dance at the Four Penny," Leonard Cohen provides a snapshot of Eastern European Jewish traditions encroaching into a contemporary Canadian setting. By fusing elements of the Bible and traditional Jewish customs with the more

secular, urban environment of Montreal, Cohen asserts that the core spirit of Judaism has survived persecution, immigration, and assimilation into Canadian culture. The speaker expresses amazement at the two men's talent in dancing at the end of the poem, where he remarks, "we who dance so beautifully / though we know that freilachs end." Despite enjoying their dance together, their enlightenment is only temporary, as the speaker and Layton must soon return to life on Stanley Street. Cohen's poem therefore provides a brief moment of fantasy in a contemporary setting that allows the speaker and Layton to escape modern life and embrace their ancestral Jewish identities. While the two men are meeting in twentieth-century Canada, they subconsciously remember the steps to the freilach dance perfectly. For the speaker and Layton, intergenerational Jewish tradition is encoded into their muscle memory.

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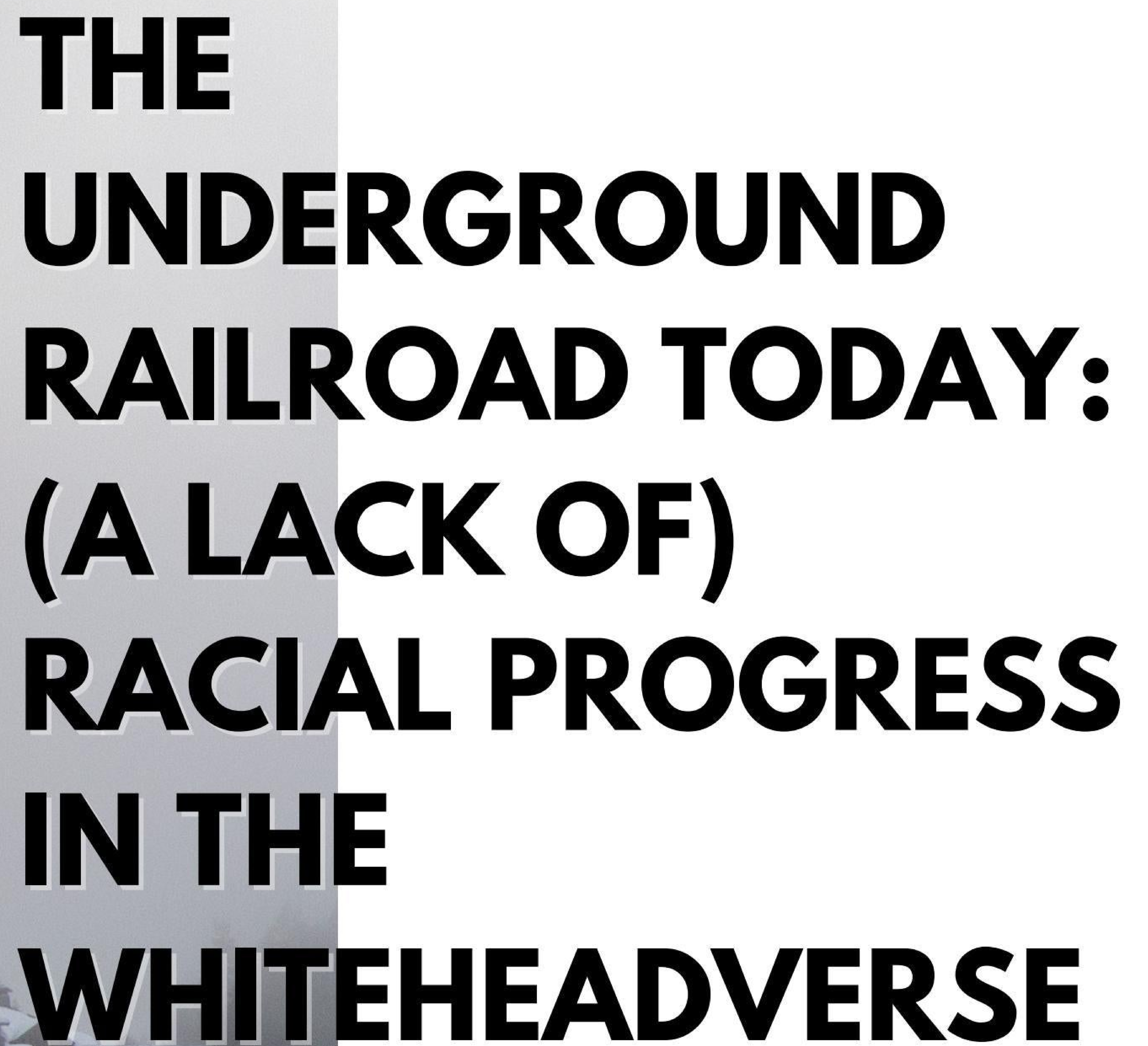

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD TODAY: (A LACK OF) RACIAL PROGRESS IN THE WHITEHEADVERSE

BEN SCHNEIDER

Edited by Catherine Hall and Justin Shen

"It's always Mississippi in the fifties," J. Sutter says in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* while working in 1996 West Virginia (127). Whitehead's novels span generations of American history and a wide range of Black perspectives, and a common one is the firm belief that the political system works against Black people. J. Sutter, a jaded New York journalist, makes this remark assuming he will be arrested or hanged for stealing a laptop while his white coworker gets only a slap on the wrist for the same crime. J. thinks the contemporary South is no better off than when Jim Crow laws reigned supreme, and his family history of being enslaved is ever-present on his mind. His circular view of the passage of time reflects Whitehead's melding of historical events together through anachronism to connect the present and the past, a move Professor Madhu Dubey says, "offers Whitehead a perfect vehicle for defamiliarizing public narratives about race and national history at the turn of the twenty-first century" ("Museumizing" 111). In his meta-slave narrative, *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead takes the concept to another level by reusing similar scenes and images from his previous novels within the context of slavery. Cora's experience as an enslaved teenager living on a Georgia plantation and subsequent escape by train references critical moments from the Whitehead Literary Universe. Showing enslaved people performing the same activities as their descendants decades later creates a dichotomy of pessimism and optimism for the present and future of Black expression. Parallel scenes between *The Underground Railroad* and Colson Whitehead's other novels, most notably *Sag Harbor*, point to a frustration over the lack of racial progress across the decades, but they also indicate that more privileged Black people today can choose to act like their ancestors did with pride by having similar events as their ancestors.

At first glance, the racial violence in *The Underground Railroad* echoing scenes in Whitehead's other novels suggests that there has been very little racial progress in the United States. When Cora is whipped for shielding a little boy with her body, she reflects on how the other enslaved people react during a whipping:

> It was customary for slaves to witness the abuse of their brethren as moral instruction. At some point…everyone had to turn away…as they considered the slave's pain and the day sooner or later when it would be their turn at the foul end of the lash. (*Railroad* 46)

Being whipped by the slave master or field overseer serves as required "moral instruction" for the spectating enslaved people so that they always remember their place at the very bottom of the social ladder. Each person is reminded of their role as a slave even if they are not the ones being punished. As Whitehead emphasizes here, this image is a scene of instruction, a common element in Black literature. These scenes depict Black people, especially younger ones, recognizing the limits imposed on them by white society solely because they have darker skin. Born into slavery, these people are already well aware that they are viewed as inferior, but the Randalls, a family of slaveowners, likes to reinforce the message. Being whipped is tragically not Cora's worst experience, but it serves as a common instructional one from which every enslaved person learns.

The terms are different in *Sag Harbor*, Whitehead's semi-autobiographical coming of age novel set in 1985, more than a century after emancipation. Ben Cooper looks back on his time as a 15-year-old in an upper-middle class family that spends its summers in *Sag Harbor*, a Black community in the Hamptons. He recounts an episode from fourth grade when a white student made a racist remark about him and the other kids shot down the remark without incident. Ben's father, meanwhile, gets quite angry at Ben for not standing up for himself. He assumes that Ben had been afraid of being hit back, so he hits Ben hard to show that bullies cannot do anything worse. Ben concludes that "[the] lesson was, Don't be afraid of being hit, but over the years I took it as, No one can hurt you more than I can" (*Sag Harbor*, 164). His family members learn the same lesson because his brother and sister close their bedroom doors knowing Ben is about to be hit, and his mother often backs down from arguments to prevent abuse. Ben's scene of instruction growing up mirrors Cora's because it involves violence from someone more powerful, but his father keeps this a private matter. His father's lesson is supposed to be the opposite of Randall's, insisting that Black people should fight back against those who inflict pain. However, Ben takes them to have the same meaning: no one is more powerful than the master of the house and no one else can stand up to the master of the house. Professor Cameron Leader-Picone asserts that because scenes of instruction are so common in Black literature, they work as "[rituals] of group identification," but Ben's experience "is filtered through an individualistic lens" ("Post-Black" 438-439). Not only is a scene of instruction collective on behalf of Black writers, but Terrance

Randall is teaching a collective lesson to all the people he owns. The lesson from Ben's father is specific to Ben because he is not hardened in his upper-class life, but the action is effectively the same. Through this parallel Whitehead shows that the evolution from a slave owner whipping Black people to a Black father hitting his son is no evolution at all.

The parallels between *The Underground Railroad* and *Sag Harbor* are more complicated than the continuation of physical violence, as some suggest racial progress seems to be frustratingly slow but still possible. During Jockey's birthday party on the Randall plantation, the other enslaved people organize a race for the little kids:

> Cora always arranged the children at the starting line, aiming their feet, calming the skittish ones, and graduating some to the older kids' race if need be…The young slaves and the old slaves gathered on the sidelines of the horse path. (*Railroad* 23-24)

This innocuous scene is eerily similar to one at the end of *Sag Harbor*, when the community gathers for their Labor Day festival: "The boys lined up to race. They double-knotted their shoelaces… They nosed their sneakers as close to the line as possible…they ran for their parents, who did or did not watch from the sidelines" (307-309). The two racing scenes both occur in a celebratory context with little kids sprinting while their families watch close by. On a rare evening where the enslaved people are allowed to relax, the only thing for the older people to do is enjoy the races or to help set up the races. In *Sag Harbor*, the kids are more sure of themselves and require less help to organize the event. On a street filled with cookouts and parties, the parents have other things they could do besides watch their kids. The overlapping scenes bring up the question: why do the wealthy people of Sag Harbor participate in the same activity their ancestors did with far less options? Perhaps this suggests that the situation of Black Americans has not improved at all. However, it is also possible the two scenes stand for a shared sense of self-expression. The people in *Sag Harbor* can do whatever they want the whole summer, but they are free to follow in the footsteps of those who suffered in slavery. They might not be aware of their ancestors' free-time activities, but Whitehead is, given that a celebratory sprint is a

unique scene to write. Rather than being trapped in the same pattern, they are honouring the meaningful perseverance of their ancestors while celebrating their own economic success. The kids in *Sag Harbor* race freely because their ancestors could not, therefore the activity is more meaningful. Even so, it is off-putting to see the race reframed in the context of slavery, where the scene concludes with Cora being beaten. Whitehead shows Black people can move forward and express themselves, but the expression is rooted in the history of slavery.

The main question of *The Underground Railroad* is how to move forward as a society and face the history of slavery, an issue Whitehead has previously addressed. The issue is at the forefront of the Valentine farm, a stop on the railroad in Indiana where Black people support themselves. Lander, a great orator born free, advocates for saving everyone, while Mingo, a formerly enslaved man who bought his family's freedom, calls for staying put and closing the doors to runaways like Cora. His logic is as follows: "The parade of famous visitors spreading the farm's renown made the place into a symbol of colored uplift—and a target…It always ended in violence" (Railroad 253). Lander's ideals are appealing to many on Valentine, as Cora and other escapees want to help more people like themselves. However, Mingo's grim pragmatism ends up being justified as white rioters burn down the farm during a town hall and kill many of the residents. Mingo thinks runaways drag down the farm and bring unnecessary attention to Valentine. He sees racial violence as a guarantee, and his predictions come true so soon they cannot even conclude the town hall. The rioters cannot stand having self-sufficient Black people near them, so they destroy the "symbol of colored uplift" as Mingo predicted.

The debate between Mingo and Lander intersects with the debate between pioneers Goode and Field in *Apex Hides the Hurt*. A nomenclature consultant living today is hired to rename the town of Winthrop, which was first settled by former slaves in the 1860's and now is home to a tech entrepreneur who wants the new name to reflect the current market. With the support of the clan, Goode originally named the settlement Freedom to embody their dreams, while Field wanted the name to be Struggle after their constant reality. Lander is somewhat more realistic than Goode, but the two debates run along the same lines: focus on the current nightmares or reach for the highest aspirations. The pioneers met both aspects head on when their

first settlement was burned down by rioters, like Valentine, but they persevered and built another home. Cora, on the one hand, is all too familiar with the nightmares of slavery; she still believes in helping as many people as possible reach freedom. In her world, museums reinforce slavery instead of showing its true nature. The consultant, on the other hand, thinks that Field resonates so much he renames the town Struggle. The locals are ready for the next wave of capitalist development, but he forces them to acknowledge the roots of their town and identify with it: "I live in Struggle and come from Struggle…I will die in Struggle" (*Apex* 211). Just like Mingo and Field, he wants everyone to fully grasp that the struggle of Black existence lasts a lifetime. Aspirations are only useful if people work to achieve their goals, and sometimes that requires hard sacrifices. In both cases, Whitehead presents idealism and blunt pragmatism as legitimate points of view, but the pragmatists are violently proven correct.

The premise of the Valentine farm also calls into question the long-term viability of Black spaces like Sag Harbor. By nearly all accounts, the farm is a successful venture. Mr. Valentine capably runs his agriculture business, and he makes enough money that he can financially afford to bring in more runaways and pay them to work, with more funds left over to build housing and a school. The crux of Mingo's perspective is that Valentine will be targeted because the farm is successful, not merely because it exists. Free Black people and abolitionists around the country know the farm is the model of self-sufficiency. As a kind of safe haven, Valentine resembles Sag Harbor, with some crucial differences. Black people can afford to spend their summers in Sag because they are financially successful. Like Valentine, they are proud of themselves for establishing a community of their own amidst a racist system, as Ben and his friends still wonder if white passersby are friendly or hostile. But Sag Harbor is only open to wealthier people and not the lower-class equivalents to Cora. Mingo would fit right in. It would be a shock if Sag Harbor was burned down, but they face the less-obvious contemporary equivalent: Adult Ben repeatedly mentions how the neighbourhoods have changed over the years due to gentrification. The consultant sees that the same thing will happen in the town he is naming, as the influx of workers are buying houses in the historically Black area because "[it's] a little cheaper on that side of town" (*Apex* 157). Prices will almost certainly go up within a few years as the tech industry dominates local business.

White people take over the Black area again, but they do so slowly without physical violence. The utopia of Valentine is doomed to fail, but Sag Harbor might not survive, either.

If Valentine finds a utopian equivalent in Sag Harbor, then the Randall plantation finds a dystopian equivalent in the Nickel Academy. *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead's companion to *The Underground Railroad*, follows the idealistic Elwood and cynical Turner sentenced to suffer through a reformatory school's blatant racism and abuse. Many of the boys are forced to work the field all day like slaves, and the state of Florida makes Nickel their official printing press to take advantage of the free labour. All boys are beaten in a white shed, and the "black boys called it the White House because that was its official name and it fit…The White House delivered the law and everyone obeyed" (*Nickel* 66). Administrators generally apply harsher discipline to black boys at Nickel than white boys, and their small-scale system of injustice is part of a large system run by the nation's highest office that has upheld white supremacy since the country's founding. Professor Derek C. Maus aptly observes that the "symbolic linkage of local and national power intimates that their shared purpose is not law enforcement but rather force enlawment" (*Understanding* 141). The same is true in *The Underground Railroad* with the Fugitive Slave Law, which was passed by Congress but enforced by local authorities. Contrary to the popular Civil Rights Movement and abolition movement in the two periods these novels are set in, the national government implicitly or explicitly sides with the racist status quo. The brutal "force enlawment" is the reason escape seems so daunting. Like Cora's scene of instruction, Terrance Randall roasts Big Anthony alive in stocks for trying to escape to tell the rest of the enslaved people what their punishment will be for running away. Nickel boys caught running away are similarly "[taken] out back" to be killed with their hands in constricting rings (*Nickel* 103). In his follow-up book, Whitehead lays bare the line from slavery to imprisonment. The threat of brutal death is horrifying in these two dystopias, but they are based on real events, not imagined worlds. One can easily imagine Turner echoing J. Sutter: it is always Georgia in the eighteen fifties.

Colson Whitehead reuses scenes and images from his other novels in *The Underground Railroad* to show a lack of racial progress over time and the potential

for Black self-expression. The perpetuation of violence within the Black community is no better than racial violence on the plantation, but wealthier Black people today can reclaim the actions of their ancestors in slavery. The reality of a Black sanctuary is possible, but destruction is a near certainty. No matter how many years go by, there will still be remnants of the past in the present. In his satirical piece "Picking a Genre," Whitehead makes fun of Black authors writing a "Southern Novel of Black Misery" who "investigate the legacy of slavery that still reverberates to this day" ("Picking"). However, Whitehead becomes one of them with *The Underground Railroad*. The key to his investigation is that slavery reverberates in each period of American history in different forms. From the predatory labour practices in *John Henry Days* and corporal punishment in *The Nickel Boys* to domestic violence in *Sag Harbor* and capitalist expansion in *Apex Hides the Hurt*, Whitehead addresses the spectrum of racial issues that originate in slavery. With a new book out and no signs of slowing down, it will be interesting to see how Whitehead reuses his imagery going forward.

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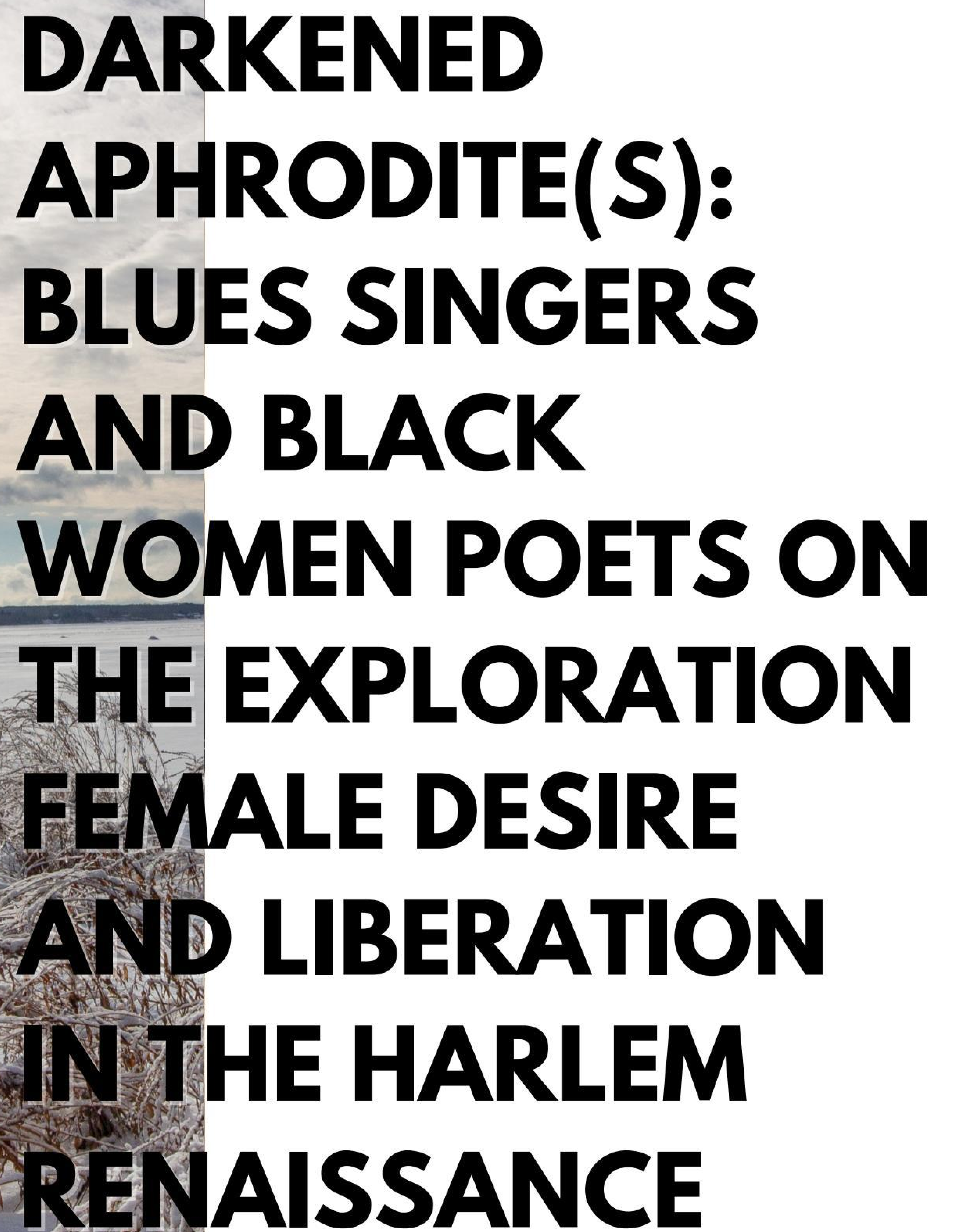

DARKENED APHRODITE(S): BLUES SINGERS AND BLACK WOMEN POETS ON THE EXPLORATION FEMALE DESIRE AND LIBERATION IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

RUXI CHIRILA

Edited by Sophie Semeniuk and Molly Pearce

During the Harlem Renaissance, one of the most salient debates amongst Black intellectuals centred on what kind of art Black artists ought to create and how they ought to represent Black people in their art. Thinkers such as George S. Schuyler dismissed the idea of a distinct 'black art,' from the premise that exacerbating differences between Black and white Americans would lead to further "conjur[ing] up in the average white American's mind a composite stereotype" (52). This desire to escape racist stereotypes led to the urban Black middle-class adopting an ideology of respectability: to align themselves with "mainstream white society" and to curate an image of a stable and secure middle-class family structure (K. T. Ewing in Honey 14). Hazel V. Carby argues that these white cultural ideologies specifically "define black female sexuality as primitive and exotic," and that the only socially acceptable response for Black women was to oppose this racist stereotype through "the denial of desire and the repression of sexuality" (12). Black middle-class respectability, then, disproportionately put pressure on Black women to present themselves as "sexually and morally pure," (14) and, most importantly, as wives and mothers rather than individuals with complexity and autonomy.

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* follows two Black middle-class women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who ultimately fail in their attempts to escape the oppressive structures of respectability. This novel not only exemplifies the dangers of respectability to Black women's liberty, but also the pervasiveness of its structure and its influence on their lives, making it nearly impossible to escape. Critically, David L. Blackmore articulates the ways in which middle-class respectability acts as a "veneer" beneath which Larsen's novel "explore[s] subversive alternatives to the repressive bourgeois order" (475). Despite radically hinting at the possibility of a relationship between Irene and Clare, it is ultimately impossible for them to see their connection through. The final glimpse of Clare falling out the window is in the form of a detailed blazon in free indirect discourse, ripe with Irene's sexual desire and her contrasting relief that Clare, the object of temptation who threatened her security and stability, has been "extinguish[ed]" (483):

> "Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking

daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter.

Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost." (Larsen 272)

There are two diverging interpretations of this scene that co-exist paradoxically: Irene defenestrates Clare out of fear of the liberatory possibility of their relationship, or Clare chooses to fall in order to be liberated from the oppressive social expectations put upon them both. Fundamentally, the ending to Larsen's novel illustrates how Black middle-class respectability both stifles same sex relationships and denies women their sexual autonomy and individuality beyond their roles in relation to men and their children. Despite Irene and Clare's inability to entertain the possibility of a relationship, *Passing* offers an insight into Irene's internalization of respectability and how it leads to the climactic moment of Clare's death, which is at once alleviating, erotic, and tragic.

Through their radically different art forms, two groups of Queer Black women artists in the 1920s—Blues singers and Black female poets—provide alternatives to the Black middle-class respectability that stifled Irene and Clare's autonomy, desire, and possibility for homosexual experiences. Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey were female Blues singers whose same-sex affairs were widely-known. As such, they were framed as unrespectable women due to their sexual openness, and their "music was designated as 'low' culture" (Davis 13). In spite of this, their cultural influence is significant: as Angela Davis argues, their music was an essential part of "working class women's community building [that…] proclaims women's complexity" (67). By contrast, the lyric poetry of Black Modernist poets Angelina Weld Grimké, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, and Mae V. Cowdery is intimate and individual. All three poets highlight the interior intricacies of women with reference to the figure of Aphrodite, a muse through which they create female spaces to explore their desires and multiplicities (Honey 5). The Blues women and the poets illustrate a radical exploration and assertion of female complexity, interiority, and desire that fundamentally opposes the "selfless propriety" expected of Black women (Honey 15). The contrast in their approaches—the collective experience of live music performance and the private, diary-like intimations of poetry—allows these artists to uniquely articulate female desire as a source of strength and meaning. Through their music and poetry, these women construct alternate spaces where their female

speakers are free from the racist patriarchal society that centres the pleasure and desires of men and represses the liberty of Queer Black women.

Distinctions of Form

It is first crucial to historically situate the developments of these two forms of art—Blues music and modernist lyrical poetry—to illustrate how their distinctive features offer Queer Black women alternative forms of expression. Angela Davis notes that "one of the most obvious ways in which Blues lyrics deviated from the era's established popular musical culture was their "provocative and pervasive sexual—including homosexual—imagery" (22). She subsequently argues that "sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation" (23). She traces the development from religious and secular "slave music," which "was collectively performed and […] gave expression to the community's yearning for freedom" (23), towards Blues music, which was prominently secular and introduced a greater distinction between the performer and the audience, as well as a "new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires" (24). This shift towards an individual projecting their interiority onto an eager crowd holds a "sacred nature," in which, in spite of its secularity, a Blues performance acts as a "communal channel of relief," similar to a religious congregation, though the gospel here expresses women's sexual freedom (27-8).

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith "preached about sexual love, and in so doing they articulated a collective experience of freedom" (Davis 28). The form of a Blues performance, therefore, intermixes the individual and the collective, the private and the public, particularly in its association with Queer sexuality. Ma Rainey's "Prove It On Me Blues" is the most crucial example of explicitly Queer lyrics being performed, recorded, and advertised by a female Blues singer. Her chorus is as follows:

> Went out last night with a crowd of my friends
> They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men
> It's true I wear a collar and a tie
> Make the wind blow all the while
> […] talk to the gals just like any old man

They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me
("Prove It On Me Blues.")

Not only do her lyrics include references to cross-dressing, but an advertisement for the song's release "showed the blues woman sporting a man's hat, jacket, and tie and, while a policeman looked on, obviously attempting to seduce two women on a street corner" (Davis 58). The Blues singers articulated their sexual autonomy through multiple mediums, including live performances, recordings, and visual advertisements for their music. They boldly and publicly declared their sexuality, thereby creating an avenue for themselves and their audience to oppose oppression.

Bessie Smith also preaches women's autonomy in "Young Woman's Blues," in which a man leaves the speaker overnight. Despite this, she is not distraught by being alone; rather, it is a source of empowerment and liberty:

I'm a young woman and ain't done running around
[…]
I ain't gonna marry, ain't gon' settle down
I'm gon' drink good moonshine and run these browns down
See that long lonesome road, Lord, you know it's gotta end
And I'm a good woman and I can get plenty men
("Young Woman's Blues.")

Smith's speaker relishes in her desirability as a young woman and sees her sexuality as a form of liberation from the institution of marriage. She feels no pressure to marry nor to "settle down" which highlights the absence of traditional family structures, and most importantly, the expectation of motherhood, from the song. Davis comments that this absence "does not imply a rejection of motherhood as such," but rather suggests the rejection of "the mainstream cult of motherhood," as the Blues singers found it "irrelevant to the realities of their lives" (32). This illustrates how middle-class respectability could not permeate the working-class, where communities of women formed around Blues music as a channel of relief.

The poets Grimké, Bennett, and Cowdery employed poetry for their more private explorations of interiority, though they still rejected the so-called 'cult of motherhood.' Maureen Honey emphasizes the ways in which their bodies of work have "fallen between the cracks of two major critical models:" Modernism, which focuses on white writers, and Harlem Renaissance Black Modernism, which centres male writers such as Langston Hughes and Claude McKay (3). Contemporary critiques of these female poets imply that their lyrical and occasionally pastoral forms were not seen as sufficiently innovative. Honey cites Jane Kuenz's assessment of a larger "literary culture" that "broadly characterized their work, as it did [Countee] Cullen's, as bourgeois, racially empty, and feminine" (17). However, this largely neglects the connection the poets drew between their lyrical poetry and their activism, as all three published activism poetry in 1927. Grimké's poem "Tenebris," offers the chillingly powerful imagery:

There is a tree, by day,
That, at night,
Has a shadow,
A hand huge and black,
With fingers long and black.
All through the dark,
Against the white man's house,
("Tenebris." 1-7)

The poignant imagery of fingers in the dark alludes to tree branches brushing against the white house as Black specters haunting white consciousness. This poem centres its political, anti-lynching message by beginning with the tree that by night "Has a shadow". The message becomes even more apparent when reading the white man's house as both an old plantation house, or the White House itself, and the Black hands as those of victims of anti-Black violence.

Bennett approaches racial activism by looking to comforting images of the past in "Song [1]," which details intimate imagery:

My song has the lush sweetness

Of moist, dark lips
Where hymns keep company
With old forgotten banjo songs"
("Song [1]." 4-7)

Bennett connects form and content through the song-like nature of the poem's subsequent use of repetition, evoking nostalgia through the depiction of music as a source of heritage, pain, and belonging. Cowdery's "Lamps" constructs an extended metaphor comparing lives to burning lamps, where some *seem* to burn less brightly because of "ebon shrouds" though the opposite is true. The speaker proclaims:

You and I are lamps—Ebony lamps.
Our flame glows red and rages high within
But our ebon shroud becomes a shadow
And our light *seems* weak and low
("Lamps." 28-31, emphasis mine)

The rich imagery of darkness in these three poems links the poets' respective sources of political empowerment to radically contribute to dismantling the "models that portrayed black Americans fighting racism as predominantly male" (Honey 18). These poets deconstruct the false notion that lyric poetry cannot address racism and be socially conscious, further developing the complexity of the possibilities of lyric poetry.

The three poets are, however, better known for their erotic poetry, much of which is set outside of the city. This pastoral mode is an aesthetic move away from the male-dominated urban poetry of streets and cabarets (Honey 14). Instead, female bodies "are framed by nature," (13) and, crucially, are in a female-only space. Grimké's "Grass Fingers" (1927) positions erotic exploration in nature:

Touch me, touch me,
Little cool grass fingers,
Elusive, delicate grass fingers.
With your shy brushings,

Touch my face —
My naked arms —
My thighs —
My feet."
("Grass Fingers." 1-8)

The enjambment in the poem–with each line separating body parts–illustrates a bird's eye view of a woman's body lying down in the grass. This connects the female body intimately to the earth and implies that the exploration of female sexuality is a natural experience. Bennet's poem "Song [2]" (1926) describes her speaker gently painting an English countryside for her lover as an act of intimacy. Cowdery's "Interlude" (1936) offers the natural world as a "quiet place" (1) to contrast with the noisy urban center to further emphasize the oppressive nature of the city and the liberatory potential of womens' mental escape into nature.

The three poets adopt these Romantic notions to express their sexualities outside of a city centre such as Harlem, which, though it was a "primary site of sexual activity in the 1920s," (Honey 13) did not offer middle-class women autonomy. The poets' speakers, then, occupy a similar position as Irene and Clare in Larsen's novel. Honey highlights this as an unfulfilled connection that may have been possible between the poets and the Blues singers. Male poets could depict Blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey sympathetically, "the female gaze on these figures, however, could not so liberally depict sexuality" (13). Therefore, the poets adopt the pastoral mode and Romantic notions as an alternate way to express their sexuality as Ma Rainey and the Blues women could through provocative visual advertisements.

Aphrodite(s): Female Figures of Desire

This initial aesthetic move out of the city landscape opened the door for further developments in the exploration of female desire. The most significant motif is the Aphrodite' figure. This figure appears at dusk and nighttime and is a muse who the speaker worships with passion and desire. It is through this muse figure that the speakers are able to experience "the erotic as a source of strength and meaning" (Honey, 5). Grimké ushers in this figure with the third part of her unpublished poem "A Trilogy":

Behold! She comes, the queen of Night!
[…]
With haunting grace and haunting eyes
[…]
A figure motionless, alone
Her solemn, radiant, vigil keeping
Never sleeping, never sleeping—"
("A Trilogy.")

Bennett's "Fantasy" summons a similar figure at "Night," which is capitalized in both poems: "I sailed in my dreams to the land of Night / Where you were the dusk-eyed Queen" (1-2). Further, Cowdery's "Four Poems" centre female figures as goddesses of nature and 'Night' is personified. Nighttime landscapes are female: "Night turned over / In her sleep" (1-2) and "The moon / Is a madonna." (13-4). In the second poem, the earth takes on a more erotic image:

A mountain
Is earth's mouth . . .
She thrusts her lovely
Sun-painted lips
Through the clouds
For heaven's kiss
("Four Poems." 18-23)

This recurring motif of goddesses who are elevated above the speaker instills a Romantic sense of the sublime. This retreat into a female-dominated Night realm further advances the initial pastoral motifs. Honey ultimately argues that these figures "[compel] respect and [cast] off the fetters of racist patriarchal civilization" by presiding over lands of Night (8). Cowdery, in contrast to Grimké and Bennett, does not name these goddesses 'queens' of their realms. They become one with the earth rather than ruling over it. No Aphrodite figure appears the same in each of the speaker's descriptions, which serves to highlight their individuality.

The poets extend this same adoration of goddesses to Black female subjects,

deifying them without resorting to typical conceits or tropes of servitude to express their sexuality. Grimké develops her metaphor of grass, first seen in "Grass Fingers," in the poem "A Mona Lisa:" "I should like to creep / Through the long brown grasses / That are your lashes" (1-3). Grass and the natural realm continue to be sites of erotic exploration. The colour brown similarly depicts grace and beauty in Bennett's "To a Dark Girl," of which the first two lines are: "I love you for your brownness / And the rounded darkness of your breast." The emphasis on darkness and brownness in these two poems echoes a more realist interpretation of the Queens of the Night—one that emphasizes an adoration of the beauty of Black women by other Black women. This female gaze reveals how these blazons are steeped in a fascination of other women. These poems challenge the traditional roles of wife and mother imposed by respectability. One poem, however, illustrates an aesthetic alternative to the ending of Larsen's passing: the second stanza of Cowdery's "Insatiate" (1936) is an erotic blazon of a woman that strikingly resembles that of Passing's Irene-influenced blazon on Clare Kendry:

> If her lips were rubies red,
> Her eyes two sapphires blue,
> Her fingers ten sticks of white jade,
> Coral tipped . . . and her hair of purple hue
> Hung down in a silken shawl . . .
> They would not be enough
> To fill the coffers of my need.
> ("Insatiate." 6-12)

This detailed dissection of the speaker's lover ends not with the subject's death, but with her speaker becoming "willing prisoner" to her lover instead (26). Willingness in particular denotes the self-centred piety and servitude towards a goddess that the Grimké and Bennett exhibit as well; these speakers willingly admire and desire their subjects, who are at once of immeasurable beauty and their equal as women. This fundamentally breaks the structure of selfless servitude that the ideology of respectability expects of Black women and instead creates a new dynamic where the speakers are emotionally complex and deeply moved by the female deities they worship by choice.

The connection between these complex interior emotions in the poetry about goddesses and the Blues singers' performances becomes clear upon gleaning the reverent audience testimonies of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey's shows. Audience members who saw the blues women perform live illustrate their stage presence in what can only be described as a blazon depicting awe-inspiring and powerful "Goddesses":

> For these singers were gorgeous and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith as the Empress of the Blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire. (Carby 20)

The centrality of female desire at the heart of their aesthetic presentations grounds these women as individuals who reclaim female sexuality. The Blues women depart from the ideology of respectability, resisting the racist stereotyed hypsersexualization of Black women, to take control of their image and agency. This blazon-like description draws attention to each of the pieces of their physicality and clothing that make up their aura and illustrate their immense power. This power allows the Blues singers to form a congregational community around their songs and create spaces for Black working-class women to articulate the complicated ways they relate to society and to one another: in romance, in rivalry, and in solidarity.

Complex Inter-Female Relationships

The exploration of female relationships by these two groups of women is not exclusively erotic. The complexities of jealousy and friendships between women is a subject that Angela Davis claims exhibits "a feminist consciousness" (11), as "feminist traditions are not only written, they are oral" (19). The power of Blues music, particularly in performance, comes from its "participatory character," which invites the audience to form a community that acknowledges how individual feelings relate to a larger consciousness (76). A particular form of Blues music, highlighted by Daphne Duval Harrison, is that of advice songs whose themes often focus on how

a woman ought to "handle [their] men" (73). This theme is most apparent in Ma Rainey's "Trust No Man," which begins with Rainey addressing the women in the audience:

I want all you women to listen to me
Don't trust your man no further'n your eyes can see
I trust mine with my best friend
But that was the bad part in the end
[…]
He'll tell you that he loves you and swear it is true
The very next minute he'll turn his back on you
Ah, trust no man, no further than your eyes can see.
("Trust No Man.")

Rainey makes all the aforementioned moves: she initially addresses the women in the audience to advise them not to "trust [their] man," then shares a personal experience before repeating her advice after she has shared a possible consequence. Giving relationship advice the women in the audience can relate to is a significant cultural practice. As Davis argues this kind of music creates possibilities for "community-building among working-class women, [where] the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and "true womanhood" were absent" (63). Indeed, the existence of advice songs implies that life for the women in a Blues performance audience was imperfect: the concept of "true womanhood" is not only an unrealistic ideal, but it also coerces women to conform and denies them the opportunity to connect on the basis of advice-giving.

Women offer each other advice through the form of Blues music, but the Blues singers also have conversations with each other in the form of duets that explore the complexities of female interactions. Bessie Smith's "My Man Blues" is performed as a duet between herself and Clara Smith. Although the opening dialogue presents the two of them in conflict after discovering they are seeing the same man, the women resolve their conflict effectively, as they hold immense respect for each other:

Bessie: Clara, who was that man I saw you with the other day?

Clara: Bessie, that was my smooth black daddy that we call Charlie Gray.
Bessie: Don't you know that's my man? Yes, that's a fact.
Clara: I ain't seen your name printed up and down his back.
Bessie: You better let him be.
Clara: What, old gal? Because you ain't talkin' to me.
[…]
[*SUNG*]
Bessie: I guess we got to have him on cooperation plan. I guess we got to have him on cooperation plan.
[*SPOKEN*]
Clara: Bessie!
Bessie: Clara!
[*SUNG*]
Both: Ain't nothin' different 'bout all those other two-time men.
[*SPOKEN*]
Bessie: How 'bout it?
Clara: Suits me.
Bessie: Suits me too.
Clara: Well, then."
("My Man Blues.")

Davis crucially notes the context behind this song: Clara Smith was one of Bessie Smith's "most serious music rivals" (Davis 70), which further emphasizes the radical nature of both women reconciling their dispute within the song as equals in a "cooperational plan." Charlie Gray, despite being the catalyst for their dispute, does not hold power over the two women. It is their initially incompatible desires that begin the song, and their mutual respect for their desires and recognition of each other as equals—most clearly demonstrated by calling each other's names after singing a lyrical line together—that resolves their conflict. This creates a narrative of female cooperation that allows for new possibilities for female equality and recognition that fundamentally opposes the ideology of respectability at the expense of female agency.

In contrasting the two groups of women—Blues singers and Black female poets—

I have described the ways in which their art forms oppose middle-class respectability based on its negative consequences for women's sexual autonomy and liberty. The Blues singers boldly proclaim their sexual desirability and their attraction to women, and subsequently encourage communities of Black working-class women to think critically about their own individuality and their relationships to others, particularly other women. The poets delve into nighttime landscapes where their speakers explore their complex interiorities and desires for women. Despite being middle-class women, lyrical poetry allows them to channel their desires for sexual liberty—and use those same lyrical forms to break boundaries on what women could contribute to racial activism. Honey argues that these poets opened the door for later poets and musical artists to draw on their innermost selves for their art, and to see "female sexuality [as a] source of creative power that challenges racism's stranglehold on the Black woman's dignity, beauty, and strength" (219). I will go further to add that Black women's sexual liberation includes the liberation of everyone: Ma Rainey's song "Sissy Blues" describes a Sissy—a term which could apply to either a trans woman or feminine presenting Queer man—stealing her man away:

> I shimmied last night, the night before
> I'm going home tonight, I won't shimmy no more
> […]
> I dreamed last night I was far from harm
> Woke up and found my man in a sissy's arms
> […]
> My man's got a sissy, his name is Miss Kate
> He shook that thing like jelly on a plate
> […]
> Now all the people ask me why I'm all alone
> A sissy shook that thing and took my man from home
> ("Sissy Blues.")

Rainey addresses this scenario exactly as she does in other songs where a woman steals her man, thereby extending the possibilities of sexual liberation to others—Queer people in particular. This song highlights the ways in which the sexual liberation of Black women actively contributes to the sexual and political liberation

of other communities; and to emphasize the range of these women’s impact in music, poetry, and activism. Ultimately, the Blues singers Bessie Smith and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, and the Black Modernist poets Angelina Weld Grimké, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, and Mae V. Cowdery boldly trailblazed in writing, singing, and performing the complexities of female desire, of their interior lives, and of their relationships to each other to initiate new modes of expression centring Queer Black women.

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“FOREVER BEYOND THE PAGE”: HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIPS IN D.C. SCOTT’S “THE HEIGHT OF LAND”

LOWELL WOLFE

Edited by Molly Pearce and Catherine Hall

Poems cannot recreate human encounters with the natural world, but ecopoetry is effective because it can connect its readers with nature and convince them to undergo such encounters without attempting to reproduce nature. Duncan Campbell Scott's poem "The Height of Land" epitomizes a compelling ecopoetic lyrical ode. Scott brings the reader into an imagined, natural realm through human senses, emotions, and artistry. Simultaneously, Scott tempers the poetically mediated link between the reader and the wilderness, refusing to prioritize his artistically constructed natural experience over an authentic one that humans could, and should, have within nature. By relating humans to a natural world that exists beyond poetic representation, "The Height of Land" encourages the reader to experience nature directly. The poem creates a powerful, but incomplete, bond between the reader and the natural world that only the reader may fulfill. Scott's "The Height of Land" weaves author, reader, and natural world together and limits the scope of this imaginative connection, motivating the reader to experience real nature.

Scott shows that nature is valuable to humans through poetic portrayal. By articulating nature's significance, Scott mediates a relationship between the reader and the natural world. The poem's setting represents the connection between humans and nature. Situated upon a topographical peak, Scott observes in one direction "[t]he lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams" and, on the other side, "[t]he crowded southern land / With all the welter of the lives of men" (Scott 42, 47–48). The space between the northern and urban areas separates wild and human realms. Written in Canada in the early twentieth century, Scott's statement ignores the colonization of Indigenous peoples, who inhabit and were driven from all the lands he observes (McKay 2). Nonetheless, Scott conveys a literal and figurative gap that divides humans and nature. By existing within this gap, the poem's setting constitutes an implicit metaphor for the unity between human subjectivity and the natural world that the poem establishes, inhabiting a realm between these entities and associating them through poetry. Moreover, by bringing the reader's imagination into the natural environment, Scott fosters what cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan terms '"topophilia,'" which is '"the affective bond between people and place or setting'" through which the poem "become[s] a model for how to approach the landscape surrounding us so that we view it as meaningful" (Tuan 4, qtd. in Bryson 11; Bryson 12). The poem creates '"topophilia'" because it imbues the natural environment with human feelings

and music, associating the reader with nature via relatable, human experiences. It transmits the powerful forces and emotions that Scott encounters in nature into a poem and, ultimately, into the reader's imagination. Scott articulates his personal experience with the wilderness to develop the foundations for the reader's own relationship to nature.

Scott uses details that act upon the reader's body and senses to bring their imagination into a seemingly direct encounter with nature. These immediate perceptions of nature allow the reader to encounter the physical wilderness vicariously. University of Idaho literature and environmental studies scholar Scott Knickerbocker argues that sensory details within nature poems immerse readers in second-hand natural encounters because "the sensuous aspects act as a physically palpable analogue for direct experience of nature" (Knickerbocker 17). Sensory details convey the speaker's immediate encounters with their natural surroundings to situate the reader's imagination within a graphic, lively natural environment. Scott's description of nature acts on multiple senses concomitantly by remembering a swamp with "[s]kin of vile water over viler mud / Where the paddle stirred unutterable stenches" (Scott 102–103). The phrase "unutterable stenches" combines sounds and smells by evoking the belching noises and the unpleasant aromas of wetland methane gas bubbles. The poem linguistically re-enacts what Scott immediately hears and smells as he canoes through a real swamp and transfers these sensations onto the reader. Furthermore, the water's "skin" evokes bodily imagery and the sense of touch to extend the passage's stimulating effects into a tactile realm that belongs to an environmental feature. Through personification, the water possesses an organ mutually shared with humans, allowing the reader's and nature's identities to overlap. The natural world enters the reader's tactile perceptions while the reader's sense of somatics melds into nature. Sensory details vicariously situate the reader within Scott's natural surroundings to connect them to the natural world through second-hand experiences. Scott creates an imaginative link between the natural world and the reader built upon shared stimuli, and furthers this link by accessing the reader's emotions.

To build upon the connection that his poem establishes between the reader and nature, Scott implicates affect into his natural experience to demonstrate the potential

for powerful emotions in natural encounters. Since he experiences natural forces outside of and within himself, Scott's sentiments correlate with his wild experiences. Simon Fraser University Canadian literature scholar Kathy Mezei identifies that "Scott achieves a fine correspondence between his spiritual state and the states of nature by describing a journey through a landscape that is also a journey through the mind of the poet" (Mezei 28). Scott's surroundings condition his epiphanies, digressions, and memories; his moods and thoughts correlate with the wilderness around him. Scott's poem allows affective states and the natural world's qualities to merge within the human experience. For example, Scott proclaims, "here, where we can think, on the brights uplands / Where the air is clear, we deeply brood on life" (Scott 77–78). Scott's environment conditions his internal feelings because the elevated topography and clear air parallel his similarly elevated thoughts and his ability to think clearly. Additionally, Scott applies the first-person plural pronoun to create a shared experience that incorporates the reader's sense of self into the poet's wild encounter. The reader physically and emotionally feels how nature affects Scott—how it could affect them. Scott illustrates that natural encounters meaningfully impact humans because they contour people's feelings and thoughts. Emotional affectivity strengthens the magnitude of the bond between the natural world and the reader.

Conversely, Scott's emotions fuse into his understanding of nature because he personifies and incorporates sentiment into his surroundings. Scott portrays wild sounds, creating an emotional aural experience through which the reader indirectly hears and feels the natural world. Natural soundscapes weave emotion and environment together, intertwining humans with nature. As Scott hears "[t]he thrill of life beat up the planet's margin / And break in the clear susurrus of deep joy," he experiences a sonic phenomenon that derives from nature, represented by "the planet's margin" (Scott 148–150). This force becomes an internal soundscape as Scott subsequently rejoices at how it "echoes and reëchoes in my being" (Scott 151). Scott's diction attaches human feelings, such as "joy" and "the thrill of life," to this wild occurrence. Earthly sonics enter his thoughts and feelings, while his exulting mood transforms his perception of these sounds into elated, natural forces. Human emotions travel between the wilderness and the poet because the natural world becomes a vessel for human meaning, while simultaneously shaping what humans

feel and think. Wild encounters are moving, sensuous occurrences. Thus, Scott's poem acts as a conduit for Scott's emotions and experiences to leap out of his natural surroundings and into the reader's imagination. Furthermore, these natural sounds belong to nature's and the poem's musical dimensions that bring Scott, the reader, and the natural world together into a polyphony of human and non-human sonics.

Scott and his readers participate in the natural world's aurality through poetic song. The forces mentioned above that Scott hears and subsequently feels demonstrate the harmonious sonic dimension of his natural environment. Drawing on German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Bath Spa University Environmental Humanities professor Kate Rigby terms this phenomenon "*phusis*," or the process through which nature discloses its autonomous, holistic existence in an expression of non-human song and dance-like movements (Rigby 434). An example of phusisoccurs when a seed sprouts and grows into a plant that blossoms, bringing bees that buzz and hum; naturally-driven movements and sounds occur as natural entities exist and interrelate, creating *phusis*. The natural soundscapes within Scott's poem demonstrate nature's resonant capabilities. "The thrill of life" and the "susurrus of clear joy" constitute aural forces that derive from a holistic, natural entity: "the planet's margin" (Scott 149–150). Scott does not attribute them to ontologically distinct natural phenomena. Instead, they emanate from a large-scale, terrestrial force, comprising an environmental ensemble of harmonizing, natural sounds that enter Scott's perception as one unified reverberation. Scott perceives these sounds as echoes, demonstrating nature's autonomy; the sonics exist beyond Scott's identity, and he only receives their vestiges. Therefore, Scott experiences and describes *phusis* by portraying how nature sonically discloses its interrelated existence, independent of humans. Through the poem's musicality, Scott and the reader connect with nature through musical communion.

Scott's poem allows the reader to engage with *phusis* because the reader's voice joins in the environment's musicality. Ecopoetry allows humans to participate in the diverse, interconnected forces and beings that comprise the natural world, using the "human capacity for song [...] to join in the exuberant singing, dancing, shape-changing, many-hued self-disclosure of phusis" (Rigby 434). Musical expression facilitates human relations with the natural world as human art responds to and

participates in the Earth's artistry. As a form of music, Scott's poem responds to nature's disclosure. Scott recognizes the potential, and creates an opportunity, for the reader's involvement in the natural world's resonance. "The Height of Land" constitutes an irregular ode because it is a moderately lengthy, sustained lyric poem containing irregular rhyme, meter, and formal language through which Scott praises nature. As an ode, the poem evokes song, dance, and oral performance, thus incorporating the reader into nature's musicality through the act of reading. Knickerbocker cites poet and University of Pennsylvania literature scholar Charles Berstein to demonstrate that "even when silently sounding the poem to one's inner ear," poets and readers "'sing the body of language [...] [They] stutter tunes with no melodies, only words'" (Knickerbocker 7; Bernstein 21 qtd. in Knickerbocker 7). Whether the reader sings, speaks, or silently reads "The Height of Land," they musically collaborate with the natural world and build a relationship with it through artistic cooperation. Scott recognizes this collaboration's significance by asserting that one can respond to nature's "spell" if they "answer in chime," conveying that both rhymed and wordless musical expression allows humans to connect with the natural world (Scott 51, 56). The poem becomes a medium through which the reader can indirectly experience nature by participating in *phusis*. This experience occurs because environmental and human sonority links humans and nature together through art. Additionally, the poem's elevated style mirrors Scott's physically elevated position between the wild and urban areas upon "The Height of Land," to demonstrate that poetry connects these two realms. Using sensations, emotions, and art, Scott's poem thus fosters a relationship between the reader and the natural world to bring the reader into the poet's wild encounter. However, the reader's experience remains distinctly indirect.

Nature exists independently of humans and is beyond artistic portrayal; art cannot capture or disclose its true essence. While the reader may connect to nature through Scott's poem, nature transcends poetic representation because language cannot truly capture natural phenomena, and how humans experience it. "The Height of Land" facilitates the reader's relation to nature but cannot act as a substitute for the real thing because language can artistically represent natural encounters, yet it cannot faultlessly recreate what a person experiences when immersed in nature. Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky argues that reality possesses forces that transcend

poetic representation because “the foundations of meaning lie in the world, and in human experience of the world, unconditioned by language” (Zwicky 15). First-hand natural encounters affect people in ways that a poem cannot reproduce. Therefore, poetry cannot portray nature without enacting what Heidegger terms “‘enframing’” (Heidegger 332, qtd. in Bate 255). University of Oxford literary scholar Jonathan Bate interprets “‘enframing’” as “making everything part of a system, thus obliterating the unconcealed being there of particular things” (Bate 255). Since nature exists autonomously beyond language, poetic representation subjugates and contorts nature by assigning specific words and phrases to its inexpressible features. Scott acknowledges these linguistic limitations when he describes how humans “snared [the stars’] fiery pinions, / Entangled in the meshes of bright words” (Scott 118–119). Through zoomorphism, the stars’ wings evoke flight, conveying freedom and their transcendence beyond humans’ experiential capabilities. Scott describes how words trap and confine the stars’ wings, suggesting that language subjugates and restricts the stars’ ineffable natural identities. The stars synecdochically represent nature in its entirety. Scott expresses that language cannot describe nature without reducing and contorting its autonomous identity. Thus, ecopoetry cannot capture nature’s essence faultlessly because it can only convey nature’s qualities through language. Since Scott establishes a meaningful relationship between nature and the reader built upon language, this relationship becomes insubstantial as he draws attention to nature’s incommunicable autonomy. Scott motivates the reader towards a more direct natural encounter by expressing nature’s existence beyond language.

The poem transmits Scott’s wild experience to the reader, but the aforementioned limits of language prevent the reader from understanding how nature truly exists. Scott proclaims that the natural world exists beyond his poetic portrayal because he feels:

> a spell
> Golden and inappellable
> That gives the inarticulate part
> Of our strange being one moment of release
> (Scott 51-54)

Natural forces and their effects on humans are ineffable. Thus, the poem cannot reproduce what the reader would experience in nature. Scott portrays the natural forces as “a spell” to imbue the lands with a mystical, esoteric identity which neither he nor anyone may describe. Scott again applies the first-person plural pronoun to identify that the reader may also undergo this experience. The poem refuses to replace or overcome authentic nature. By communicating how natural experience transcends articulation, the poem “draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing” (Rigby 437). The poem’s self-awareness reminds the reader that they are not truly experiencing the natural world. Their poetically mediated connection with nature only goes so far because Scott emphasizes this connection’s insubstantiality. An unfulfilled gap remains between the reader and the environment that only the reader can travel across.

Scott invites the reader into the real world by drawing upon the reader’s senses and emotions and bringing them into musical harmony with nature to develop a deep human-nature bond, but announces that the bond remains because nature is ultimately indescribable. To discover “the secret of that spell” of which “no man may tell,” the reader must encounter real nature (Scott 57–58). Scott makes nature’s forces and powers enigmatic and esoteric; the reader must experience them first-hand to truly understand nature. French poet Yves Bonnefoy observes that compelling poems refresh the reader’s sense of existence, or “presence,” within reality because the poet “can recall that presence is a possible experience, and he can stir up the need for it, [and] keep open the path that leads toward it” (Bonnefoy 801). By developing the reader’s meaningful relationship with the natural world, yet acknowledging this world’s existence outside of his poem, Scott reminds the reader that they, too, can undergo an encounter with nature. Within these limitations, the poem reveals the effects that the natural world has on humans. It instills in the reader a drive to enter nature and experience the phenomena that exist beyond these limitations. Thus, the poem “both draws [the reader] in and sends [them] forth, urging [them] to ‘interrupt’ [their] reading by returning [their] gaze to what lies forever beyond the page” (Rigby 438). While Scott’s poem cannot stand in for nature, it pushes the reader to experience it and motivates them to fulfill the relationship that the poem initiates. “The Height of Land” encourages the reader to seek out natural encounters by imbuing its description of nature with ambiguity. Furthermore, Scott limits his poetic

vision's authority to invite the reader to understand nature for themselves.

By accepting and acknowledging representational biases, Scott resists asserting an absolute understanding of nature. His recognized subjectivity invites other perspectives to experience and disclose what the Earth means for them. Scott reflects upon his personalized natural experience when he rhetorically questions, "How often in the autumn of the world / Shall the crystal shrine of dawning be rebuilt / With deeper meaning" (Scott 123–125)? By metaphorically describing the sunrise as an altar that is continuously imbued with new, greater significance, Scott identifies that even a natural feature as recurrent as night and day provokes a poetic response, subjective interpretation, and human introspection. He humbles himself and acknowledges that his experience is not unique. He reflects on how many other voices will, like his, create their own understandings of the natural event that he perceives. This question also constitutes an invitation: Scott calls readers and other poets to formulate their own meaningful conceptions of the natural world. Scott's poem embodies what Prescott College Environmental Humanities scholar David Gilcrest terms "hermeneutical poetics," an ecopoetic style in which subjectivity "bracket[s] the poet's commitment to the vision being offered in his or her poem, thus ensuring that meaning is kept in play, to one extent or another" (Gilcrest 100). Scott ensures that his representation of the natural world does not claim dominion over the truth in order to create room for other voices. Scott resists authoritatively portraying how he understands nature by foregrounding that his imagination contorts his poetic vision. The poem sends readers to discover their own perceptions of nature without Scott's vision exerting authority over it. Additionally, by articulating these understandings, readers can further the human participation in *phusis*, singing up the natural world by adding their unique voices and opinions in resonance with human and non-human others.

Scott forges a bond between the reader and the natural world portrayed within his poem, but mitigates this bond's strength. Scott encourages an encounter with real nature by distinguishing the reader from his poem's presentation of nature. The reader develops a vicarious physical, emotional, and musical bond with nature by reading the poem. However, Scott refuses to complete the reader's connection with nature. To fully experience this bond, the reader must leave his poem behind and

enter the magical, ineffable space whose grandeur and significance Scott communicates in “The Height of Land.” The poem demonstrates ecopoetry’s ability to direct readers into forming meaningful connections with the natural world. Literature is a bridge to, but not a substitute for, nature.

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF AESTHETIC DISTANCE WITHIN "TIN ROOF"

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Edited by Chloe Azoto and Michael Anders

In the poem "Tin Roof," Michael Ondaatje refines his pain and creates a contrived display of the emotional aftermath of his divorce. The poet employs aesthetic distance, shielding himself and his audience from raw discomfort, and weaving his intimate vulnerabilities and skillful aesthetics until they are indistinguishable from each other. In his essay, "Coming Through: A Review of Secular Love," critic Sam Solecki argues that Ondaatje's distinct style in "Tin Roof" can be divided into two voices: the poet as the central character, and the poet as the "creative voyeur who watches his own life; reflects and recreates it as art" (Solecki 128). Ondaatje shifts reality into poetry, creating an altogether different entity on the page. In this essay, I will define the metaphorical architecture of aesthetic distance of "Tin Roof," a structure at times both fluid and fragmented, creating controlled exposure of human loss. The architecture of "Tin Roof" can be broken down into four elements: physical surroundings, honest admissions of truth, subsequent recovery, and metaphor. Ondaatje shifts swiftly between introspective and exterior foci and intersperses glimpses into his darkness with quick diversions. These techniques enable Ondaatje to recover from outbursts of suffering, creating a finely-tuned poem, which is equal parts aesthetic enjoyment and satiation of our desire for human emotion.

Within "Tin Roof," Michael Ondaatje intermittently returns to what he can comfortably articulate: his physical surroundings. Ondaatje grounds himself in the physicality of setting. This architectural element cements his lines in the immediacy of his surroundings and slows the pace of his painful confession. The poet's first acknowledgement of his environment comes in section two, writing: "The geography of this room I know so well / tonight I could rise in the dark / sit at the table and write without light" (Ondaatje 104). In sharp contrast to the uncertainty of the first section, where "everything falls to the right place / or wrong place" (Ondaatje 103), Ondaatje describes the surrounding space of the cabin with conviction, claiming he is so familiar with it that he could even "write without light." Further in the poem, his tropical setting will be a subject Ondaatje returns to amid agonizing expressions of loss. He returns to the matter of the cabin and its geography several times, an architectural element that physically shelters the figure in the poem from the elements, and protects the poet from his own emotional turbulence.

In addition to being a subject the poet conveys with acuity, the inclusions of Ondaatje's physical space prolong respite from inner turmoil. At times, his external surroundings even act as a removed symbolic representation of his internal strife, enabling the poet to communicate his anguish with limited self-exposure. In the same section, he describes his knowledge of surrounding geography: "and all day the tirade pale blue waves / touch the black shore of volcanic rock / and fall to pieces here" (Ondaatje 104). Ondaatje is the one falling to pieces; we bear witness to his fragmentation in admissions such as "In certain mirrors / [the poet] cannot see himself at all. / He is joyous and breaking down" (Ondaatje 108). His projection of internal struggles upon the roaring sea creates distance from the subject, and this powerful imagery gives his audience an understanding of the gravity of his emotions. Ondaatje's physical surroundings are a framework in which the poet can lean on when necessary to fill in gaps and are a resource of communication with the audience; the cabin and ocean form a structure that can simultaneously weather and reproduce the storm of the poet's emotions.

If Michael Ondaatje's physical surroundings within "Tin Roof" are the foundation of the poem, then his candid and jarring admissions of truth are the windows, briefly shedding light into the poet's mind. Ondaatje begins the poem with the severe profession that he "look[ed] through windows / for cue cards / blazing in the sky. / The solution. / This last year I was sure I was going to die" (Ondaatje 103). He swiftly shifts the focus from signs in the outside world to himself in an admission of the lowest point in his life. Ondaatje repeats this, inserting glimpses of personal suffering amidst metaphor and motif. Later in "Tin Roof," Ondaatje returns to describing the cabin: "The cabin / its tin roof / a wind run radio" (Ondaatje 108). He suddenly integrates honesty: "In certain mirrors / he cannot see himself at all. / He is joyous and breaking down" (Ondaatje 108). An emotional whiplash, Michael Ondaatje gives a series of confessions but denies the reader emotional context. In the final moments of "Tin Roof," he reveals his desire to write poetry as Rainer Maria Rilke did, wanting to "sit down calm" like the German poet and confessing directly to him: "I have circled your book for years / like a wave combing / the green hair of the sea" (Ondaatje 122). In the next lines Ondaatje moves away from the wave metaphor and edges closer to a more intimate admission:"I always wanted poetry to be that / but this solitude brings no wisdom" (Ondaatje 122). However he quickly

deflects and continues, writing that solitude brings "just two day old food in the fridge" and "certain habits you would not approve of" (Ondaatje 122). He pivots quickly from the confessional to a more light-hearted tone, controlling his audiences' view into his interiority. Though the poet's confessions are windows into his pain, they provide limited light, restricting the audience's complete understanding of Ondaatje's suffering.

Despite the windows Michael Ondaatje gives us, he has also constructed blinds. Alongside short confessions, the poet staves off any direct descriptions of pain with complex and heavily veiled references and dramatic imagery. It is through this medium that Ondaatje conveys his suffering, and the indirect nature of his lines provides a reprieve from his anguish. In the third stanza of section nine, Ondaatje employs multiple external references and aesthetically pleasing imagery, culminating in a carefully wrought poetic expression of pain. He begins smoothly, describing the "All night slack-key music / and the bird whistling duino" (Ondaatje 111). Accompanied by the gentle notes of slack-key music, the "words and music" are "entangled in pebble / ocean static" (Ondaatje 111). At this point, it is hard to remember that "Tin Roof" is an expression of loss, a breakdown. In contrast, Ondaatje later integrates a dramatic reference to ramp up the imagery of suffering. He introduces the film *Casablanca* (1942), envisioning main star Humphrey Bogart in a drunk and depressed stupor after his lover leaves him: "he says to himself, stupid fucker / and knocks the bottle / leaning against his bare stomach onto the sheet" (Ondaatje 122). Though Ondaatje spends the first half of this section heightening the description of the actor in a regretful shambles, he quickly pulls back the curtain, distancing himself from this classic depiction of pain, saying "and that / was a movie I saw just once" (Ondaatje 120). External sources of suffering enable the poet to further enact aesthetic distance. In the case of *Casablanca*, if the reference too closely resembles the truth, Ondaatje shuts both the reference and the truth out of his constructed reality, reducing truth to fiction. Image and reference are morphed at will.

I have discussed the architectural elements of physical surroundings, confession, veiled imagery and reference—or the poem's structure, windows, and blinds. An element that requires subsequent discussion is the ornamentation flowing throughout

the entirety of “Tin Roof”: carefully wrought metaphor. Ondaatje employs metaphor to depict his inner turmoil between artist and man. A culmination of the three previous features, metaphor is the lens through which we can perceive and understand Ondaatje’s world. For Ondaatje the artist, poetic perfection is only found in silence. The very act of creating, or speaking poetry into existence, blemishes it with human fault. However, Ondaatje also possesses the human urge to create, to speak and engage with his humanity as the “creative voyeur who watches his own life.” As both a poet and man, to go silent is to die, an act he desires as a poet looking for perfection, but cannot commit because of his humanity. He is torn by his innate desire to speak, to articulate his life as art, but also knows that what he creates will never be perfect. Ondaatje reiterates this challenge several times in the poem, with the swirling Pacific symbolizing both his emotional anguish and his poetry. The poet is faced with the choice of drowning or remaining in purgatory on the shore, writing, “Tonight I lean over the Pacific / and its blue wild silk” (Ondaatje 109), or more subtly, “The tug over the cliff” (Ondaatje 108). In the final lines, Ondaatje refines the metaphor to its final culmination: “I wanted poetry to be walnuts / in their green cases / but now it is the sea / and we let it drown us” (Ondaatje 123). The poet admits defeat. He cannot enter the sea because of “the warmth in the sleeve,” his heart (Ondaatje 108). Ondaatje successfully connects the personal struggle of his life to the universal one of the artist. The poetic perfection that is only found in the silence of entering the sea signifies the death of the man. Ondaatje leans over the cliff, torn between impulses. “Tin Roof” is a consummation of aesthetic principles of art and the human loss of love. Ondaatje’s interwoven metaphor of a figure divided between man and poet standing on the edge of the abyss is both the adornment of the architecture and the very thing that binds it together.

Ondaatje refines his own pain into a discrete structure. “Tin Roof” is comprised of detailed and layered imagery and reference, creating a carefully constructed fabrication of pain and an existential questioning of the artist. Together, the poet’s physical environment, honesty, image, and overarching metaphor simulate a poetic breakdown. Michael Ondaatje remains safely unexposed behind his aesthetic structure, limiting our perception into the true darkness of his personal life and crises. His cabin on the cliffside is a safehouse woven from his own emotional hardship. Ondaatje translates his raw discomfort to artistic satisfaction; disassociating himself

from his own pain and making it art. Beautiful suffering, “Tin Roof” is a cadenced collapse of human and artist.

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