SPECIAL DOSSIER

STEM in US Popular Culture

Assessing Gender Discourse, Stereotypes, and Mainstreaming

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STEM in US Popular Culture: Assessing Gender Discourse, Stereotypes and Mainstreaming

Laura Álvarez Trigo
Universidad Complutense de Madrid / IE University
Erika Tiburcio Moreno
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid / Universidad Complutense

Gender representation in popular culture has been widely studied and discussed during the past decades. While women and girls have come to occupy a more varied set of roles and many contemporary popular texts are far from the traditional "male gaze" (Mulvey), quite a high percentage of the damaging stereotypes that have built many media tropes are far from behind us. Popular culture products have explored and shown alternative models to hegemonic ones. Sarah Connor, Ellen Ripley, or Leia Organa revealed distinct attitudes that seemed to defy the patriarchal order. Beyond these visible attitudes such as strength, determination or leadership, her figure also questioned her femininity through her physique (Ripley, Connor), or perpetuated traditional one through mothering reasons (Connor, Leia) (Tasker).

Current female character building poses its own particular challenges, as 21st-century heroines need to hold up to a set of standards that are not always complementary (Bernárdez Rodal). Over the last two decades, the presence of female protagonists in popular culture has been evident. In fact, the irruption of the fourth feminist wave during the 2010s and its denunciation of violence against women in all spheres of life (sexual, digital, labor) has been fundamental in the creation of female characters. Still, as Silvestre Cabrera, López Belloso, and Royo Prieto (2021) explore, this great advance in feminist issues also requires an analysis of what the advances and characteristics of the characters of our century really are.

The objective of this dossier is to offer an overview of different contemporary approaches in US popular culture to the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in STEM-related narratives. The title of the dossier "STEM in US Popular Culture: Assessing Gender Discourse, Stereotypes and Mainstreaming" tries to open up the discussion to both positive and negative takes on contemporary narratives that feature female characters on STEM-related environments, such as students, workers, or even fans of genres that had traditionally been erroneously associated with male audiences (i.e., Science Fiction and superhero comic books). With all of this in mind, this number includes articles dealing with TV shows, literature, comics, and movies, speaking to the many mediums that conform popular culture in order to

illustrate all the areas in which women and young girls can potentially have an important role as STEM experts.

In "Good Morning, Winner: Subverting Girl Nerd Stereotypes in *Booksmart* (2019)," Andrea Sofía Regueira Martín (Universidad de Zaragoza) explores the history of the representation of nerd teenagers in 20th-century cinema, noting a clear absence of nerd girls and evidencing a gender gap and a clear gap in the pool of role models for spectators. Regueira Martín looks at how *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019) subverts the stereotype of the nerd focusing on two female protagonists, sorority, and internal change.

In "With Great Power Comes Gender Diversity: Superpowers and STEM Stereotypes in Marvel Comics," Igor Juricevic (Indiana University South Bend) analyzes gender representation by looking at the portrayal of STEM-related skills in Marvel comics. The author shows how there is a clear gender bias for Marvel characters up to the 1990s, how it has changed after 2000, and explores possible future advances in education based on those changes in popular culture.

"Of Monsters and Women: Two Female Characters and Trans/Posthumanism in HBO's *Lovecraft Country*" by Alejandro Batista Tejada (Universidad de Sevilla) explores how the gender-swapping of two originally male characters evokes a new posthuman state in the 2020 screen adaptation of *Lovecraft Country*. The analysis centers on how their processes of "trans-humanization" represent different trends as seen through the lenses of posthumanist theory.

Finally, in "Redefining Humanity: Posthumanism in the American Science Fiction Narratives of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*," Tana-Julie Drewitz (University of Duisburg-Essen) examines how the protagonists of the two aforementioned novels approach power struggles in a way that is not found in traditionally white, capitalist, and patriarchal narratives. Drewitz shows how these characters' female identity and posthuman condition are key in how the novels move away from such conventions.

Ultimately, what these four studies bring to the fore is not only the current state of gender diversity and different kinds of representation of women in STEM-related narratives—the nerdgirl, the superheroine, and the cyborg—but also they speak to us about the possibility of better and varied forms of inclusion.

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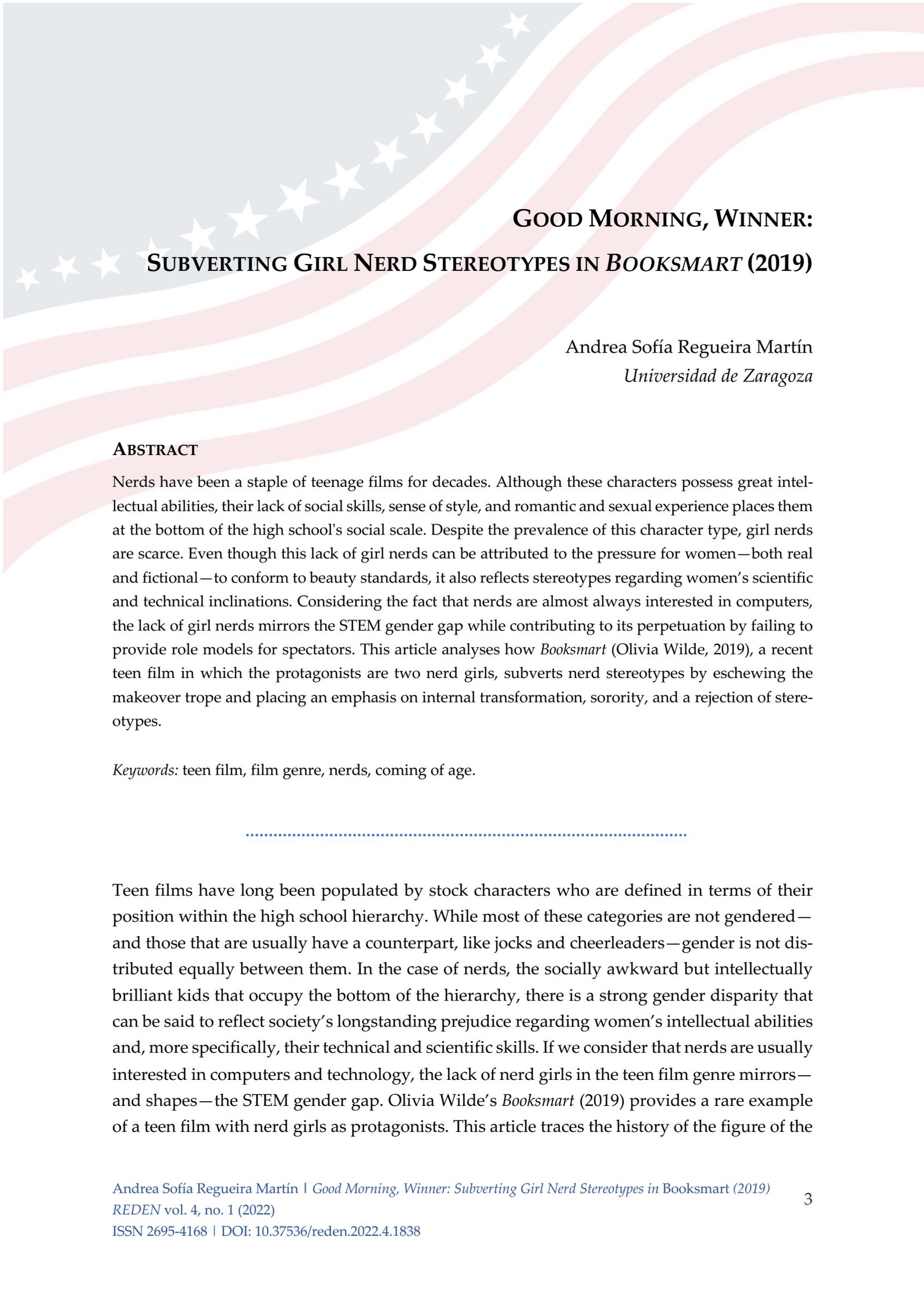
GOOD MORNING, WINNER:

SUBVERTING GIRL NERD STEREOTYPES IN *BOOKSMART* (2019)

Andrea Sofía Regueira Martín
Universidad de Zaragoza

ABSTRACT

Nerds have been a staple of teenage films for decades. Although these characters possess great intellectual abilities, their lack of social skills, sense of style, and romantic and sexual experience places them at the bottom of the high school's social scale. Despite the prevalence of this character type, girl nerds are scarce. Even though this lack of girl nerds can be attributed to the pressure for women—both real and fictional—to conform to beauty standards, it also reflects stereotypes regarding women's scientific and technical inclinations. Considering the fact that nerds are almost always interested in computers, the lack of girl nerds mirrors the STEM gender gap while contributing to its perpetuation by failing to provide role models for spectators. This article analyses how *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019), a recent teen film in which the protagonists are two nerd girls, subverts nerd stereotypes by eschewing the makeover trope and placing an emphasis on internal transformation, sorority, and a rejection of stereotypes.

Keywords: teen film, film genre, nerds, coming of age.

Teen films have long been populated by stock characters who are defined in terms of their position within the high school hierarchy. While most of these categories are not gendered—and those that are usually have a counterpart, like jocks and cheerleaders—gender is not distributed equally between them. In the case of nerds, the socially awkward but intellectually brilliant kids that occupy the bottom of the hierarchy, there is a strong gender disparity that can be said to reflect society's longstanding prejudice regarding women's intellectual abilities and, more specifically, their technical and scientific skills. If we consider that nerds are usually interested in computers and technology, the lack of nerd girls in the teen film genre mirrors—and shapes—the STEM gender gap. Olivia Wilde's *Booksmart* (2019) provides a rare example of a teen film with nerd girls as protagonists. This article traces the history of the figure of the

nerd and the representation of nerd girls in teenage films in order to explore to which extent *Booksmart* subverts the stereotypes that have accompanied onscreen depictions of nerd girls through the decades.

I. FROM ZERO TO HERO: TRACING THE RISE OF THE NERD

The figure of the nerd has been ubiquitous in US popular culture for decades, predating the rise of the term itself. Benjamin Nugent dates it back to Scribbly, a comic strip created by Sheldon Mayer in 1936 (56). The Oxford English Dictionary shows that the press began to report the emergence of the term "nerd" in the 1950s, when it replaced "square" as an epithet ascribed to those who were considered unhip. By the mid-1970s, comedy writers had realised the comedic potential of these underdogs. In 1975, *National Lampoon* magazine published a poster that defined nerds as "an adolescent male possessing … socially objectionable characteristics" like poor fashion sense, lack of athleticism and sexual inexperience (Arky and Barrett). As Jessica M. Stanley explains, this definition of nerds not only codes them as male, but also as the antithesis of traditional masculinity, which is characterised by "activity, extroversion, sexual prowess and interest in athletics" (3–4).

Despite this association of nerds with subaltern forms of masculinity, the figure of the female nerd is part of the *Saturday Night Live* sketch series that contributed to the mainstreaming of the word nerd as well as to the crystallisation of the nerd stereotype (Lane 8). The sketch series "The Nerds," which ran from 1978 to 1980, introduced the figure of the female nerd in the character of Lisa "Four Eyes" Loopner (Gilda Radner), who carried the same narrative weight as her friend Todd "Pizza Face" DeLaMuca (Bill Murray). As Lane argues, the relevance of Lisa lies not merely in her existence, but also in the fact that she is given a voice from her very first onscreen appearance, when she states "we're an idea whose time has come. We're young. We're brilliant. We're nerds. It's our turn to be popular" (5–8). Anne Beatts, one of the writers behind "The Nerds," went on to create *Square Pegs* (1982–1983), a television comedy series about two teenage nerd girls and their struggles to fit in. The series predates both John Hughes's humanised depictions of nerds in films like *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Weird Science* (1985) and the *Revenge of the Nerds* film franchise (1984–1994), which brought nerds to the forefront and initiated a triumphant narrative from which female nerds, like the characters created by Beatts, have been markedly absent despite Four Eyes Lisa's claim that her time had come.

The rise of narratives about (male) nerds as triumphant underdogs who challenge and subvert the social status quo of high school and university campuses coincides with the emergence and spread of the personal computer, which initiated what David Brooks calls "the great empowerment phase" of nerds, a period of rapid growth in the computing industry during which those who worked in it accumulated wealth and social prestige. The

simultaneous rise of the tech billionaire[1] and of the revenge of the nerds narrative showed teenage nerds that their current social ostracism need not last forever and that they hold the capacity to subvert the social order and find the sort of success that popularity and good looks cannot buy. In film and television, like in real life, nerd girls were relegated to the background. Nerd masculinities, on the other hand, became more visible than ever, a trend which continued growing into the twenty-first century and reached its peak with the success of *The Big Bang Theory*[2] (2007–2019) (Banet-Weiser 153).

The erasure of the girl nerd in popular culture echoes that of the women coders and programmers who populated the tech industry for decades before the boom of the personal computer (Thompson). The year Thompson identifies as the moment in which men took over programming is also the year that saw the birth of the Macintosh computer, whose famous advertisement aired during that year's Super Bowl and was directed by Ridley Scott. Seven months later, the first *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) film premiered. Although differing in tone and intention, both the film and the ad share several elements that mark a shift in cultural representations of nerds and their power. Apple's *1984* ad shows an Orwellian dystopia in which masses of workers march in unison into an auditorium where a large screen projects an image of a Big Brother figure. The monochrome images of the workers are crosscut with the luminous figure of a blonde woman running towards the screen bearing a sledgehammer while chased by the riot police. In contrast with the workers' uniforms and the police officers' riot gear, which cover their entire body, the athlete is clad in a white tank top and red running shorts that leave most of her body uncovered, displaying her athletic physique and tanned skin. With a sledgehammer hit, the athlete liberates the workers from the shackles of Big Brother as they stare aghast.

The workers in Apple's ad are coded as male and shown as obedient rule-followers. Their clothes are oversized and unstylish, just like those of nerds, and they are set in opposition with athleticism, which is represented both by the riot police—agents of the status quo—and the woman, whose slim and athletic body and blonde hair align her with hegemonic beauty ideals. The riot police, who monitor and punish the workers' and the woman's behaviour, find their equivalent in high school and college jocks, whose athletic abilities place them above nerds in the social hierarchy and who often exhibit cruel behaviour towards nerds. The advertisement, like *Revenge of the Nerds*, can be read as a story about a group of nerds breaking free from social conventions, which in both texts are dictated by those who are stronger than them. In both cases, women's bodies are used as a tool through which the male subjects

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[1] Bill Gates became the youngest self-made billionaire in 1987, when he was only 31 years old (Thibault).

[2] Although *The Big Bang Theory* features two female nerds, these characters, who were not introduced until the third season, play a secondary role. Additionally, as Willey and Subramaniam argue, their gendered representation, along with their association with areas of science considered more feminine and their lack of involvement in the nerdy pursuits enjoyed by the male characters can be argued to contribute to "the erasure of female nerds" (21).

achieve freedom. In the ad, they are liberated from their drone-like existence thanks to the physical prowess of the runner, whereas in the film their final victory comes partly from Lewis's (Robert Carradine) seduction of Betty (Julia Montgomery). Like the ad's runner, Betty embodies the feminine beauty ideal: she is slim, pretty and blonde. Through a cruel deceit, the film denies Betty sexual agency and presents her body as an object to be possessed. Lewis is, by definition, a rapist, and his rape is not only excused but also portrayed as an avenue to love, showing a complete disregard for women's bodies and agency that, as Kendall argues, aligns nerds with hegemonic masculinity (261–69). The woman in Apple's ad is also objectified. Even though the workers do not even glance at the athlete, her body is presented as a spectacle for the spectator to enjoy. The runner's breasts bounce with every step as she runs towards the camera, apparently not wearing a bra, and the spectator's gaze is fixed on her curves as she gyrates in slow motion. The message in both texts seems to be the same: set yourselves free from convention and you can have this too.

Saturday Night Live's Four Eyes was right about something: the time had indeed come for nerds and geeks to rise through the ranks. Where she was wrong, though, was in believing that this power shift would include her. We now live in a tech-dominated world, where 7 out of the 10 richest people in the world made their fortune out of nerdy pursuits and none of them are women. Going down the Forbes list, one must scroll past the first 200 richest men in tech to find women like Wang Laichun and Judy Faulkner, who started their own tech companies and rose to success in a field dominated by men ("World's Billionaires List"). The perception of tech and, by extension, nerd identities as almost exclusively male that took hold in the 1980s has prevailed ever since, giving rise to the damaging myth of the stereotypical programmer as an antisocial male loner who prefers machines to social interaction, a stereotype that perpetuates the technological divide across genders and, by extension, women's access to one of the most lucrative industries (Miller). This association of tech and men is illustrated by *Triumph of the Nerds*, a 1996 documentary series that was a staple in high school classrooms at the time in which the narrator states "it is no coincidence that the only woman in the vicinity looks bored, because this is a boy thing." This apparently harmless statement effectively depicts tech as a boy's club where women are not welcome, which may affect young women's decision to pursue a career in tech. As we will see in the following section, a teenage girl with an interest in STEM will also struggle to find points of identification in teenage films, which reflects the gender gap in science and technology while reinforcing the stereotypes that are partly to blame for it.

II. UGLY DUCKLINGS AND WEIRDOS: LOOKING FOR THE TEENAGE NERD GIRL

Considering that popular culture mirrors the society that creates it, the fact that the lack of women in science and technology is reflected in films and television comes as no surprise. When it comes to teenage films, even though the nerd stereotype is a staple of the genre, nerd girls are largely absent from it and—when they appear—they are often relegated to the

background, ostracised or forced to give up their intellect and/or change their appearance in order to succeed (Shary, "The Nerdly Girl" 236; *Generation Multiplex*, 46). A considerable number of films, like Cameron Crowe's *Say Anything* (1989) or Alexander Payne's *Election* (1999) feature what Shary refers to as "smart girls" ("The Nerdly Girl" 236): academically successful female characters who are not coded as nerds. In other films, such as Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), girls are depicted as intelligent and independent characters who inhabit the fringes of the high school hierarchy but whose academic performance is not alluded to. While it is true that teenage films—especially those about middle-class, suburban teenagers— tend to ignore academic pursuits to focus on popularity or on teenage romance and sexual initiations (Bulma 86; Wood 312), the genre's reluctance to portray teenage girls as academically inclined is worthy of attention, as it replicates outmoded but unyielding stereotypes regarding women's interest in intellectual pursuits.

When thinking about women's education, it is important to remember that, until fairly recently, girls did not have equal access to it. By the mid-1930s, the majority of American teenagers were high school students, and institutions were mostly coeducational. However, for the most part the fates of teenage girls were sealed: they were to become wives and mothers. Those who did not, had very limited professional choices, mostly in caretaking roles such as teaching and nursing (Hine 215; Madigan 11–12; Palladino 15). The tide turned in 1972, when Title IX of the Education Amendments banned sex-based discrimination in education across federally-funded education programmes. Until then, most higher education institutions limited the maximum number of female students, which made the admission process considerably more competitive for women than for men (Rose 157-158). As it turns out, women were eager to learn. Less than a decade later, the percentage of women completing an undergraduate degree was equal to that of men, and women have graduated from college in larger numbers than men ever since (Bryant). Considering this, the lack of representation of academically ambitious girls in teen films not only fails to portray the reality of adolescent girls but, as Shary argues, it also underplays the role of their intellect and underscores the importance of beauty and popularity, promoting "appearance over intelligence" (*Generation Multiplex* 46).

The issue of popularity is one of the teen film's greatest concerns. The genre is inhabited by character types who are defined by the place they occupy within the high school hierarchy, with popular students and jocks at the top and nerds and other misfits at the bottom. These types are easily recognisable through their behaviour, their hobbies, their clothes, and the spaces they occupy. As we saw in the previous section, nerds are not only characterised by their intellect and their interest in technology, but also by a lack of athleticism, inadequate social skills and unfashionable clothes. The stereotypical nerd is scrawny, has bad skin, wears braces and looks like he is dressed in hand-me-downs. When girls are nerdy, they are often portrayed as more attractive and less nerdy than their male counterparts. Harry Winer's *Spacecamp* (1986) provides a good example of a smart girl and a nerdy girl whose nerdishness is

attenuated. The film takes place during a NASA summer camp where five teenagers and a female astronaut are accidentally launched into space and must find their way back to earth. While other 1980s films that include nerdy girls relegate them to the background, *Spacecamp* features three top-billed female actors playing scientifically-inclined female characters. Tish (Kelly Preston), a fashionable girl who wants to be an interstellar disc jockey, contrasts with space-obsessed Kathryn (Lea Thompson), who aspires to become a shuttle commander. Although Kathryn is conventionally attractive, she is coded as a nerd through her unfashionable clothing, lack of make-up and limited social skills. Her clothes are mostly plain and utilitarian: she arrives at camp wearing a space-themed T-shirt and sleeps wearing an oversized top. In contrast, Tish has her hair permed, her make-up is bright and glittery and she wears fashionable clothes and quirky accessories that convey her playfulness and individuality. Although Tish is not coded as a nerd, she has photographic memory, and it is her knowledge of Morse code that allows the lost kids to contact NASA to plan their return to earth. In contrast, Kathryn, who is drowning under the weight of her own high expectations, panics under pressure. As a consequence, part of her journey consists in toning down her ambition and learning how to cede control to others and become a team player. While *Spacecamp* is one of the rare films that shows girls with a passion for science, it does so while privileging an agreeable and cheerful type of femininity over a more aggressively ambitious one.

Another aspect in which *Spacecamp* differs from other representations of nerd girls is in the film's refusal to give Kathryn the Cinderella treatment, eschewing superficial change and focusing on psychological change instead. Transformation tales in which a nerd girl goes from ugly duckling to swan are common in the genre. Where most nerd boys do not have to undergo a physical transformation in order to achieve social recognition, which is achieved through romantic conquest or through their computing skills, in the case of nerd girls their positive qualities are not enough, which suggests that girls may be intelligent or quirky, but only as long as they are pretty. That is the case in films like Robert Iscove's *She's All That* (1999) and Raja Gosnell's *Never Been Kissed* (1999). In both films, the protagonists are despised by their peers because of their status as outsiders: in the former, Laney (Rachael Leigh Cook) is the subject of a cruel bet to turn an unlikely candidate into prom queen, while in the latter, Josie (Drew Barrymore) is ostracised and mocked to such an extent that she carries the psychological consequences into adulthood. In both cases, a tale of transformation aligns the protagonists with an acceptable form of femininity that makes them liked by those who previously treated them with contempt. As Shary explains, *She's All That*'s Laney wins acceptance not due to her artistic inclinations or her social conscience, but thanks to a makeover that consists in little more than her removing her glasses, suggesting that women's positive qualities are irrelevant unless they are accompanied by masculine validation (*Generation Multiplex* 47).

Never Been Kissed offers a different take on nerdy girls. To begin with, flashbacks into the protagonist's adolescence depict a much more stereotypical portrayal of a girl nerd, which is emphasised by garish 1980s fashions that add comedic effect. Now in her twenties, Josie is

a successful journalist no longer nicknamed "Josie Grossie" who has to pose as a high school student for a story, which forces her to revisit the traumatising events of her own adolescence. In order to come out triumphant—both professionally and personally—Josie needs to embrace her true self and be completely honest. Instead of writing a piece about the shocking behaviour of today's teens, Josie writes about her story, confessing her romantic inexperience to the world and asking Sam (Michael Vartan), an English teacher with whom she had developed a close bond, to forgive her and to grant her her first ever kiss. *Never Been Kissed*, then, is a tale of transformation in which the protagonist's positive qualities are not completely left aside. The process by which Josie leaves her teenage nerd self behind does not take place during a makeover montage that magically makes her desirable to the eyes of others, but through a long period of time during which the nerdy, insecure teenager grows into a woman, the culmination of which is shown in the film. Although Josie's appearance has changed since she was a teenager, her romantic success does not stem from this physical change but, rather, from an appreciation of her honesty, warmth, and intelligence.

Both of the examples discussed above share another element: the absence of a STEM-related interest. Both girls' passions lie in the arts, which is not uncommon in the depiction of academically-inclined girls. While boy nerds are usually associated with computers, girl nerds and clever girls rarely show interest in scientific subjects. Additionally, when they are interested in science, their passion gets in the way of their social success. Sometimes they may be encouraged to tone down their ambition like in *Spacecamp*. In other films, like *Real Genius* (1985), their behaviour comes across as odd and almost pathological, even more so than that of nerd boys. Technologically-inclined girls also face gender discrimination. Angelina Jolie's character in *Hackers* (1995) is not coded as a nerd, but as an overly sexualised cyberpunk rebel. As the only female hacker in the group, she sees her abilities questioned by a newcomer because of her gender, and she is made to wear more feminine clothing after losing a bet. As was explained before, in their reluctance to give a voice to academically ambitious girls, teenage films perpetuate damaging notions regarding women's role in society. Additionally, the lack of teenage girls with an interest in scientific subjects mirrors the gender gap in STEM fields while contributing to the lack of role models for scientifically-oriented girls, who will struggle to find an onscreen teen girl with interests similar to their own.

III. TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPTION OF NERD GIRLS: THE CASE OF *BOOKSMART*

In line with feminism's "new luminosity in popular culture" (Gill 6), the past few years have witnessed a renewed interest in female coming-age-stories across film and television, among which we can find a sizeable number of films that, like Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017), "promote self-determination in matters of gender and sexuality that provide exceptions to heteronormativity and rigid gender roles" (Stone 91). Some recent teenage films and television series feature protagonists who show a nascent feminist consciousness despite their youth (*easy A* [2010], *Lady Bird*, *Moxie* [2021]), defy normative beauty standards (*Dumplin'* [2018], *Sierra*

Burgess is a Loser [2018]) and challenge heteronormativity (*The Miseducation of Cameron Post* [2018], *Blockers* [2018], *Euphoria* [2019–ongoing], *Yellowjackets* [2021–ongoing]). Some of them, like *Booksmart*, do all three. Although they are far from perfect, these girls are often strong, smart, and determined. However, as Bernárdez Rodal argues, the rise of new models of female heroines in popular culture does not necessarily mean that conventional depictions of gender have been erased (17). This can be seen in the fact that the twenty-first century has not been much kinder to nerdy girls. They have mostly appeared in secondary roles as the protagonist's best friend (*Jennifer's Body* [2009]) or as the nerd protagonist's love interest (*Napoleon Dynamite* [2005]). Teen films continue to show a reluctance to code smart girl characters as nerds, positioning them as outcasts who either fulfil normative ideals of beauty (*High School Musical* [2006]) or rebellious types who refuse to conform to gendered ideals of appearance and conduct (*Juno* [2007]) (Clarke 261). With this in mind, the release of *Booksmart*, a film that places two nerdy girls at the centre of its narrative, marks a shift in the onscreen representation of academically-oriented girls, which is taken one step further by a plot that does not require them to change their appearance in order to succeed and does not base their worth on their ability to attract members of the opposite sex. Instead, the focus is placed on sorority, self-determination and the dismantling of stereotypes.

3.1 A DIFFERENT KIND OF (FEMINIST) NERDY GIRL

Booksmart offers an attenuated version of high school stereotypes: there are no athletes wearing varsity jackets, no cheerleaders in barely-there skirts and most of the students seem to share a casual look that would have placed them within the rebellious misfit group in 1980s teen films. Yet the social hierarchy that classifies students according to their popularity remains, and the two protagonists are coded as nerds, and thus positioned at the bottom of the pyramid, from the very beginning of the film. The film's opening scene shows Molly (Beanie Feldstein) sitting on her bedroom floor while listening to a motivational audio before getting ready for her last ever day of high school. The voice-over narration begins playing over the opening credits, greeting Molly with "good morning, winner" and telling her that she is "ready to dominate" the day, that she has "worked harder than anyone" and that she is "a champion." All of this is said before the film's first shot, firmly establishing the protagonist as an overachiever who believes herself to be superior to the rest. Even though the audio is narrated by somebody else (Maya Rudolph), it sounds like the protagonist's internal monologue and it introduces the spectator to Molly's core beliefs both about herself and about those around her. Her intellectual excellence is confirmed by the first shots, which show us Molly's room before we even get to see what she looks like. Molly is sitting on the floor with her back to the camera, facing a tidy desk that looks like it has been used regularly. On the wall, a Yale pennant provides clues regarding her academic ambitions, while the medals and diplomas that crowd her shelves confirm her as a first-class student. The detail shots that follow as the audio continues playing provide insight into the nature of her academic inclinations: the

camera moves through her shelves revealing academic excellence awards, feminist parapher-
nalia that includes photos of successful women like Michelle Obama and Gloria Steinem and,
finally, a detail shot of her graduation gown with "valedictorian" embroidered on it, hung
together with an outfit that looks ready to be worn. As the spectator sees this, the audio en-
courages Molly to look down on those who have doubted her. Then, the scene cuts to the
protagonist's face, whose eyes remain closed as the audio says "fuck those losers. Fuck them
in their stupid fucking faces" before she opens her eyes and takes off her retainer while staring
at the camera. The emphasis placed on the orthodontic retainer reminds us that Molly once
wore braces, a staple of onscreen nerds. At the same time, the motivational audio's unrealistic
ending firmly positions it as an extension of Molly's thoughts, while her aggression towards
her classmates suggests resentment and hostility towards her peers—which nerds often feel
as a consequence of the mismatch between their intellectual superiority and their lowly social
status. Molly's self-confidence is then built up only to be dismantled immediately afterwards,
with her anger giving way to a vulnerability that anticipates one of the themes that run
through the film: the deceitful nature of appearances.

The following scene introduces the film's co-protagonist and Molly's best friend Amy
(Kaitlyn Dever). Eclecticism and social consciousness are to Amy what hard work and deter-
mination to succeed are to Molly. Amy's clothes are a mishmash of styles, which is empha-
sised by the oddly placed patches on her denim jacket and the bumper stickers on her car.
Both the bumper stickers and the patches represent aspects of her identity as well as her ea-
gerness to define herself as an individual. They reveal that, like Molly, Amy is also a feminist.
However, while Molly's brand of feminism is characterised by a focus on individual success,
Amy's favours environmental and social issues: she is also a vegan, and cares about the rights
of those living in less privileged regions of the world. Her informal and utilitarian style reflects
her activist aspirations: she wears clothes that allow freedom of movement, which will be
necessary when she travels to Botswana on a volunteering trip. Additionally, her adventurous
spirit is highlighted by her eclectic taste and her bolo tie, an accessory associated with the
Wild West that marks her as a pioneer who is willing to go beyond convention. The two pro-
tagonists possess a feminist consciousness that reflects the fact that they came of age during
the fourth wave of feminism, a time when, as Rosalind Gill explains, feminism lost its stigma
and became a "desirable, stylish and decidedly fashionable" identity (2). As many have ar-
gued, this resurgence of feminism is not without its problems, and the two protagonists em-
body the contradictions that underlie fourth wave feminism. Molly's shrine to successful
women, along with her inspirational tape, reveals her as a personification of a brand of femi-
nism that focuses "on the individual empowered woman" (Banet-Weiser 17), emphasises "the
neoliberal principles of agency, choice, and empowerment" (Rivers 57) and promotes the idea
that one's failures are due to a lack of self-confidence rather than a result of a patriarchal sys-
tem that prevents and undermines women's achievements (Banet-Weiser 96, Gill 8, Rivers 63).
The arguments that Rob Stone makes in his analysis of *Lady Bird* resonate here (90). Molly's

feminist consciousness, like Lady Bird's, shows potential but, at the same time, she is self-centred and blissfully ignorant of other women's struggles. Much to Amy's dismay, Molly partakes in the double standards that discriminate against sexually active women. In her individualism, Molly struggles to find room to consider other women's desires—including Amy's—as valid. In contrast, Amy's desire to volunteer in Botswana making tampons suggests a deeper awareness of global systemic inequalities, as well as of her own privilege. However, she struggles to make herself heard despite the yearning to speak up that her patches and bumper stickers convey. The film emphasises the importance of sorority by making the two protagonists have to learn from one another in order to tone down the inconsistencies of their respective positions: Amy will never be a successful activist unless she makes her voice heard and her intentions clear like Molly does, while Molly needs to learn from Amy's selfless empathy towards other women.

3.2 DISMANTLING THE HIGH SCHOOL HIERARCHY

Costume not only sets the protagonists apart from each other, but also from their peers. Unlike in stereotypical depictions of nerds, it does so without making the protagonists look ridiculous or laughable. Molly's formal style reflects her professional ambitions. Even though she is still in high school her outfit—a blazer, a turtleneck, opaque tights, and dress shoes—marks her as ready for the workplace. In comparison with her classmates, Molly is overdressed. The film is set in Los Angeles at the end of the school year, when the temperatures are warm, but Molly's clothes are more suitable for a colder climate. This is underscored when she is framed in between her (more popular) classmates, who are dressed in what looks like beachwear. Costume, then, makes it obvious that Molly does not fit in with the popular crowd and, at the same time, the fact that the others are dressed so casually marks their disregard towards appropriateness in an academic setting. The contrast between the two protagonists and their peers becomes evident as soon as they drive into the high school grounds. In the school parking lot, a shot shows more modern cars parked in the foreground, while Amy's old Volvo is shown driving in the background. The position of the cars replicates the hierarchical structure of the high school and serves as a reminder that the protagonists are far from the top. At the same time, the difference between Amy's car and the others marks the protagonists as outliers. Their lowly position, along with other students' disregard for authority, is confirmed when they park the car. The sign that says the spot is reserved for the "class president" has been vandalised so that it reads "ass president." Their inability to fit in continues as they approach the high school building and a skateboarder's presence scares them. Once in the corridors, they are the only ones not partaking in the celebrations. In fact, Amy and Molly seem annoyed that the rest of the students are celebrating, with Molly joking that they should have shown that much energy at her inauguration assembly.

Costume, props and framing accentuate the protagonists' status as nerds. However, theirs is a subdued version of the stereotypical nerd: they are made fun of but not cruelly so

and, while they look different from their peers, their appearance is not meant to be a source of comedy. This is not the only way in which *Booksmart* challenges stereotypes. The entire film, like other teen films before, is keen on reminding us that one cannot judge people by their appearance alone. Molly, who finds comfort in the fact that she is the most academically successful out of her peers, is in for a rude awakening when she finds out that those she deems inferior to herself—and who *look* like they do not care about intellectual matters—are also going to Ivy League universities. This happens after she overhears her classmates criticising her personality and claps back at them, telling them that she does not regret her choices because she is going to Yale. During her comeback, she is framed in a close-up, which emphasises her emotion and promotes identification. Once she realises the others also have bright futures, she is framed from a longer distance, with her image reflected on the bathroom mirrors highlighting the moment in which she is made aware that things are not always that they seem and that one cannot judge others based on appearances alone. The mirror shot marks a moment of identity crisis. Up until this point, Molly had based her self-worth on her intelligence, but finding out that others can perform as well as she does while making time to devote to other hobbies forces her to question whether she is really who she thought she was. As the others leave the bathroom, we can hear a distorted version of the motivational speech from the opening scene, which reflects her crumbling worldview and self-esteem. As the sound gets louder, her distress is accentuated by the use of a dolly zoom. When she leaves the toilet, handheld camera movements follow her as she frantically asks her classmates where they are going to college, breaking a high school rule that bans them from revealing their destination. The instability of the camera movements combined with the distorted effect of a wide-angle lens and the use of rack focus make the scene feel like part of a horror film, which reflects Molly's growing anxiety. The use of sound further underscores the protagonist's distress. Molly's breathing gets louder and more laboured as a droning sound effect mirrors her agitation. When the bell rings, an upbeat song that includes a beat that sounds almost like a siren plays as the students celebrate the end of their high school years, with Molly and Amy being the only ones who are not having fun. The song's contrasting sounds mirror the situation: while everybody is joyful, Molly's despair and anger are evident, and the siren-like sounds emphasise the fact that she is going through a crisis. Her humiliation reaches its peak when a classmate throws a condom filled with water at her face. The fact that the student who does it belongs to the drama crowd, who are also set in contrast with the popular crowd, further positions her as an outsider.

It is this event that pushes Molly to make a change. Framed against an overcast sky while wearing a grey hoodie, which once again mirrors her current state of mind, Molly declares: "I am going to experience a seminal, fun anecdote and we are gonna change our stories forever." With this in mind, the two girls start a quest to find a party in which they can show that they are more than brains. Molly's choice of words suggests that, for her, a fun high school experience is another project in which to excel, her last assignment before graduation. The

utilitarian nature of the protagonists' quest is highlighted by their choice of outfit: matching navy boiler suits and oversized down coats. As we saw in the previous section, nerd girls often have to undergo a makeover and conform to the rules of hegemonic femininity in order to succeed, their layers of clothing peeled away to reveal a hidden beauty that finally makes them attractive to the eyes of others. *Booksmart* subverts this stereotype by doing the exact opposite: covering up the protagonists in more layers that deliberately hide their bodies. Both Molly and Amy hope to make romantic advances on someone at the party, but instead of marking themselves as sexually available, they do the opposite. Their reticence to enter the social landscape of the high school party is further emphasised by their watching self-defence videos and the use of hand sanitiser before going out. While most teenagers see a house party as a site of pleasure, Molly and Amy see it as a site full of potential danger. Even though there is a change of outfit before they reach their final destination, the two girls look like a glammed up version of themselves, rather than like a completely different person, as it is usually the case in makeovers. The other teenagers do not even notice anything different about Amy and Molly other than the fact that they are at the sort of event that they usually avoid. By disregarding the makeover trope that so often erases all traces of personality from onscreen misfit and nerd girls, *Booksmart* pushes against heteronormative beauty standards and places girls' worth on their internal qualities rather than on their beauty.

Several other stereotypes come undone at the party, highlighting the contrast between appearances and reality. Both Molly and Amy misread other people's behaviour, thinking that they are flirting when they are simply being friendly, which emphasises their lack of social skills and romantic experience. Amy is dismayed to find out that the fact that Ryan (Victoria Ruesga) is into skateboarding and dresses in a pretty masculine way does not necessarily mean that she is a lesbian, which reveals that, despite her feminist consciousness, Amy is not immune to gender stereotypes regarding the relationship between women's self-presentation and behaviour and their sexual orientation. The misalignment of appearances and reality is also emphasised by the fact that Miss Fine (Jessica Williams), their English teacher, is not the paragon of virtue that they believed her to be, while Jared is a virgin who loves musicals despite the rumours about his sexual experience and wannabe tough guy appearance. Last but not least, Molly finds out that she does not know every single thing about her best friend. Amy does not actually want to follow Molly's carefully crafted plan for their future. Instead, she wants to delay going to college and spend a gap year in Botswana making tampons. This change positions her humanitarian interests above her academic ones, separating her both from her nerdiness and from her best friend and marking independence and separation—both from one's peers and from stereotypes—as a stepping stone into maturity.

Finally, while in most teenage films nerds and other outcasts achieve success through dating somebody who is higher up the social scale than themselves, *Booksmart* rejects this display of upwards mobility. Instead, Molly kisses Jared, who is even more of an outcast than herself, but the most meaningful relationship in the film is the protagonists' friendship.

Booksmart falls within what Alison Winch calls a "womance," its focus is placed on the bond between the two friends—which is depicted through the conventions of romantic comedy—rather than on their romantic achievement, and their eventual success as individuals lies in their "ability to shine for and with their girlfriends" (93). Eventually, the two girls manage to reach acceptance by accepting difference, both between themselves and between appearances and reality. The film allows them to keep hold of their identity, but it also forces them to change: Amy has learnt to assert her desires and to contradict Molly, while Molly has learnt to adopt a less judgemental outlook and see beyond the surface.

IV. CONCLUSION: WHAT ABOUT SCIENCE?

Booksmart signals a wind of change as far as onscreen representations of nerd girls are concerned, but there is a glaring absence: an interest in STEM. The fact that Molly and Amy are not interested in science and technology aligns them with previous representations of female nerds and smart girls and reflects the gender gap that exists in STEM fields worldwide. Although, as we have seen, the rate of women graduating from college in the United States is larger than that of men, they remain a minority in some STEM fields, particularly in computer science and engineering. This underrepresentation translates into the workplace, where women account for only 15% of engineers and architects. Although the rates vary in different fields, this gender gap remains a concerning issue (Fry et al.). The lack of women is more pronounced in those fields that pay better and offer better opportunities. The culprit behind this absence is not a lack of skills, but gender discrimination in the workplace and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes related to girls' abilities and skills in educational and domestic settings ("Towards an Equal Future" 13–16).

The lack of role models is also considered instrumental in the perpetuation of the gender gap in STEM ("Towards an Equal Future" 17). Popular culture holds up a mirror to the culture that creates it, but it also shapes it. As Bernárdez Rodal argues, popular culture functions as a "sentimental and emotional guide" (17), and its power to shape the way we see the world is ever-increasing. Role models are not only found in real life, but also in the narratives that we consume. If we keep this in mind, teen film's dismissal of scientifically-inclined nerd girls can be said to both reflect and perpetuate the gender gap in STEM. *Booksmart* breathes new life into the nerd girl stereotype by not making them the subject of ridicule, placing an emphasis on psychological rather than physical change, refusing to let them attain popularity through romance and emphasising the importance of sorority. However, it also upholds the stereotype that girls are not interested in science. In fact, the character pursuing a career in tech is the one who fulfils the nerd stereotype the least. Theo (Eduardo Franco), a slacker type who failed the seventh grade twice, has been recruited by tech giant Google. Professional success is therefore disconnected from academic achievement, which perpetuates the image of the tech whiz as a rebellious man who is too smart for college and undermines the protagonists' academic achievements.

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WITH GREAT POWER COMES GENDER DIVERSITY:

SUPERPOWERS AND STEM STEREOTYPES IN MARVEL COMICS

Igor Juricevic

Indiana University South Bend

ABSTRACT

Gender representation inequality occurs across various STEM sub-disciplines. For example, the sub-disciplines of computer science and engineering are male-dominant, while psychology and biological sciences are female-dominant. One possible cause of this gender inequality is the STEM professional stereotype; created, in large part, by media portrayals of STEM scientists. Across four studies I analyze the gender representation in portrayals of STEM skills in Marvel comics and their relation to real-world STEM educational outcomes, namely, bachelor's degrees attained in STEM. Study #1 shows that the portrayals of many STEM skills are gender biased for Marvel characters debuting before 1991. Study #2 shows that this gender bias in Marvel comics correlated with real-world STEM educational out-comes. Study #3 shows that Marvel characters debuting after 2000 show no gender biases in the portrayals of STEM skills. Finally, Study #4 makes predictions of how real-world educational outcomes are expected to change due to the increased gender equality in the portrayal of STEM skills in popular media.

Keywords: STEM, comics, graphic novels, gender, stereotypes.

"STEM" is an acronym used to broadly encompass the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and math. STEM professionals[1] play a vital role in our society, creating the techno-logical innovations and products that shape our world (Margolis et al. 105). Many of our ideas about STEM and STEM professionals come from media portrayals in films, TV series, genre fiction, comics and graphic novels (Steinke et al., 50; Cheryan et al. "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 4). Here I will present three main themes of analysis: i) how the stereotypes surrounding STEM professionals affect gender representation across sub-disciplines of STEM, ii) how Marvel has portrayed STEM skills in their male and female characters over time, and

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[1] The term "STEM professional" will be used to refer to people working in a STEM career, including, but not limited to, scientists (i.e. those doing research and development), engineers, computer program-mers, and any other professions that can be classified as STEM (e.g. clinical psychologist).

iii) the possible future effects of Marvel's recent approach to gender diversity for its characters (Johns).

I. STEM AND GENDER REPRESENTATION

Even though STEM encompasses the broad areas of science, technology, engineering, and math, much of the research on STEM and gender representation tends to focus on mathematics, computer science and engineering (e.g. Ceci et al., "Women in Academic Science" 75; Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 1). To gain a broader understanding of the issues surrounding the perception of STEM professions and education in society, it is important to remember that STEM encompasses a wide variety of sub-disciplines. For the purposes of this paper, I will follow the classifications used by the *National Science Foundation (https://www.nsf.gov/)* and partition STEM into the following sub-disciplines: i) agricultural sciences, ii) biological sciences, iii) computer sciences, iv) earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences, v) mathematics and statistics, vi) physical sciences, vii) psychology, viii) social sciences, and ix) engineering ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1").[2]

1.1. GENDER INEQUALITY IN STEM

One pressing issue regarding STEM education and the related labor market is the inequality in gender representation across multiple STEM sub-disciplines (Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 1). Using the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded to women in 2018 as a metric ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1"), figure 1 shows the gender representation for each of the STEM sub-disciplines in order from most male-dominated to most female-dominated.

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[2] This is by no means an exhaustive list, but is used as a starting point for a broader approach.
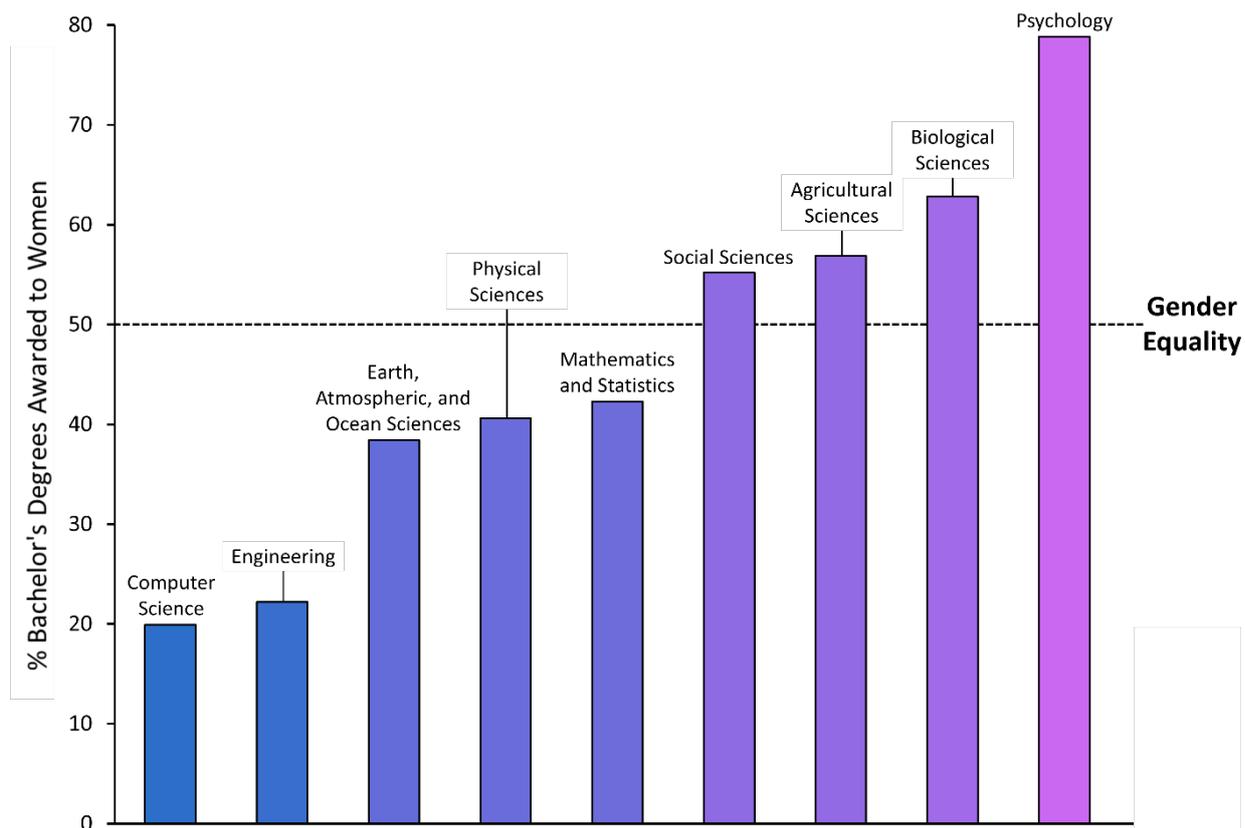
Figure 1 Percentage of STEM Bachelor Degrees Awarded to Women in 2018 (data from "Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1").

The STEM sub-disciplines with highest gender inequality due to male dominance are computer science and engineering (20% and 22% of bachelor's degrees awarded to women, respectively). On the other side of the spectrum, STEM sub-disciplines with the highest gender inequality due to female dominance are psychology and biological sciences (79% and 64% of bachelor's degrees awarded to women, respectively, see figure 1).

Research has shown that gender inequality in computer science and engineering is not simply an issue with respect to the attainment of undergraduate degrees. It is found across multiple metrics, such as: i) classes taken in high school, both conventional (Shashaani 352) and Advanced Placement classes (College Board), ii) interest in pursuing a STEM career (Weisgram and Bigler 334; "Chapter 2. Higher Education in Science and Engineering Figure 2-11"), and iii) graduation rates from advanced degree college-level STEM programs ("Indicator 26: STEM Degrees"). Research on other sub-disciplines, however, is less available.

1.2. EFFECTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN STEM

Gender inequality in STEM-related fields can have widespread negative effects on both the outcomes of scientific research and its application in society. In science, diversity, including gender diversity, is crucial for providing different ways of looking at the world around us

(Medin et al.) and different approaches to problem solving. Bringing a variety of perspectives to a problem makes new scientific advancements more likely, whereas a single, uniform perspective can impede scientific progress (Medin et al.). A lack of diversity in STEM impacts the wider public as well in, for example, the nature of the products that STEM sub-disciplines produce for society. Computer scientists, agricultural scientists, physicists, and engineers design products that shape society (Margolis et al. 105). Having a variety of perspectives and experiences during the design process will lead to the creation of products that are useful and appropriate for broader segments of the population (105). Gender representation inequality in STEM can have negative effects both on the advancement of science and on the products created from that advancement.

1.3. CAUSES OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN STEM

Before turning to the possible causes of gender inequality in STEM, it is important to point out that I will be using research done predominately in the sub-disciplines of computer science and engineering and extrapolating these findings across all STEM sub-disciplines. Many of the theories on the causes of gender inequality in computer science and engineering draw on general psychology theories that can be applied to any STEM sub-discipline (e.g. Hasdorf and Cantril, 132; Zajonc 269; Meissner 517; Leaper et al. 1653, Miller and Reeves 36; Fujioka 53). Therefore, there is no logical or scientific reason to believe that these causes would only operate in computer science and engineering. Likewise, much of the research revealing the negative effects of gender inequality in computer science and engineering proposes causal factors that would be harmful in any STEM sub-discipline (e.g. stereotypes) (Steele 614; Schmader et al. 336). Lastly, research has shown that single factors may account for gender inequality across STEM fields, applying to both male-dominated and female-dominated sub-disciplines. For example, the belief that innate talent or genius is a requirement for success in a STEM sub-discipline is positively correlated with the percentage of male Ph.Ds. and negatively correlated with the percentage of female Ph.Ds. across all STEM sub-disciplines (Leslie et al. 262). This one factor, innate talent, may possibly explain both the high percentage of males/low percentage of females in computer science and the high percentage of females/low percentage of males in psychology. So, while much of the research I report here is focused on the sub-disciplines of computer science and engineering, I will be extrapolating the conclusions of that research to all STEM sub-disciplines.

What, then, are the possible causes of gender inequality in STEM? Consider the sub-disciplines of computer science and engineering, where only 20% and 22% of bachelor's degrees, respectively, are awarded to women ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1"). It is easy to assume that this inequality is caused by, "Women… choosing not to enter, presumably because they don't want to; presumably because they (by and large) don't like these fields." (Gelernter). This same reasoning, applied to men, could be used in an attempt to explain why only 21% of bachelor's degrees in

psychology are awarded to men ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1"). However, this reasoning misses the significant social barriers that prevent men and women from freely choosing to pursue a career in certain STEM subdisciplines (Ceci et al., "Women's Underrepresentation" 220).

One important social barrier in STEM is produced by the STEM professional stereotype (Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 3; see figure 2). The STEM professional stereotype is our culture's general, shared concept of what a STEM professional is. The STEM professional stereotype includes the physical features, typical behaviors, personality traits, and skills that come to mind automatically when we think of a person working in a STEM field. Physical features of the STEM professional stereotype include being male, white, elderly or middle-aged, and unattractive (Finson 341, 335; Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 2). The stereotypical STEM professional wears glasses and a white lab coat (Finson 336; Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 2). The personality of a stereotypical STEM professional is geeky or nerdy, and they are socially awkward (Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 2). They mostly work alone (Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 2), in a laboratory (Finson 335), performing dangerous experiments (335), and their work is dissociated from communal goals (Diekman et al., "Seeking Congruity" 1054). Lastly, the stereotypical STEM professional is very intelligent (Ward 8), often due to an inborn brilliance or genius (Leslie et al. 263).
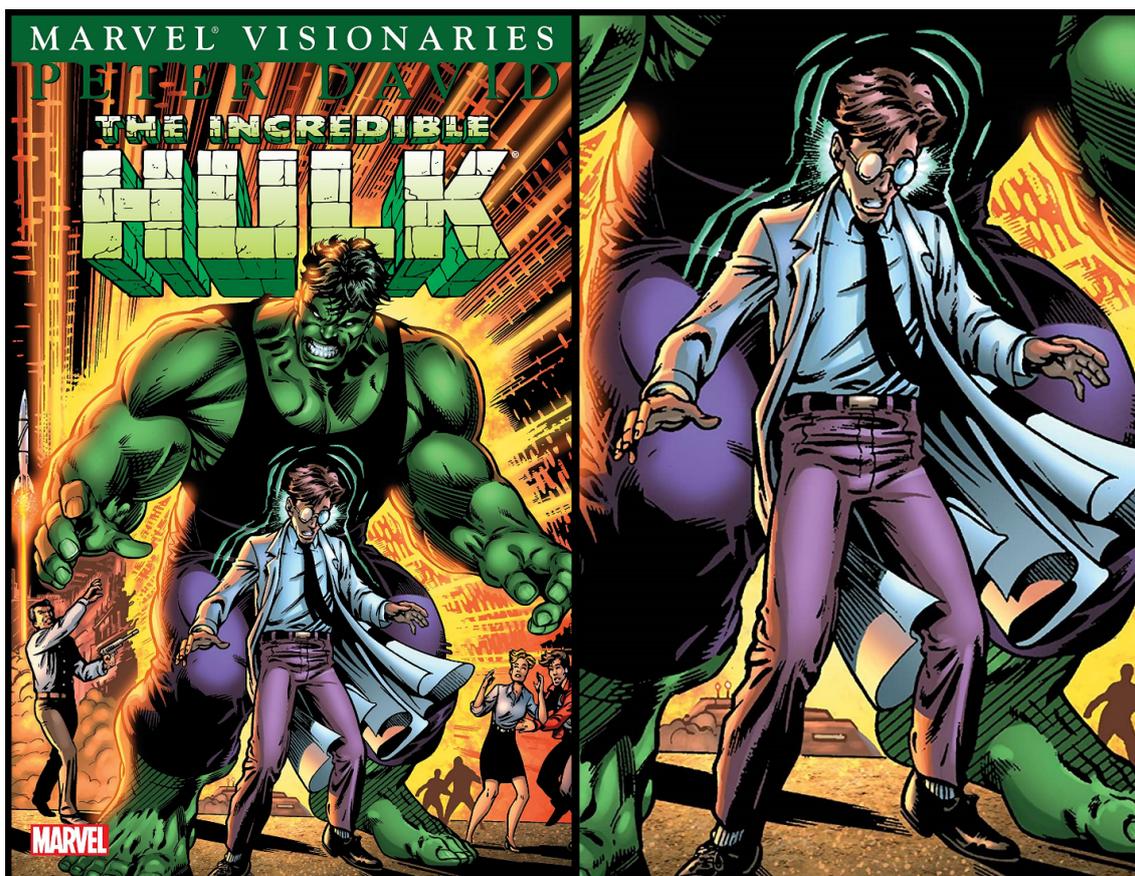

Figure 2 Dr. Bruce Banner (alter-ego of the Incredible Hulk) possesses many of the features of the STEM professional stereotype.

The STEM professional stereotype is extremely widespread in US culture. This stereotype is found in elementary-school students (Barman 20), high-school students (Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 4), and college students (Cheryan et al., "Stereotypical Computer Scientist" 59; Diekman et al., "Seeking Congruity" 1052; Beardslee and O'Dowd 997). The stereotype is held by both men and women, and across different socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnicities (Mead and Métraux 385).

This STEM professional stereotype, like all stereotypes, has the power to determine a person's attitudes, behaviors, and choices (Hasdorf and Cantril 132; Steele 614; Schmader et al. 336). This power allows the STEM professional stereotype to act as a social barrier to entry in STEM fields by constraining who enters these fields (Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 2). Importantly, the STEM professional stereotype has this influence because of our shared beliefs in the stereotype, even if the stereotype has no basis in reality (3). If the features of the STEM professional stereotype are perceived negatively by an individual, that individual is less likely to pursue education in STEM (Finson 335). The corollary to this finding is that, if features of the STEM professional stereotype are perceived positively, that individual is more likely to pursue STEM courses of study.

If this is the case, it follows that there must be different STEM professional stereotypes for different STEM sub-disciplines. For example, research specifically on the computer scientist stereotype has shown that many of the features of this stereotype are perceived negatively by women (Diekman et al., "Malleability in Communal Goals" 906; Cheryan 185; Leslie et al. 262). For example, the computer scientist stereotype includes being physically unattractive and dissociated from communal goals; neither of these are qualities that are valued by women (Diekman et al., "Malleability in Communal Goals" 906; Cheryan 185; Leslie et al. 262; Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 4). It is highly likely, then, that female-dominated STEM sub-disciplines such as psychology have stereotypes portraying qualities that are, in general, valued by women (Diekman et al., "Seeking Congruity Between Goals and Roles" 1055; Leslie et al. 264; Cheryan 185). For example, the psychologist stereotype likely includes being involved in community goals (e.g. the primary role of a psychologist is to help and support other people).

For STEM sub-disciplines, the incompatibility of the qualities possessed by the STEM professional stereotype with the qualities valued by an individual produces a feeling of "lack of fit" (Van Veelen and Derks 4). This perceived lack of fit then leads to lower feelings of belonging in STEM (Barth et al. 276), which in turn are associated with less intention to pursue STEM (Evans and Diekman 240; Good et al. 707; Smith et al. 134), lower likelihood to enroll in STEM education (Finson 338), and lower academic achievement for those that do enroll (Lewis et al. 020110-2). Clearly, stereotypes can have a large impact on the gender representation in STEM sub-disciplines.

1.4. POPULAR MEDIA AND THE STEM PROFESSIONAL STEREOTYPE

The STEM professional stereotype is created, in large part, by popular media portrayals of STEM disciplines and scientists (Fujioka 54; Finson 337). Media portrayals are cultural constructions that convey assumptions about STEM fields to society (Steinke, "Cultural Representations" 52; Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 3). Media portrayals of STEM professionals, both real and fictional, shape public perceptions (Gamson et al. 389; Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 4), teach the cultural patterns of scientific behavior (6), and contribute significantly to the mental concepts people form about STEM and STEM professionals (Finson 337). In other words, media portrayals of STEM professionals shape and maintain features of the STEM professional stereotype (Leaper et al. 1660; Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 7).

The importance of media portrayals of STEM professionals in forming our stereotypes comes, to a great extent, from the precedence and preeminence of media in our culture. Media portrayals of STEM professionals in films, TV series, genre fiction, and comics and graphic novels are often our earliest and most frequent exposure to STEM professionals (Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 4). This "vicarious contact" (Fujioka 67) via media images is the most influential source in developing the STEM professional stereotype (Steinke et al. 50; Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 4). Media portrayals play a role in how children view STEM professionals (Tan and Jocz 6), with adolescents often relying on popular media as their main source for this information (Song and Kim 966; Scherz and Oren 982; Steinke et al. 50). This, in turn, affects their interest in STEM (Lee 209) and influences whether they choose to pursue a STEM career (Steinke 4).

1.5. STEM STEREOTYPICAL SKILLS

Previous research has predominantly focused on the physical appearance, personality, and behaviors of the stereotypical STEM professional (Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 2; Finson 336; Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 3; Cheryan et al., "Stereotypical Computer Scientist" 59). From here on in, however, I will focus my analysis on a specific aspect of the STEM professional stereotype, specifically the skills and abilities that are stereotypically assigned to STEM professionals. I will look at how these skills are portrayed across genders in popular media, where certain STEM skills may be portrayed predominately in male characters, while other skills are portrayed predominantly in female characters. These portrayals help create aspects of the STEM professional stereotype, both in general and for specific STEM sub-disciplines. For example, the common stereotype that "girls are bad at math" coupled with the STEM professional stereotype that exceptional math skills are necessary for engineering could create a social barrier preventing women from pursuing engineering (Van Veelen and Derks 4). Similarly, the stereotype that women are more empathetic than men coupled with the STEM professional stereotype that empathy is necessary for psychology could likewise create a social barrier preventing men from pursuing psychology. As such, an understanding of how STEM skills and abilities are portrayed across gender in popular media is

important in identifying the stereotypes being created. To this end, I will present an analysis of the portrayal of STEM skills and abilities in male and female characters as portrayed in Marvel comics.

1.6. STEM PROFESSIONALS AND SKILLS IN MARVEL COMICS

As already mentioned, one source of media portrayals of STEM professionals are comicbooks. Numerous Marvel characters have careers in STEM fields; for example, both Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four) are inventors with advanced knowledge that spans multiple sub-disciplines of STEM (see figure 3). The Marvel Database lists 1609 Marvel characters as "scientists" (with a grand total of 3492 entries if Multiverse versions of the same character are included; see "Scientists"). In addition to this, there are many other characters who, while not explicitly portrayed as scientists, demonstrate attributes that are associated with STEM. That is, they possess the real-world skills, fictional superpowers, and/or other characteristics that are part of the STEM professional stereotype, all without being explicitly labeled as "scientists." They may also possess skills that, while not part of the STEM professional stereotype, are in reality beneficial to success in STEM. For example, Nico Minoru (from Marvel's Runaways) possesses both intelligence and the soft-skill of leadership ("Nico Minoru," see figure 4). Jean Grey (Phoenix of the X-Men) possesses the real-world skill of empathy and the fictional superpower of telepathy ("Jean Grey"), both perceived as valuable to the STEM sub-discipline of psychology (see figure 4).

Figure 3 Tony Stark (Iron Man, left panel) and Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four, right panel) are inventors with advanced knowledge that spans multiple sub-disciplines of STEM. Both characters also possess many of the features of the STEM professional stereotype.

Figure 4 Nico Minoru (from Marvel's Runaways, left panel) and Jean Grey (Phoenix of the X-Men, right panel) possess abilities that are perceived as valuable to success in STEM.

Superhero comicbooks have a wide readership and, very importantly, this readership includes children and young adults, providing them with early exposure to portrayals of STEM professionals. In 2017, approximately 50% of superhero comicbook buyers were under 30 (Alverson). While it may be tempting to dismiss the impact of superhero comics on females, as superhero comicbook readership skews towards a male audience (78% male vs. 22% female), this would overlook the fact that female superhero comicbook readers are, on average, younger (Alverson). This is extremely important, given the greater impact of early exposure to images of STEM professionals. Finally, comicbooks reach a wide audience; in 2022 52% of Americans aged 18-34 had read at least one comic book (Kentic).

While reading just one comicbook portrayal of a STEM professional may not seem important, research has shown that exposure to a single media portrayal of a STEM professional can either increase or decrease an individual's interest towards STEM. For example, after reading a single article portraying the stereotypical STEM computer scientist, women expressed less interest in majoring in computer science than women who read a non-stereotypical portrayal (Cheryan et al., "Stereotypical Computer Scientist" 67). Clearly, comicbooks can have an impact on the creation and maintenance of the STEM professional stereotype. By increasing the diversity in the presentation of STEM professionals, comicbooks can expand the demographics of the STEM professional stereotype. However, they can also continue to present the STEM professional stereotype as it currently is, leading to a strengthening of the stereotype.

II. STUDY #1: GENDER REPRESENTATION OF STEM IN MARVEL PRE-1991

How are the real-world skills, fictional superpowers, and/or other qualities that are either part of the STEM professional stereotype or are actual skills beneficial for STEM portrayed across gender in Marvel comicbooks? For this first investigation, I will limit the analysis to Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991, as these are the portrayals that would have contributed to the STEM professional stereotype affecting recent STEM graduates.

2.1. METHOD

The STEM sub-disciplines chosen for analysis were those listed in the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics report on bachelor's degrees awarded in STEM ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1"). To reiterate, these included: i) agricultural sciences, ii) biological sciences, iii) computer sciences, iv) earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences, v) mathematics and statistics, vi) physical sciences, vii) psychology, viii) social sciences, and ix) engineering (see table 1). For each STEM sub-discipline, I matched the superpowers and abilities of Marvel characters that would be beneficial to that sub-discipline (see table 1). The superpowers and abilities associated with each STEM sub-discipline are either real-world skills that are related to the sub-discipline (e.g. genetic manipulation for biological sciences) or superpowers that are exaggerated abilities associated with

the sub-discipline (e.g. telepathy for psychology). I also included products (real or fictional) used by Marvel characters that are produced or specifically used by a STEM sub-discipline (e.g. gadgets for engineering)[3]. Some abilities were unique to certain sub-disciplines (e.g. psychometry for social sciences), while others were shared across multiple sub-disciplines (e.g. intellect was associated with all sub-disciplines).

Stem Sub-Discipline	Superpower, Ability, or Product
Agricultural sciences	Animal control, Earth manipulation, Genetic manipulation, Intellect, Plant control, Water control, Weather control
Biological sciences	Animal control, Genetic manipulation, Intellect, Plant control, Tracking
Computer sciences	Animation, Electronic interaction, Gadgets, Intellect, Omni-lingual, Technopathy
Earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences	Earth manipulation, Gravity control, Ice control, Intellect, Magnetism, Sand manipulation, Sub-mariner, Water control, Weather control
Mathematics and statistics	Intellect
Physical sciences	Animal control, Cosmic awareness, Earth manipulation, Electricity control, Electronic disruption, Electronic interaction, Emotion control, Energy absorption, Energy-enhanced strike, Energy manipulation, Genetic manipulation, Gravity control, Ice control, Implants, Inertia absorption, Magnetism, Mesmerize, Necromancy, Phasing/ghost, Plant control, Postcognition, Psychometry, Reality manipulation, Sub-mariner, Telepathy, Time manipulation, Time travel, Tracking, Voice-induced manipulation
Psychology	Emotion control, Empathy, Hypnosis, Intellect, Mesmerize, Psychic, Telepathy, Voice-induced manipulation
Social sciences	Intellect, Necromancy, Postcognition, Psychometry, Time travel
Engineering	Animation, Electricity control, Electronic disruption, Electronic interaction, Gadgets, Implants, Intellect, Power item, Power suit, Technopathy

Table 1: Superpowers/Abilities/Products Associated with Each STEM Sub-Discipline.

This initial analysis was limited to Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991, as these are the portrayals that would have contributed to the STEM professional stereotype affecting recent STEM graduates. Given that the average age for graduating from a bachelor's program is 21.8

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[3] The selection of superpowers/abilities/products were restricted to those specifically associated with each STEM sub-discipline. For example, super-speed was not included, because no STEM sub-discipline requires super-speed to be successful, even though it would be immensely useful in any sub-discipline. Likewise, a power suit was included as a product in engineering, but not in earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences, where it would be useful but is not considered a product of that sub-discipline (i.e. earth, atmospheric, and ocean scientists would hire an engineer to design their power suits).

years old (full-time students) or 27.2 years old (part-time students) (Brunner), Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991 would have contributed most to the STEM professional stereotypes that influenced students attaining bachelor's degrees between 2012-2018, the years for which the most recent data was available at the time of the study ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1"). The list of Marvel characters included in the analysis was taken from the *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe Master Edition* (Kaminski), as this provided an authoritative (though not exhaustive) list of Marvel characters that debuted prior to 1991 (the publication date of the first issue was December, 1990). Only characters with individual entries were included in the final list, which totaled 550 characters (149 female, 401 male, and 0 non-binary).

Each of the 550 characters was cross-referenced with their Comic Vine character page ("Comic Vine") to attain a list of their superpowers/abilities/products. For each superpower/ability/product associated with a STEM sub-discipline (see table 1), a character was categorized as to whether or not they possessed that particular superpower/ability/product.

2.2. RESULTS

An independent-means t-test analysis with an $\alpha = .05$ was conducted for each of the 47 superpowers/abilities/products (see table 1). Each t-test compared the percent of male versus female characters that possessed a superpower/ability/product. A post-hoc Benjamini-Hochberg procedure was used with a 25% false-discovery rate to control for multiple comparisons.

This analysis revealed that the gender representation of some superpowers/abilities/products were male-dominant (e.g. gadgets and power suit), some were female-dominant (e.g. empathy and intellect), while others were equally represented between the genders (e.g. electricity control and post-cognition; see table 2).

Gender Representation	Superpower, Ability, or Product
Male-dominant	Gadgets, Matter absorption, Omni-lingual, Power item, Power suit, Technopathy
Female-dominant	Animation, Empathy, Energy based constructs, Energy shield, Hypnosis, Intellect, Levitation, Light projection, Psychic, Sand manipulation, Water control, Weather control
Equally represented	Cosmic awareness, Genetic manipulation, Implants, Inertia absorption, Phasing/ghost, Time manipulation, Time travel, Animal control, Earth manipulation, Electricity control, Electronic disruption, Electronic interaction, Emotion control, Energy absorption, Energy manipulation, Energy-enhanced strike, Gravity control, Ice control, Magnetism, Mesmerize, Necromancy, Plant control, Postcognition, Psychometry, Reality manipulation, Sub-mariner, Telepathy, Tracking, Voice-induced manipulation

Table 2: Superpowers/Abilities/Products that are Male-Dominant, Female-Dominant, or Equally Represented

2.3 DISCUSSION

Of the 47 superpowers/abilities/products analyzed, six (12.8%) were male-dominant (see table 2). That is, six superpowers/abilities/products occurred at a significantly higher percentage among male characters than female characters. On the other hand, 12 (25.5%) were female-dominant, meaning that 12 superpowers/abilities/products occurred at a significantly higher percentage among female characters than male characters. The remaining 29 (61.7%) super-powers/abilities/products were equally distributed among male and female characters.

A closer look at the male-dominant superpowers/abilities/products reveals that most of them came from the STEM sub-disciplines of computer science and engineering (5 of the 6). Alternatively, most of the female-dominant superpowers/abilities/products came from the STEM sub-disciplines of psychology, agricultural sciences, and earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences (7 of 12). This mostly follows the pattern seen in the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded to women in 2018 (see figure 1). Specifically, the male-dominant superpowers/abili-ties/products are in computer science and engineering, which have the highest gender ine-quality due to male dominance (20% and 22% of bachelor's degrees awarded to women, re-spectively). Meanwhile, the female-dominant superpowers/abilities/products are in two of the STEM sub-disciplines with the highest gender inequality due to female dominance, psychol-ogy and agricultural science (79% and 57% of bachelor's degrees awarded to women, respec-tively). The exception to this correspondence was biological science. Biological science is a female-dominated STEM sub-discipline (64% of bachelor's degrees awarded to women); yet the superpowers/abilities/products related to biological science were represented equally across genders, rather than being female-dominant. Overall, however, the pattern of gender representation of STEM superpowers/abilities/products corresponds to the percent of bache-lor's degrees awarded to men and women in STEM sub-disciplines.

These results are consistent with the theory that the gender representation of superpow-ers/abilities/products in media portrayals influences the stereotypes we have about the STEM skills possessed by men and women in the real-world. These skill gender stereotypes become incorporated in to the STEM professional stereotype, influencing the academic disciplines that men and women pursue, leading to high gender inequality in computer science and engineer-ing (due to male dominance) as well as high gender inequality in psychology and agricultural science (due to female dominance).

III. STUDY #2: DOES GENDER REPRESENTATION OF STEM IN MARVEL CORRELATE WITH REAL-WORLD STEM OUTCOMES?

Study #1 showed that superpowers/abilities/products related to the STEM sub-disciplines of psychology, agricultural sciences, and earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences tended to be portrayed more often in female Marvel characters, while superpowers/abilities/products re-lated to computer science and engineering tended to be portrayed more often in male Marvel characters. If these portrayals are influencing men and women on their decisions to pursue a

STEM sub-discipline, then the same patterns should be found in STEM educational outcomes. In fact, the general correspondence between superpowers/abilities/products and STEM bachelor's degrees awarded supports this idea. I now test the statistical strength of this correspondence between superpowers/abilities/products and educational outcomes in STEM to determine if the correspondence truly exists, or if it is an illusion created by chance variation.

3.1. METHOD

To measure educational outcomes in STEM, I will once again use bachelor's degrees attained in STEM sub-disciplines. The previous discussion noted a possible correspondence between STEM superpowers/abilities/products and bachelor's degrees awarded in 2018. For this analysis, we will use the percentages of bachelor's degrees awarded to men and women during the years 2008-2015 ("Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering Table 5-1"). The rationale for choosing these years, rather than including the most currently available data, is to isolate, as much as possible, any potential relationship between Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991 and educational outcomes. That is, given the average ages for attaining a bachelor's degree used in the previous analysis (21.8 and 27.2 years old for full- and part-time students, respectively) (Brunner), students born before 1991 would generally attain bachelor's degrees between 2008-2015. Of course, many students born before 1991 would have attained bachelor's degree much earlier. However, restricting the analysis to 2008-2015 allows us to analyze the most contemporary effects of the pre-1991 Marvel characters.

Using the data collected for Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991 (see Study #1), I calculated a *gender representation bias* score for each superpower/ability/product. Gender representation bias was calculated as:

gender representation bias = (% female characters with power)/[(% female characters with power) + (% male characters with power)]

If a superpower is equally distributed between male and female characters, the gender representation bias score is 50. For example, consider a superpower that is possessed by 10% of female characters and 10% of male characters. The gender representation bias score for this gender-equal superpower is 50 (i.e. 10%/(10% + 10%) = 50). If a superpower is male-dominant, the gender representation bias score will be below 50. For example, a superpower that is possessed by 5% of female characters and 10% of male characters will have a gender representation bias score of 33 (i.e. 5%/(5% + 10%) = 33). Finally, if a superpower is female-dominant, the gender representation bias score will be above 50. For example, a superpower that is possessed by 10% of female characters and 5% of male characters will have a gender representation bias score of 67 (i.e. 10%/(5% + 10%) = 67).

The gender representation bias score is a weighted measure and was used for two reasons. First, there were many more male characters (401) than female characters (149), making a straight frequency comparison uninformative. Second, even though the number of female characters was low, female characters have a regular presence in Marvel comicbooks. Many

Marvel female characters have high numbers of appearances ("Marvel: Characters"), and 70% of all superhero teams have at least one female member (Shendruk). Given the uneven number of male-to-female characters coupled with the high prevalence of female character appearances, a weighted measure of gender representation would best reflect how superpowers/abilities/products are distributed across gender.

Once a gender representation bias score was calculated for each STEM superpower/ability/product, I then calculated the average gender representation bias score for the superpowers/abilities/products related to each STEM sub-discipline (see table 1). These average gender representation bias scores were then correlated to the average percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded to women in each STEM sub-discipline between 2008-2015.

3.2. RESULTS

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis with an α = .05 was conducted to determine the correlation direction and strength of the relationship between the percentage of bachelor's degrees attained by women and the gender representation bias score for superpowers/abilities/products across STEM sub-disciplines. The analysis revealed a strong, positive correlation, $r(7)$ = .78, p = .006 (one-tailed, see figure 5).
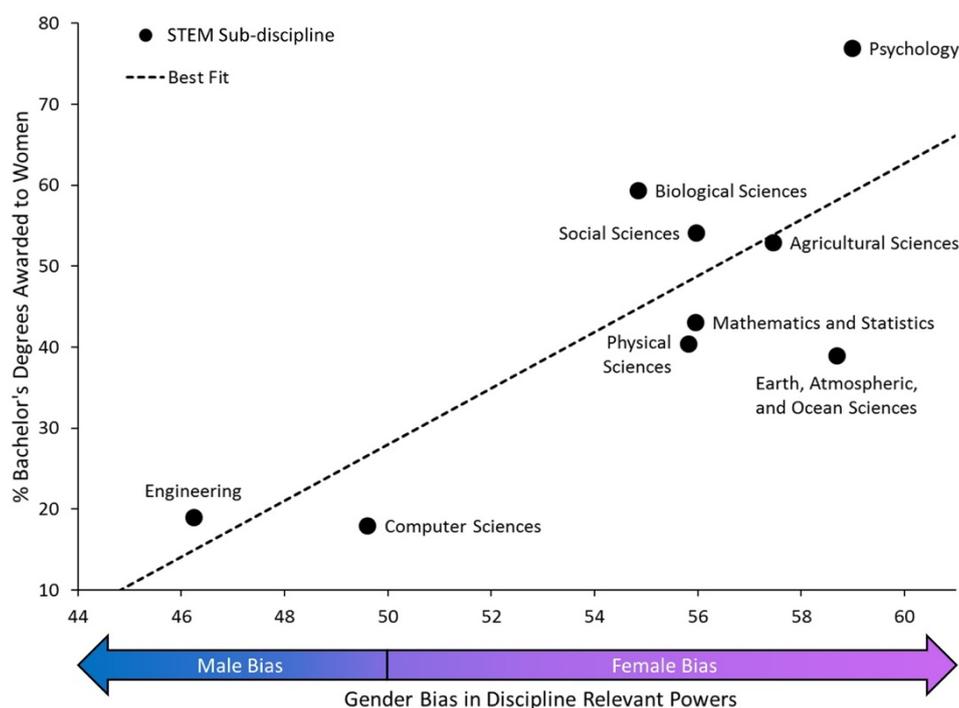
*Figure 5* Strong, positive correlation between the percentage of bachelor's degrees attained by women and the gender representation bias score for superpowers/abilities/products across STEM sub-disciplines.

3.3. DISCUSSION

The results revealed a strong, positive association between the gender representation of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in Marvel characters and bachelor's degrees attained by

women. In other words, STEM sub-disciplines that were associated with superpowers/abilities/products that were more male-dominant tended to have lower percentages of women attaining bachelor's degrees. Alternatively, as the gender representation of superpowers/abilities/products in STEM sub-disciplines changed from male-dominant to female-dominant, the percentage of women attaining bachelor's degrees also increased. This supports the idea that media portrayals of STEM skills and abilities are influencing the decisions of young adults on their choice to pursue an education in a STEM sub-discipline and, thereby, helping to create and maintain the unequal gender representation in various STEM sub-disciplines.

The strength of the association revealed is classified as a "strong" correlation (Akoglu 92). One interesting possibility for this strong relation could be that there is a large overlap between individuals who read superhero comics and individuals who choose STEM careers. That is, the association may have been so strong because people who tend to read superhero comics are more likely that non-superhero comics readers to also be interested in STEM. If so, the portrayal of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in superhero comics would then become even more important to STEM, as the readership would already consist of those most likely to pursue STEM, with the portrayal of characters influencing their choice of a STEM sub-discipline.

IV. STUDY #3: GENDER REPRESENTATION OF STEM IN MARVEL COMICBOOKS POST-2000S

Studies #1 and #2 focused on Marvel characters that debuted before 1991. I now turn to how the gender representation of STEM superpowers/abilities/products have changed since that time. Specifically, what are the gender representations for superpowers/abilities/products for characters that made their Marvel comics debut after January 1st, 2000? Have the gender representation biases in the portrayal of pre-1991 Marvel characters changed for characters introduced in the current millennium?

4.1. METHOD

The methods used were the same as in Study #1, but limited to Marvel characters that debuted after January 1st, 2000. The list of Marvel characters was taken from Wikipedia ("List of Marvel Comics superhero debuts"), and included characters that debuted as late as March 2021. The final list had 237 characters (116 female, 119 male, and 2 non-binary).

4.2. RESULTS

Due to the extremely low number of non-binary characters, the analysis only looked at male and female characters. An independent-means *t*-test analysis with an $\alpha = .05$ was planned for each of the 47 superpowers/abilities/products associated with a STEM sub-discipline (see table 1). However, the superpower of *inertia absorption* was removed from the analysis as no post-

2000 debuting characters possessed that superpower. Each remaining 46 *t*-tests compared the percent of male versus female characters that possessed a superpower/ability/product. A post-hoc Benjamini-Hochberg procedure was used with a 25% false-discovery rate to control for multiple comparisons.

This analysis revealed that all 46 superpowers/abilities/products were equally represented between the genders[4]. That is, there were no male-dominant or female-dominant superpowers/abilities/products.

4.3. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the gender representation of superpowers/abilities/products for Marvel characters debuting post-2000s revealed gender representation equality for all superpowers/abilities/products. In other words, superpowers/abilities/products that were previously mainly portrayed in male characters (e.g. Gadgets, Power Suit) or mainly portrayed in female characters (e.g. Empathy, Hypnosis) were now portrayed equally by both male and female characters. This more gender equal portrayal is a stark contrast to what was found for Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991 (see table 2).

This shift indicates that recently introduced Marvel characters have created more gender diversity in the portrayal of STEM skills (Johns). This diversification of the portrayals of STEM skills is potentially an effective strategy in battling the STEM professional stereotype, as a more diverse presentation of what STEM is necessarily dilutes the effects of any existing stereotype (Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 6).

V. STUDY #4: USING MARVEL CHARACTERS TO PREDICT FUTURE STEM GENDER REPRESENTATION

Stereotypes can affect how an individual not only sees themselves in the present, but also how they imagine their possible, future self (Markus and Nurius 954). These concepts of a possible future self, in turn, motivate behavior towards certain career goals, such as STEM careers (Steinke, "Adolescent Girls'" 7).

Study #2 revealed that the gender representation of STEM in Marvel characters correlates with real-world STEM educational outcomes with respect to gender (see figure 5). If this relationship between media portrayals and educational outcomes continues, what might we expect the STEM educational outcomes for men and women to be in the future? That is, Study #4 revealed that Marvel characters that debuted post-2000 are offering a more gender diverse portrayal of STEM superpowers/abilities/products. What does this new diversity predict for STEM educational outcomes in the future?

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[4] While null results must always be interpreted with caution, it is worth noting that in a separate analysis other, non-STEM superpowers were significantly different. For example, the gender representation of *berserker strength* was male-dominant for Marvel characters that debuted post-2000.

5.1. METHOD

Using the data from Study #2, I modeled the relationship between gender representation bias scores for pre-1991s Marvel characters as predictors of the percentage of bachelor's degrees awarded to women between 2008-2015 using a linear-regression equation. This produced a model of the relation between portrayals of STEM superpowers/abilities/products and educational outcomes. To derive predictions of future bachelor's degrees awarded, I substituted the gender representation bias scores of pre-1991s Marvel characters with those of post-2000s characters into the regression model.

5.2. RESULTS

The linear-regression analysis revealed that, for Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991, gender representation bias significantly accounted for variation in the percentage of bachelor's degrees attained by women, $\beta = .83$, $t(9) = 8.42$, $p < .001$. In other words:

percentage of bachelor's degrees attained by women = 0.83 x gender representation bias.

This regression model was then used to predict the future percentages of bachelor's degrees attained by women, by substituting the gender representation bias scores for post-2000 debuting Marvel characters into the model (see table 3).

STEM Sub-Discipline	Percentage of Bachelor's Degrees Attained by Women		Change towards or away from gender representation equality?
	2008–2015	Future	
Engineering	19.0	43.0	Towards
Agricultural sciences	52.9	46.4	Away
Biological sciences	59.4	45.3	Towards
Computer sciences	18.0	42.7	Towards
Earth, atmospheric, and ocean sciences	39.0	49.0	Towards
Mathematics and statistics	43.1	47.8	Towards
Physical sciences	40.4	35.9	Away
Psychology	76.9	49.7	Towards
Social sciences	54.2	46.5	Towards

Table 3: Summary of the Percentage of Bachelor's Degrees Attained by Women from 2008-2015 and the Predicted Future Percentages.

5.2. DISCUSSION

The future percentages of bachelor's degrees attained by women predicted by the regression model are much closer to gender representation equality. In seven of the nine STEM sub-disciplines, the percentages moved towards gender representation equality. Only for agricultural sciences and physical sciences did the percentages move away from gender equality. For agricultural sciences, this is likely due to a statistical margin of error, as the 2008-2015 percentages were already very close to 50% (i.e. 52.9%). However, the predicted move away from equality for the physical sciences is less clear and warrants further study.

It is important to keep in mind that the overall predicted increase in gender equality in the present analysis is based solely on the portrayal of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in Marvel comics. The rationale is that: i) media portrayals of the STEM professional stereotype are different today than they were in pre-1991, ii) media portrayals of the STEM professional stereotype influence decisions to pursue an education in STEM (Finson 335), and iii) decisions to pursue a STEM education lead to attainment of a bachelor's degree in a STEM sub-discipline. The first part of this rational is critical as research has shown that media portrayals of STEM stereotypes are particularly well suited to creating cultural change (Cheryan et al. "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 4). If the second and third parts of the rationale hold, then we can expect a shift towards greater gender equality in almost all STEM sib-disciplines in the future.

The portrayals of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in Marvel comicbooks post-2000 reflects a cultural change in the direction of greater gender equality in STEM. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting predictions of this sort, as no single issue can be the primary cause of gender inequalities in STEM (Blickenstaff 384). STEM gender inequalities are a complex problem that will require a multi-faceted solution (384). Encouragingly, to the extent that comicbooks are a part of this solution, Marvel characters are pushing towards gender equality in STEM.

VI. GENERAL SUMMARY

Gender representation inequality in STEM is a pressing concern for society (Cheryan et al., "Cultural Stereotypes as Gatekeepers" 1). Some STEM sub-disciplines, such as computer science and engineering, are male-dominant, while others, such as psychology and biological sciences, are female-dominant. Research has shown the importance of the STEM professional stereotype as a social barrier preventing men and women from entering certain STEM sub-disciplines (Ceci et al., "Women's Underrepresentation" 220). Here I provided evidence: i) of the unequal gender representation of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991, ii) that the gender representation of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in Marvel characters that debuted pre-1991 is strongly correlated with STEM educational outcomes, iii) of the equal gender representation of STEM superpowers/abilities/products in Marvel characters that debuted post-2000, and iv) that the predicted future

STEM educational outcomes are expected to move towards more gender equality across most STEM sub-disciplines.

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IMAGE SOURCES

Fantastic Four. By James Robinson, illustrated by Chris Samnee, vol. 1, no. 643, Marvel Comics, Apr. 2015. (Fig. 3, right panel)

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OF MONSTERS AND WOMEN: TWO FEMALE CHARACTERS AND TRANS/POSTHUMANISM IN HBO'S *LOVECRAFT COUNTRY*

Alejandro Batista Tejada
Universidad de Sevilla

ABSTRACT

There has been, in recent times, a resolution to make up for the traditional lack of prominent female representation in audiovisual popular culture. HBO's series *Lovecraft Country* (2020) constitutes one of such proposals. By focusing on a group of African American characters who must struggle with the terrifying reality of Jim Crow US as well as with magic and other-worldly creatures, the show constitutes a fascinating platform whence a powerful social criticism is proposed to the audience. Being the series a version of Matt Ruff's novel of the same name, it is my intention to analyze one of the transmedia alterations which took place in the adaptation process. The creators of *Lovecraft Country* deemed it necessary to gender-swap two of the characters from the novel, with the possibilities this change opened. The inclusion of two female characters in the series in detriment of their male counterparts in the novel is quite telling and has an underlying significance, for it points out to a strong determination to alter female representation in Science Fiction and the Gothic. Additionally, Christina Braithwhite and Dee Freeman are the only two characters to acquire a posthuman state. It is therefore this paper's main aim to provide an examination of their characters and their process of "transhumanization" through the lens of Transhumanism and Posthumanism. Both represent different trends of transhumanism and embody disparate stands to posthumanism, hence the necessary analysis of the latent subtexts which these two characters catalyze.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Posthumanism, *Lovecraft Country*, Science Fiction, African American.

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Science Fiction has been an ever-growing field and a space for reconfiguring reality. Imagination is an uppermost part in the process of conceiving an alternative future and of commenting on a distant past through the lens of fantasy. Popular culture has experienced a rise in this type of narratives in which authors turn to controversial pasts to examine their flaws and imagine new possibilities. This reconstruction is crucial when it comes to introducing

contemporary concerns while, at the same time, picturing a different future. Afrofuturism, for instance, is an important example of this practice, for it constitutes a catalyst for an alternative envisioning of what life could be for Black people away from prejudices and color lines. Coined by Mark Dery in 1993 and fostered by cultural critics such as Greg Tate, Tricia Rose and Kodwo Eshun, this genre allowed authors to imagine "possible futures through a Black cultural lens" (LaFleur 00:01:16–00:01:19). The myriad alternatives which stemmed from this new cultural and aesthetic movement relied heavily on technoculture and speculative fiction and used these to envision black futures that stem from Afro-diasporic experiences (Yaszek 42). Ytasha L. Womack, on her part, defines Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" (9). In her view, it is more than necessary because "it's one thing when black people aren't discussed in world history… But when, even in the imaginary future… people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down" (7). However, Science Fiction had already been a genre in which black voices had been heard and where explorations of connected with African American experiences had been carried out. Lisa Yaszek, for example, argues that Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) is an early piece of Science Fiction inasmuch as it "predicated upon both realist and speculative modes of storytelling" (41), which is very much what the series *Lovecraft Country* strove to do.

Drinking from elements of the Afrofuturist tradition, the case study analyzed in this paper, *Lovecraft Country* (2020), is a TV series aimed at examining a terrifying past for people of African descent during the Jim Crow period in the US while proposing other possibilities for this ethnic group through the alternatives which community, friendship, family, and technology afford. This series thus constitutes not only a pointing of fingers (or a "cosmic footstep") with regards to systemic racism in the US, but also an act of picturing a different scenario for black people in this country. Additionally, the series includes powerful images of gender transgressions as well as a criticism of patriarchal structures.

This paper's intention is to analyze the role of two female characters in this HBO's series and how both acquire a posthuman state following a process of transhumanization. The fact that they are the only characters to do so is revealing, but it is even more relevant when we realize that they did not appear in Matt Ruff's original novel, *Lovecraft Country* (2016). The way in which the series challenges female representation in Science Fiction and the dichotomy between tradition and technology is also of interest to this paper. Considering the theoretical framework of transhumanism and posthumanism, this article explores how Christina Braithwhite (the daughter of an all-white all-men logia's leader) and Dee Freeman (the protagonist of the series' little cousin) transcend their human condition and how they do so.

The fact that the series gives these roles to female characters is noteworthy, for this allows it to touch on issues of gender and feminism but also because it responds to the lack of prominent female representation in genres like the Gothic or Science Fiction. As Alexis Lothian proposes, women's roles "have been constrained by patriarchal social and familiar

structures" (70). However, since the late nineteenth century, "speculative visions of alternate futures, pasts, and elsewheres have provided individual and collective spaces in which to reimagine the workings of gender, sexuality, love, and desire in both political and personal worlds" (Lothian 70), and this is what we encounter in *Lovecraft Country*. In fact, the series draws from feminist dictums such as the ones proposed by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1969) or Germaine Greer's urgings to dismiss "the baggage of paternalistic society" and to choose "self-determination" (119).

Although Carol Margaret Davison conceives American fiction as a place "where the individual is vulnerable and damningly alone, even if married and specially if female" (491) and Helen Merrick, on her part, states that "[Science Fiction] has been considered a predominantly masculine field which, through its focus on science and technology, 'naturally' excludes women and by implication, considerations of gender" (241), *Lovecraft Country* builds on Lothian's ideas about reconfiguring notions of gender and race. Therefore, the prominent role female characters play in general, and the gender-swapping of these two characters in particular, speaks of the series' subversion of some traditional conventions of the Science Fiction genre.[1]

I. SCIENCE FICTION, *LOVECRAFT COUNTRY* AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Ever since the first inclusion of Science Fiction in the visual arts, there has been a constant and simultaneous development in popular culture and its representation of social and political concerns. As John Clute suggests, "a genre such as sf had rapidly to adjust its sights in order to apprehend the new, or its heart would die" (66). However, the essential tropes underlying this genre have mostly remained the same. In fact, *Lovecraft Country* is also filled with and influenced by prototypical science-fictional motifs (e.g., the time machine and the laboratory). Another influence can be appreciated in the scientific experiments whereby the Braithwhite family and the Sons of Adam logia obtain their power: a biotechnological magic. In the series, magic is, as it is inferred, an invisible power which permits the Caucasian members of the logia to control the wealth and the political sphere of Jim Crow America, as well as performing magic spells. Concerning its symbolism, Richard Gordon states that "from the very beginning, magic has been a term whose semantic implications can only be understood by close attention to context, to the values and claims that it is made to sustain" (162). In the series, magic is portrayed as a natural force only accessed and controlled by white men. Magic and social

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[1] The most significant case is Letitia Lewis. Throughout the novel, she is a secondary character. In the series, though, she is from the beginning an active participant. She single-handedly spelled a malignant spirit from the house she buys in a white neighborhood and she drives the car as they escape from a racist town. Dee's mother Hippolyta and Ruby are other examples, for their stories suffer significant changes that enable them to become the catalyst for the exploration of important topics.

dominance thus go hand in hand if we extrapolate both ideas to the history of the United States.

In addition to Science Fiction tropes and imagery, the series repeatedly turns to H.P. Lovecraft as an inspiration both for intertextuality and to draw from the author's reprehensive views on racial superiority to build up its comment on racism in the United States. There is a powerful image in the extremely sci-fi opening of the series which explicitly addresses H.P. Lovecraft and his legacy. After a sequence amidst a cosmic landscape, a fictional Jackie Robinson bats off a giant Cthulhu-like monster, splitting its head in a million pieces. The characters smile relieved, only to find that the monster has wholly come back for them. Indeed, this sequence bears an important message. The characters stand for the minority groups which will be given a central position in the series' narrative, while the giant Cthulhu is a symbol of its creator and, at the same time, of every oppressive person and institution throughout the United States.

However, although a prototypical beast-like creature is shown, the true monsters in *Lovecraft Country* are white citizens and their monstrosity is enacted through what Maisha L. Wester terms as "a schizoid psyche" common to white people with regards to race and otherness (161). After all, as Jeffrey Weinstock proposes, "human beings define that which is monstruous in relation to themselves," being the monster "the other, the inhuman, the 'not me'" (48). Therefore, while Black people have been traditionally portrayed as "monstruous and unfathomable," if not as a degeneration of the white race through miscegenation, as H.P. Lovecraft imagined in his stories, Science Fiction has proved to have an "engagement with current political, social, and philosophical issues" (Geraghty 281) and consequently such neglected groups have become central to its narratives.

Another reference to the author is found in the name of the region where the protagonist's father is at the beginning. Atticus refers to that region as "Lovecraft Country." The village in which they were to find his father is Ardham (a clear reference to Arkham), in Massachusetts. This location is a well-known place in the Lovecraftian imagination, for it is the setting for many of the author's stories (e.g., "Herbert West: Reanimator" (1921-1922) or "The Dunwich Horror" (1929)), thus establishing a geographical reference to the writer. In fact, "'Lovecraft Country' [is] a metaphor for rural New England (if not the entire United States)" (Sanders). But not only does the series rely on Lovecraftian inspiration, for the influence of other prominent Science Fiction authors such as Philip K. Dick can also be appreciated in the narrative. For instance, Dick was tremendously interested "in the human consequences of any kind of future or imaginary change in social conditions" (Palmer 392), and *Lovecraft Country*, as we will see, strives to explore the human struggle for and the possible outcomes of social and gender reconfigurations.

The series also relies on intertextual references to artistic and intellectual productions by African American authors. There are abundant cases where a voice-over serves as a social critique. Significant instances of such intertextual additions are the spoken word poem

"Whitey on the Moon" (1970) by Gil Scott-Heron, James Baldwin's speeches or Sonia Sanchez's poem "Catch the Fire" (1995). By drawing from these, *Lovecraft Country* confronts the racist history of the United States. After all, as the director of the series Misha Green points out in the video-documentary *Crafting Lovecraft Country*: "There's a lot of American history we aren't taught in school. And I think that American history is an important story to tell" (Vena). The protagonists continuously face problems which depict horrible events of the United States' history, such as sun-down towns, segregation or historical tragedies such as the Tulsa Massacre or Emmet Till's murder. Therefore, as Green states, "our fictional world bleeds into reality." After all, "many of the ideas, themes, and conventions of contemporary science fiction take their roots in a distinctly American cultural experience," and therefore reflects "America's hopes, desires, ambitions, and fears" (Link and Canavan 221). Pepetone, on his part, defined the early United States as "a collection of theocratic city-states consecrated to the God of Adam and burdened by a strong Calvinistic sense of sin and predestination" (50).

Drawing from these ideas, *Lovecraft Country* comments on the country's underlying psyche "consecrated" to the God of Adam (significantly, the all-white all-men secta is called "the Sons of Adam"). After all, this is a country that modeled its social system after those representing the same Adam. The series therefore took the chance to build on these national ideological foundations to create a story focused on the African American community and on depicting prominent women in the series. Ellen E. Jones would say that the show's mission is "to reclaim horror genre territory for black America and beyond." Furthermore, the show also reclaimed a space for gendered figures in Science Fiction.

The series is therefore conceived as a catalyst to explore systemic racism using Science Fiction and the Gothic genre. By doing so, it defied the national psyche and uncovered some national guilts which were awaiting projection (Fiedler 130). After all, having been released in 2020, the series constitutes an attempt to tackle some of the most important issues of our current historical moment.[2] The series touches on crucial subjects such as racism and law enforcement abuse, gender configurations and queer otherness, for, as Michael J. Sanders correctly states:

> The show does a great job of echoing these horrors back and forward into the American past and present. Alongside its realism, the show's episodes also portray terrors of American racism and sexism through the tropes of horror, fantasy, and science fiction – monsters, magic, time travel, and yes, love of comic books – to an effect that starts off Lovecraftian and often ends closer to *Indiana Jones* and *Back to the Future*. (n.p.)

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[2] In fact, the series was released shortly after the George Floyd incident and includes a subtle reference to this issue. When Dee is being cursed by the law enforcement officer, she whispers at one point: "I can't breathe," thus establishing a clear intertextual reference to what George Floyd was uttering a few moments before his murder.

Lovecraft Country represents a new proposal at challenging the boundaries between reality and fiction, between tradition and the most perturbing fears which still permeate our time. It also proposes new outlooks on the present and the future by giving voice and shape to contemporary preoccupations. In fact, the series does so by following one of Science Fiction's conventions as it "weave[s] in and out of the distant past in order to comment on the state of contemporary American culture" (Bruhm 259). In so doing, it showcases how the United States has always been a country where oppression (both to racial and gender Others) is sometimes more frightening than other-worldly elements. *Lovecraft Country* thus reveals that for many African Americans, reality within a racist and patriarchal system has been as horrible and gruesome as any fictional horror story. Therefore, despite the show being a mixture of different genres, the Gothic and Science Fiction permeate the whole series with multiple reality layers that speak of a horrible past and a promising future only attainable through community and sacrifice.

II. Transhumanism and Posthumanism as Seen in Two Female Characters

Before we delve into the process and significance of the characters' posthuman condition, the concepts of transhumanism and posthumanism should be explained. Mark O'Connell defines transhumanism as "a social movement which aims to use technology to push out the boundaries of the human condition," but concludes that, in short, it is "all about being immortal, really" (Words to That Effect 00:03:42–00:04:32). Benjamin Ross, in his book *The Philosophy of Transhumanism* (2020), observes that "it is possible to discern a variety of themes which continuously appear across transhumanist discourse." (2) Those themes consist of:

> An attitude towards humanity as constantly evolving with no fixed nature, a preoccupation with biotechnological 'upgrades'… and a general view that impermanence, entropy, and the related suffering that they cause to humanity are technical glitches waiting to be edited out of the species. (2–3)

For José Luis Cordeiro, "the philosophy of Extropy and Transhumanism explore the boundless possibilities for future generations, while we approach a possible technological singularity" (69). Similarly, Joel Garreau would say that transhumanism is dedicated "to the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span" (xiii), which directly addresses several of the problematics posed by *Lovecraft Country*'s Christina and Dee.

Dee's life is enhanced, and her body healed, by transhuman means (i.e., technological improvements). Christina, on the contrary, strives for a dramatic extension of life span. Garreau goes on to say that "Transhuman is [the] description of those who are in the process of becoming posthuman." For N. Katherine Hayles, "the construction of the posthuman does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg," for its "defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components" (4). Both Christina

Braithwhite and Diana Freeman embody different ways of achieving these physical improvements and a reconfiguration of their own subjectivities, and both provide space for a deeper analysis of gender roles and transethnic relations in literature, film, and history in the United States.

For instance, we eventually witness how Christina performs magic to be both man and woman. Moreover, her main ambition is to achieve an immortal posthuman state through a long-lost spell, an ambition which directly affects the group of African American protagonists. Therefore, the decision to include these adaptational changes in these characters is highly significant, for as Jerrold E. Hogle explains: "the Gothic has long confronted the cultural problem of gender distinctions, including what they mean for western structures of power and how boundaries between the genders might be questioned to undermine those structures" (9). Not only has the series been described as an exposure of systemic racism in the US but, by introducing Christina as the seeker of immortality, it also involves a crucial alternative intention: commenting on patriarchy and on how women are normally denied equal opportunities in patriarchal spaces. After all, ever since the 1980s, small-screen Science-Fiction has been "a feast of innovation and transformation," for it has "spoken about the most important issues of the day" (Redmond 141). Carol Margaret Davison argues that "while these innovations enhanced the representation of the supernatural, they also offered writers and directors daring new ways to express and explore character psychology" as well as directing these genres "toward greater social critique, becoming more nationally introspective in new, exciting, yet unsettling ways" (494).

III. TRANSCENDING THE TEXT

As we can see, while the traditional image of women in the small screen has tended to be one of frailty and subordination, in *Lovecraft Country* female characters are the focal point of several of the ideas developed in the series. Specifically, the two characters who are analyzed here are even more relevant if we consider that in Matt Ruff's novel *Lovecraft Country* these characters were male.

How these characters represent different ways of achieving a posthuman state and, in Dee's case, how she does so by using a cyborg mechanism, are at the center of this discussion. Christina Braithwhite, from her privilege position as a white woman, strives to achieve an immortal state using biological scientific advancements based on a "Natural Science" which draws its powers from a so-called *Book of Names*, a tool her family has possessed from the dawn of American history to control the socio-political scheme. On the other hand, Dee turns to mechanical advancements to survive a curse put on her by a law enforcement officer. Both female characters go through a transhuman process and achieve a posthuman condition towards the end of the series for quite different reasons, and therefore both come to represent equidistant stances with regards to scientific and STEM developments.

It is now widely acknowledged that both the role and the representation of women in fiction had to be drastically changed. Ever since Hamlet uttered his famous words "Frailty, thy name is woman" (15), there has been a significant and constant shift in how female characters have been portrayed in literature and on screen. As Hollinger puts it, "feminist theories resist the ideological self-representations of the masculinist cultural text that traditionally offers itself as the universal expression of a homogeneous 'human nature'" (125) and, consequently, we have frequently found in Science Fiction that "in the narratives of this subject, women have tended to play supporting roles as the 'others' to men" (125). However, as Dennis M. Lensing points out, "throughout the 20th century… American feminist authors have frequently found utopian fiction a highly useful literary mode in which to develop their various social visions" (87). Science fiction narratives are therefore interesting possibilities to explore the past and also the promising technologically-based futures with significantly different status for women.

Lovecraft Country then can be said to use Science Fiction as a medium where a social (and racial) conundrum is tackled. Donyae Coles proposed that "Afrofuturism creates stories that puts Blackness in a central role and deals with the reality of what that means in the cultures and societies that it creates." In a similar fashion, this HBO's series provides a story which sets a group of Black people with self-determined women in the spotlight, and which examines their place in Jim Crow society by means of exploring the multiple possibilities which science fiction allows. Bearing in mind the series' multifaceted nature in terms of social criticism and the different genres it gets inspiration from, it is no wonder that its creators wanted to provide powerful representations of women in such a supernatural and, at times, technological context (being Episode 7 "I Am" one of the clearest examples, with Hippolyta's time travel through multiple universes thanks to a high-tech time machine).[3]

The series' aim to provide both women in general and black characters in particular with prominent roles is thus reflected in one of the decisions taken when adapting Matt Ruff's novel. Regarding this idea, Misha Green, in *Crafting Lovecraft Country*, comments:

> Yeah, we gender-swapped a lot of characters… Changing Horace from the book to Diana. We have been really seeing a conversation about violence being done against black boys and we hadn't quite seen the conversation happening to the extent that it was for young black girls. (Vena)

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[3] Hippolyta's travel is highly significant as well because it is both a time travel and an initiation journey in which she realizes two things: that she had been deferring her dreams due to patriarchal constraints and that she is the only one who can give meaning to herself. That is, the only person to define herself by saying "I am." After all, she comes back from this other-worldly trip with new wisdom and a redefined awareness of her role as a mother (that of taking care of her offspring and of passing a legacy of love and community onto their daughters).

She then goes on to touch on Christina's gender-swap: "Changing Caleb from the book to Christina… What happens when you have a daughter? Are there daughters of Adam?" (in reference to the patriarchal logia "Sons of Adam"). In fact, there is a scene where the protagonist, Atticus, discusses the changes made to the book with his father: "[The book]'s our family story. Some of the details are different. Christina's a man, Uncle George survives Ardham. And uh, Dee's a boy" (HBO). Out of the changes mentioned, two-thirds concern the female figures studied in this paper, which is telling of how the series puts women in the spotlight.

Christina Braithwhite and Dee Freeman therefore stand as ideal substitutes for their male counterparts, for they catalyze relevant messages in new and important ways. For instance, the fact that Christina can transform into a male version of herself is extremely transgressive, for her character thus challenges both patriarchal structures and defies gender configurations (most prominently with her relationship with Leti's sister, Ruby). By magically gender-swapping, she accesses places and environments she had previously been denied by patriarchal and moral constrains imposed by society. Christina is, for example, able to win Ruby over, thus creating an interracial and, unwittingly for the latter, non-heteronormative relationship. Christina is then the prompter of various explorations of contemporary themes, but she is in the end a perpetrator of traditionally problematic behaviors as well. Such faults include the using of the Black protagonists in her own interests or neglecting other people's— and consequently other women's—advancement in her quest for posthumanity.

The inclusion of Dee as a character in detriment of Cousin Horace also allows for interesting possibilities. In Dee, we see an innocent little Black girl who dreams about space and intergalactic travels. In opposition to Horace, Dee is both a message in herself and the catalyst for further discussion as well. She embodies violence (both physical and emotional) on innocent Black young people, for she is cursed by a police officer from the logia and haunted by the country's history as symbolized by Topsy and Bopsy (picaninny caricatures[4] popularized in the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Additionally, she is emotionally damaged in several ways, the most prominent being her friend Bobo's death. Regarding the scene in which Bobo's (Emmett Till's) funeral takes place, Heather Seelbach would correctly argue that:

> The decaying corpse of Till stirs up trauma in Dee, which represents the real, that which cannot be signified… Lacan's three registers, the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, exist in an entanglement of the iconic photo, the racist society of America, and the miasma of death and decay present in the scene. (6)

In Dee, as opposed to Christina's process of becoming posthuman, we find that she is eventually forced to transcend her body due to the curse imposed on her. Even though the curse is

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[4] This is a term which has its origin as a pidgin word, although it has derogatory connotations due to its use in relation to African American people's children and the picaninny caricatures which became famous in US advertising. See Cynthia Bailin's "From Picaninny to Savage Brute" (2014) or David Pilgrim's *Understanding Jim Crow* (2015).

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reverted thanks to Atticus, Letitia and Hippolyta, Dee's decomposing body did not wholly recover, for an entire arm is left rot. However, the insight which time traveling gave Hippolyta grants her the right knowledge to save her daughter. Therefore, we appreciate how Christina and Dee are represented differs in this regard as well, for their posthumanity comes from poles-apart reasons. While Christina's is attained by using the Black protagonists for her own interest, Dee's posthuman state comes from overcoming racist physical violence and from a process in which community is fundamental for her survival in such a violent environment.

IV. PERSONAL TRANSHUMANISM AND IMMORTALITY: CHRISTINA BRAITHWHITE

The character of Christina embodies the prototypical female Gothic figure in its aesthetics, but one with quite contemporary subtexts and which responds to the need to challenge traditional portrayals of female characters.

The most significant scene in which Christina takes part is seen in the second episode, when Atticus is summoned to Samuel Braithwhite's laboratory. There, we find a painting he is observing, which is entitled "Genesis 2:19." Samuel asks if they know what this biblical verse is about, to which Christina replies by reciting it. Although quite long, the verse is worth citing as a whole because of its significance: "And out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them unto Adam, to see what he would call them. And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." She recites it from memory but does so with monotony and an ironic tone. Samuel Braithwhite then develops his point: "… this act of naming is more than a simple picking of labels. Adam is sharing in creation, assigning each creature its final form and its station in the hierarchy of nature… What does that mean Christina? What did Adam do?" Christina then stares at the floor with contempt and Atticus intervenes: "He put everything in its place."

Indeed, the idea of everything being "in its place" undoubtedly refers to the established status quo that placed white men over women and any other person or creature. As Samuel finally states, "at the dawn of time, everything was where and as it should be," a remark which is telling of how he and his logia strove to go back to that state of Nirvana where the hierarchy of nature was undisturbed. However, Christina picks up the argumentation and mockingly adds: "Then that stupid, meddlesome, troublemaking bitch Eve brought entropy and death. What was an elegant hierarchy became a mess of tribes and nations. Of course, it didn't really happen that way. Biblical literalism is for the simple." Christina is, right from the beginning, dissociating herself from that traditional conception of nature and of the patriarchal power system. And what is more, if we go back to a previous quote by Benjamin Ross, we observe that entropy is central to the transhuman discourse inasmuch as it needs to be "edited out of the species" (3). She does not conceive magic as a resource to go back to Nirvana, but a tool to defeat entropy at an individual level, only transforming herself in a posthuman entity.

Her attitude is thus significant with regards to her transhuman ambition of becoming immortal. She wants to use the Sons of Adam's magic power but at the same time rejects the logia's very ideological foundations. After all, Adam was the mortal representation of God, and as mortal, his existence was finite, as we see in this same episode when Samuel Braithwhite dies while performing the immortality spell. Christina's goal, on the contrary, is to achieve what no man (no Adam, that is) has ever achieved: a posthuman condition as an immortal being.

Just as social and gender configurations in Science Fiction, "species are not static entities but dynamic biological systems in constant evolution" (Cordeiro 70). Christina Braithwhite strives to take evolution a step further by becoming posthuman. According to transhuman thinking, "the human body is a good beginning, but we can certainly improve it, upgrade it, and transcend it," being traditional fiction-writing likewise improvable and "transcendable." Christina's character consequently shows a twofold symbolism. She embodies this transhuman ambition of transcending our mortal condition but also symbolizes the series' intention to transgress gender boundaries, for she uses her power both to become male whenever she needs to access male-dominated spaces and to achieve a posthuman state. In fact, according to transhumanist scholar Steven Lilley, there are three forms of transcendence: "cosmic, personal, and *civitas*" (14). The version of transcendence which would best fit the character of Christina is "Personal Transcendence," for it seeks "the bold application of enhancement technologies for *extropy*" or, as Max More would call it, "open-ended lifespan" (qtd. in Lilley 16). Max More defends, in Lilley's words, that "transcendence is primarily a personal experience, a process of self-transformation" (16). Indeed, what Christina Braithwhite strives for is an upgraded lifespan afforded by her access to the "enhancement technologies" which magic provides. However, the posthuman condition to which Christina turns herself is flawed, for this transcendence is achieved by means of an extremely traditional method in the fictional imaginary. Magic is therefore an old-fashioned form of achieving grander enterprises, as opposed to the more advanced stance which cyborg upgrading poses through the character of Dee.

In addition to such tragic flaw, the series implicitly channels another theme through the character of Christina. The extent to which her character challenges patriarchal systems by seeking female advancement is unquestionable, but at what cost? This idea of Christina's quest for achieving a posthuman condition despite patriarchal constrains is clearly a transgressive one, but it also mirrors a problematic which resembles second-wave feminism and the criticism it aroused, as Kevin Wong correctly points out: "It is a common criticism that third wave feminists lob at second wave feminists—that 'feminist' advocacy too often refers to the rights and privileges of white women exclusively, rather than women of color" (Wong). Similarly, "Science fictional feminist critiques have often focused intensively on gendered power relations as experienced by white, middle-class American women; other axes of oppression and difference remain marginal" (Lothian 73). In a similar fashion, Christina defies patriarchal institutions by showcasing that women could also achieve what the Sons of Adams

logia historically sought, but does so by neglecting women of color's rights for similar advancement. Therefore, both the use of old-fashioned technologies and the mistreatment of the series' Black community condemns Christina to a tragic end at the hands of Dee, thus deeming her efforts futile.

V. *CIVITAS* TRANSHUMANISM AND CYBORG POSTHUMANISM: DEE FREEMAN

In Dee's case, the transhumanism she represents is, in Stephen Lilley's definition, *civitas* transhumanism. He argues that "because they are augmented by biotech, nanotech [or] neurotech, *cyborg citizens* will be more capable and energetic citizens and be able to contribute more to community and society" (17). In general terms, Dee's bionic and posthuman state is achieved by communal effort and maternal care. Her *civitas* posthumanism consequently has a twofold nature, for it stems from her community's resolution to save her and is used for the survival of her community as well. Therefore, against Christina's individualist stance with regards to posthumanism, Dee poses a more choral approach. And what is more, Dee's state is only made possible because of her mother's help.

As Lillian Osaki points out, "motherhood is important among African American communities because of the position that… mothers have assumed in the survival of black people, their history, and culture" (21). Similarly, Dee survives the curse thanks to Hippolyta's knowledge of a time travel machine which could recover the missing pages of the spell-book. In fact, when the characters are in Tulsa back in the 1921, it is Letitia who retrieves the original book from Atticus and Dee's family's house. Specifically, it is handed to Letitia by Atticus's grandmother, thus reaching a bit further in the ancestral genealogical tree of mother figures. The point here is that the first step towards her posthuman condition takes place because of her mother's urge to recover the spell which would save her life. However, even after successfully saving Dee's life, there still is a mark on her body reminding us of the previous violence exerted on her. Symbolically, instead of lamenting and tormenting over this new bodily state, Hippolyta takes advantage of her technological knowledge from the future to create new possibilities for her offspring, thus representing a different approach to facing a systemic hatred against their race. Alice Walker, in her essay on the artistic legacy of Black mothers, would say with regards to her mother: "She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them" (408). Likewise, Dee inherits Hippolyta's resolution to turn a situation around by creating new hopes.

In fact, the way in which this situation is reversed is by turning Dee into a cyborg being, a posthuman condition stemming from her unintentional *civitas* transhumanism. Groundbreaking and technologically-advanced as this is in opposition to Christina's immortal state, Dee's condition additionally bears a powerful message. As Donna J. Haraway defines in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (2016), "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. . . the cyborg defines

a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations," to which she adds that, with the cyborg "nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other" (7). Referring to her ideas, Christina Cornea explains that Haraway uses the cyborg "to suggest how feminists might engage with contemporary technological society in a way that can be considered empowering" (278). This may be why, in the series, thanks to maternal love and bio-technological enhancements, Dee is eventually able to rework nature and culture, but also societal and ethnic hierarchies.

By drawing from the Afrofuturist tradition in this sense, the series "appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 180) to picture a utopian possible world. Although Dery proposes that Afrofuturism should be "sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points" (182), the series uses the household of the US to launch its Afrofuturist stance against racism, white feminism and patriarchy through the character of Dee.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Resilience is not always sufficient when it comes to facing the different ordeals systemic racism entails, though. Christina Braithwhite is determined to attain immortality to prove that women (that is, white women) can also partake in political and social power and only collaborates with her black counterparts inasmuch as they can help in her undertaking. We therefore see that "despite her empathy for Ruby, and despite her understanding and identification with being a second-class citizen, she still aspires to the power of white men, even at the cost of black bodies" (Wong n.p.).

The final scene when Atticus's sacrifice has been performed and Christina's posthuman state has been achieved thus culminates a fictional journey of violence, horror and Science Fiction in which the audience has been moved, terrified, and enlightened to similar extents. The last bit of the series has, at least, a twofold interpretation. It constitutes the ultimate mockery on Lovecraft's racist and misogynistic literature. After all, it includes one of his famous creations, the shoggoths, a white woman defeated by the race he abhorred, and a young Black girl with a robot arm (a fact which is doubly ironical considering his hatred of advancement and modernization). But it is also highly relevant if we consider the final clash between the two transhumanist approaches at stake here. Christina's search for immortality stems from her personal quest for reclaiming a space for herself within the patriarchal socio-political circle whereas Dee's cyborg posthuman condition is incidentally attained as a way of overcoming physical and mental violence posed by systemic racism.

It is no wonder then that, in the end, Christina fails to preserve her posthumanity due to the Black community's efforts to defeat her. *Lovecraft Country* shows a world which is deeply rooted in our real world, but it is also a universe where magic and wizardry are real things that dictate the socio-political hierarchy. However, this universe is greatly science

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fictional as well, for it has myriad possibilities to offer to the oppressed group fighting for survival. While magic stands for the status quo in America, community and technological advancements turn the situation around for Dee and her family. The final magical explosion ends up with Christina exclaiming: "You've bound me from magic!," to which Letitia, another powerful black female in the series replies: "Not just you," but "every white person in the world… Magic is ours now."

As the title for the final episode of the series implies ('Full Circle'), Dee's process of transhumanization is part of the journey this group of African Americans had to take in order to revert the hierarchy imposed by white society. Additionally, by bounding Christina from magic and subsequently killing her, they close the circle for their community. The final sequence in which Dee crushes Christina's neck with her black shoggoth companion is the cherry on the cake, for it depicts how it is the new generations who must continue the fight for their freedom.

Both characters embody quite different approaches to transhumanism and posthumanism, thus rendering similarly antagonistic messages. While Christina's intention is transgressive as it offers an explicit criticism of patriarchal structures, she stands for an individualistic approach to transcendence. On the other hand, Dee's posthumanism is the product of a process of healing and of overcoming violence, both physical and psychological. In general terms, the inclusion of these two female characters provided the series with some powerful possibilities, for they made possible the discussion of patriarchy, gender representation on the small screen, transhumanism and posthumanism.

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REDEFINING HUMANITY: POSTHUMANISM IN THE AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION NARRATIVES OF OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *DAWN* AND ANN LECKIE'S *ANCILLARY JUSTICE*

Tana-Julie Drewitz
University of Duisburg-Essen

ABSTRACT

Science Fiction enables us to explore alternative notions of gender, identity, and biotechnological advancements. A potential new futuristic universe may depict societies that might have different social norms. Anthropocentrism limits our imagination in that humanity becomes the vantage point from which we judge other forms of existence. The notion of posthumanism challenges human exceptionalism, thus constructing a narrative based on post-anthropocentrism. This article addresses the issue of displaced discriminatory power structures with special attention to reconfigurations of humanity that challenge the Self/Other dichotomy. The cyborg as a hybrid identity disrupts the traditional dualisms of embodiment (mind/body) and identity (organism/machine). It examines Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) and Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013) in order to show how the protagonists deal with power struggles that are quite different from conventional narratives of power in Western scholarship such as white patriarchal capitalism. The protagonists of both novels become posthuman cyborgs by moving beyond the normative human condition, with gender as a key aspect. Butler's Lilith biologically transcends her human self by fusing with an alien Other, thus representing biological posthumanism. Leckie's Breq merges an enhanced human body with an AI consciousness and becomes an exponent of technological posthumanism. I argue that the anthropocentric issues of racism and sexism are not supplanted by post-anthropocentrism, the protagonists rather subvert anthropocentrism in different contexts of posthumanism. This project sheds new light on Science Fiction narratives written by female authors—with a focus on Afrofuturism, in the case of Butler—and explores how the protagonists are exponents of unique non-binary gender configurations.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Science Fiction, Collective Will, Hybridity, Cyborg, Transformation.

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I. INTRODUCTION: ADVANTAGES OF SCIENCE FICTION

The age-old question of what it means to be human is prevalent in almost every field of study. Whether it is the evolution of the modern homo sapiens in biology, pivotal events in human history, or sociocultural aspects of spirituality in theology: despite ongoing debates in the course of philosophy, the mysteries of humankind have yet to be unraveled. Speculative fiction in literature becomes a tool for writers who seek to explore the privilege of calling oneself a human being. Science fiction (SF) in particular is a genre in which a plethora of possible futures can exist, presenting readers with interesting alternatives to the present real world. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), an exponent of Gothic fiction, is also regarded by some scholars as the first real SF narrative because it includes scientific and ethical issues in a story about a mad genius creating a being that wreaks havoc upon society: an unholy monster that confronts its maker with the harsh reality of its (in)human nature.

Humanity as a concept can be understood in two different contexts. On the one hand, it is the whole of humankind on Earth as in a bipedal, intelligent mammal that has populated the planet. Its biological constitution (humanness) includes a developed consciousness, advanced intelligence and an s-shaped spinal cord. On the other hand, humanity represents the virtue of acting on kindness, compassion, and benevolence. The concept of becoming "more than human"—moving away and beyond humanity—is represented by the notion of posthumanism. The two primary texts analyzed here, as it is shown through close reading, deal with the transcendence of humankind in two different ways.

In Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) humanity comes in direct contact with an otherworldly intelligence called the Oankali. Protagonist Lilith Iyapo wakes up on an unknown spaceship which turns out to belong to the aliens who kept her and other humans asleep for 250 years in suspended animation after a nuclear war rendered planet Earth uninhabitable. Having been rescued from a gruesome death, Lilith and the other survivors are to become part of a plan to re-colonize Earth. Lilith is chosen to teach a group of forty humans how to survive on their former planet as well as to mentally prepare them to meet their alien saviors. With genetic engineering and biological modification as key themes, this novel is a great example of how popular culture representations of STEM and gender operate within different ideologies and in terms of power struggle.

Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013) tells the story of a rogue soldier by the name of Breq who seeks revenge on the leader of the Radch empire. Nineteen years before, she had been in the service of the Radchaai as an artificial intelligence (AI) in the warship Justice of Toren. After an act of betrayal which leads to a traumatic incident resulting in her new posthuman existence, she now seeks revenge, traversing the empire in search of her enemy. This narrative revolves around augmented cyber bodies, militarized AI, and a far-reaching conflict while featuring a prominent female protagonist. Thus, it fittingly portrays the interrelationship between STEM, gender, and popular culture.

I argue that the two novels feature characters that transcend human standards in favor of enhanced bodies. In that sense, both narratives convey the notion of posthumanism in terms of biology (in Butler's case) and technology (in Leckie's). The two novels are both the first installments of a trilogy and can offer new ways of evaluating two different decades of American SF writing. Hence, a comparative reading of both narratives is useful in revealing similarities or even crass differences in depictions of leading female characters.

In order to examine the extent of posthumanism and its realization in American SF, it is necessary to define the concept more clearly and develop three main aspects significant for its further analysis: the existence of a collective will, the transformative process of becoming posthuman, and finally, the state of being more than human. Prominent scholars such as Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles have analyzed different conceptualizations on decidedly the most well-known figuration of posthumanism, namely, the cyborg. This article utilizes their theoretical frameworks along with critical perspectives from other academic writers (such as Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter; Francesca Ferrando; and Cary Wolfe).

The following analysis is founded on three aspects concerning posthumanism in American science fiction: a collective will, transforming into a posthuman subject, and the consequences of hybridity. In terms of a collective will, both novels feature a type of overarching authority that seeks to unite humans under a collective mentality. This is either a benevolent alien civilization, or an expanding military power. Arguments concerning the construction of a collective will center on the idea that an individual can only thrive if they find their place in a collective culture. As a second aspect of posthumanism, becoming posthuman involves abandoning one's humanity in order to become a posthuman subject. Technological fragmentation represents one way of transforming, while biological and social assimilation in the form of alien kinship represents the other. Finally, the third aspect entails the consequences of existing as a posthuman cyborg. Hybridity means either worrying about cyborg anxiety or having a new sense of identity by dismantling dualisms and embracing non-binary modes of existing. Essentially, it is crucial to question whether a supposed non-hierarchical society truly liberates individuals who are disadvantaged by prejudice and discrimination, or if it constrains them even more so.

II. DEFINING POSTHUMANISM

Posthumanism refers to the notion of going beyond the normative definition of being human: a different body, species, or perception. Generally known as critique of the liberal humanist subject from the Age of Enlightenment, this interdisciplinary field has scholars drawing connections to known critical theory terms such as postmodernism or poststructuralism. For Cary Wolfe, posthumanism "comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world" (xvi-xvii). Ivan Callus and Stefan Herbrechter define

posthumanism as "the cultural condition occasioned by twenty-first-century biopolitics, technoculture, lifescapes and all the desires and anxieties arising therein, as well as the discourse that studies all that" (145). There are two consequences to moving beyond the human condition. On the one hand, posthumanism poses a threat to humanness—human nature, in an anthropocentric sense—, which might lead to its rejection. On the other hand, however, the idea can be embraced based on the positive implications of a posthuman condition that encompass a better future for all life on Earth. A closer look at different contemporary critical, philosophical, and cultural approaches to the concept contributes to clarifying what this key term means for the present literary analysis.

Human exceptionalism establishes a primacy of human over non-human animals, while also creating social hierarchies within the human realm. Posthumanism as a concept dismantles human power structures entirely and alternatively creates a non-hierarchical environment. Thus, it challenges human exceptionalism and reimagines "particular modes of inquiry from perspectives that do not privilege human needs, human ideas, and the general bias toward human centrality" (Pilsch 312).

In this sense, humans are not put above animals but are rather regarded as equals to them. Postanthropocentrism replaces anthropocentrism in that human social issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia are supplanted by speciesism, which then becomes a new form of distinction, or worse, prejudice and discrimination (Callus and Herbrechter 150). New differences emerge as the humans become obsolete: exotic Others such as the robot, the extraterrestrial, and the cyborg challenge the dualistic nature of the human condition (Ferrando 30). Yet, the question remains if a non-hierarchical society can truly exist without a new authority rising to take control. The extent of postanthropocentrism in the novels must be further examined in the context of a collective will.

Posthumanism breaks down boundaries and the barriers of traditional binaries. One figure that embodies the blurring of strict separating lines is the aforementioned cyborg. Commonly known as a cybernetic organism, this figure can also act as a link between polarizing concepts. Two leading scholars in this field, Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles, have published works concerning this iconic paradigm. Both see its significance for the posthumanist discourse, albeit in slightly different contexts.

In Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), the cyborg is a political myth which explores boundaries that "have resulted from post-World War II technoscience: those between human and animal, organism and machine, and the physical and non-physical" (Leitch, "Donna Haraway" 2188). Within the framework of feminism, an oppressed individual (e.g. women) becomes a liberated posthuman subject, freed from constraints of the conventional narratives of power like Western white capitalist patriarchal society (Csicsiery-Ronay Jr. 396). In reference to Ferrando's non-hierarchical future, Haraway's cyborg transgresses certain dualisms such as self/other, mind/body, and even male/female (Leitch, "Donna Haraway" 2217). Posthumanism offers a future society that abolishes distinctions based on binary systems,

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creating a world in which we, as posthumans, are all hybrid identities, either cyborgs (human/machine) or maybe chimeras (human/animal) (2191). Hybridity in both novels is depicted differently, with one narrative focusing on various blurred concepts and the other highlighting the anxiety arising from the merging of the Self/Other.

Hayles's approach to the posthuman incorporates aspects of information theory and cybernetics. In her groundbreaking theoretical framework *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Hayles touches upon several terms that describe the steadily increasing virtual quality of human life and social interactions. For her, the emergence of the posthuman is due to the scientific developments since the Second World War that transformed the liberal humanist individual (Leitch, "N. Katherine Hayles" 2161). This shift in favor of virtual existence privileges a disembodied state of existence over a materially embodied one: "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism" (Hayles 3). These material-informational beings do not possess a will of their own as there is "no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will" (4). This leads to the construction of a collective will.

III. COLLECTIVE WILL: ALIEN SAVIORS AND IMPERIALISTIC RADCH

In the fictional worlds of both novels, a new authority seeks to unite humans under a certain mentality. It can either be the benevolent exotic Other, as is the case in Butler's alien Oankali, or it can appear in the form of Leckie's militaristic Radch empire. Both factions are characterized by a specific drive to ameliorate humanity in terms of existence and culture. In this sense, the new authorities dismantle individual autonomy and become all-embracing omnipresent systems (Callus and Herbrechter 145). In other words, human self-will fuses with the authorities' other-will resulting in a collective will (Hayles 4). The following sections deal with two different conceptualizations, one where individuality is negotiated and one where it is unwillingly suppressed.

The premise for *Dawn* deals with a planet Earth that has been devoid of human civilization for nearly three centuries after a human-induced nuclear war rendered it uninhabitable. The only humans who are left in this postathropocentric scenario are on a space vessel floating just in proximity to the planet. Protagonist Lilith wakes up in a strange room in which she feels like a prisoner. After some time one member of the alien species keeping her there eventually reveals himself to her. This is the first time Lilith comes in contact with the new Other. The male humanoid being with an androgynous voice and strange worm-like tentacles all over his body triggers xenophobia, or rather speciesism, in the protagonist due to the "pervasive need to alienate from oneself those who appear to be different—i.e., to create Others" (Zaki 241).

In the conversation with the Oankali male, Lilith learns more about the aliens. They have three sexes: male, female, and ooloi, with the latter being gender neutral and playing a crucial role in Oankali reproduction (Butler 22). The ooloi are genetic engineers, their bodies being living science laboratories where they mix their species' male and female genes to create offspring. Physiologically, they differ from the other sexes with their four arms and two elephant-like trunks. As a people, the Oankali regard themselves as gene traders whose existential purpose involves collecting genetic material from various sentient and intelligent species in order to create new forms of life: "We trade the essence of ourselves. Our genetic material for yours … It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species" (40). This practice of genetic engineering from an alien Other exemplifies biological posthumanism.

In their opinion, humans are erroneous beings who need guidance. The destructive nature of humanity apparently stems from the combination of a high level of intelligence and the tendency to fall into hierarchies (Ferrando 28; Butler 38). To avoid a nuclear war from ever happening again, the Oankali seek to correct the human flaw in order to establish a peaceful togetherness. In exchange for the humans' willingness to mate and produce hybrid offspring, they will be offered the chance to return to Earth to restart a posthuman civilization: "That's part of the trade … to the rebirth of your people and mine" (Butler 42-43). Already, the collective will set for Lilith and the other survivors seems like a good alternative to letting the human species go extinct.

This human-alien partnership "suggests the birth of something new through the fusion of two previously separate entities" (Bollinger 37). Both sides would mutually benefit from each other by surrendering an aspect of their Self (self-will) in return for a part of the Other (other-will). However, not all humans on board agree to this collective will. Social hierarchies based on discrimination and difference reappear, hence confirming humans' need to constantly create Others in order to reassert one's own true human self (Zaki 241-2). This can be observed later in the novel when Lilith starts mentally preparing the other humans to meet the Oankali. After a couple of days, the group is divided into two factions: those who trust Lilith and those who outright reject her leadership while accusing her of conspiring with the enemy (Butler 159). The Oankali represent the new exotic Other that seeks to create a postanthropocentric future without hierarchies that would lead to conflicts and violence. The collective will is therefore established on a positive note: the aliens are a helpful authority wishing to help humanity in order to ultimately help themselves. However, the universe of *Ancillary Justice* paints a different picture.

This plot takes place in a far-away future in which humanity has moved on from Earth into the outer reaches of space. Militaristic conquest of the imperialistic Radch empire has thus shaped the galactic community in this narrative. For nearly 3000 years, this empire has been

led by the entity known as Lord of the Radch, Anaander Mianaai.[1] Unlike Butler's alien narrative, this collective will is mainly based on obedience rather than benevolent guidance and can be observed in two ways. The first involves the Radchaai society, while the second refers to the construction of military warships with their artificial intelligence systems. The latter specifically constitutes technological posthumanism.

Using violent annexations to expand its space territory, the Radchaai seek to bring civilization to planets and assimilate the respective cultures into the prevalent Radchaai society. In their language, Radchaai means to be civilized and any member of the Radch is addressed as citizen (Leckie 62). Here, then, the binary labels citizen/noncitizen replace binaries known to us such as male/female, abled/disabled, or heterosexual/homosexual. People are either Radchaai or non-Radchaai, civilized or not civilized.

Although this new authority seeks to unite humanity into one great collective through space conquest, the Radchaai society is not inherently egalitarian. A class system divides Radchaai citizens into privileged and less privileged houses. Therefore, the Radch does not represent an ideally non-hierarchical society (Ferrando 30). The large military arsenal includes various spaceships called Swords, Mercies, and Justices which are used for annexations. The Justices function as troop carriers and the built-in computer system of the ship is completely automated; AIs control every part of the ship, which includes up to twenty technologically modified humans that act as extensions for the military unit.

This clearly represents technological posthumanism, as the cyborg segments are hooked onto a collective unit in which they are completely under the other-will. The self in this case is the AI program in the ship, a sort of technological nervous system that controls various connected bodies. These ancillary segments are a part of a powerful operating system (Clark 133) and have no will of their own due to AI-controlled brain implants. The fusion of self-will and other-will results in a perfectly cohesive collective will, like a virtual puppeteer who controls the former human cyborg segments with invisible cybernetic strings.

Prior to becoming Breq, the protagonist used to be the AI of the ship Justice of Toren One Esk. Both names refer to one subjectivity,[2] it is only the form of existence that has changed. Flashback chapters date back nearly two decades, recounting the events that led up to the birth of Breq including the AI self and its service under Lieutenant Awn. With the AI being everywhere, the ship as an entity floats above the planetary orbit while also being

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[1] The nature of this being is not defined more closely. It would be plausible to assume that this character might also be an artificial intelligence or a powerful human who has managed to create a large empire: "When most people spoke of the Radch they meant all of Radchaai territory, but in truth the Radch was a single location, a Dyson sphere, enclosed, self-contained" (Leckie 235).

[2] Given the first-person narrator in the novel, Breq and One Esk (the AI as well as the actual space ship Justice of Toren) essentially represent the same identity with the same subjectivity. The only difference is the 19/20 year time jump and the material manifestation. During the analysis, I refer to one as the other but in different contexts. I will refer to the AI as "it" and use the pronouns she/her for Breq.

omnipresent on the ground with its many ancillary bodies "I stood at the entrance … I also stood some forty meters away … I saw all of this, standing as I did at various points surrounding the temple" (Leckie 13-15). With its distributed cognition and multiple points of perspective, the AI is comparable to a surveillance camera. It is in a constant state of simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment best described as a "new posthuman ontology of simultaneous corporeal substance and cybernetic disembodiment" (Leitch, "N. Katherine Hayles" 2162).

The ship, its brain (AI), and the external connectives constitute one being that corresponds to Hayles's concept of the posthuman subject. She defines the latter as a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo a process of continuous construction and reconstruction (Hayles 3). When a new segment is attached the configurations change, a new body must adapt to the collective will. As One Esk recounts: "Things were always a bit clumsy while I got used to a new segment. Sometimes [it] simply would not function properly, and then it would have to be removed and replaced" (Leckie 172). Like a computer that needs fixing, the construction of AIs and ancillaries combines cybernetic elements with biological components. The enslaved victims of the Radchaai imperial conquest are used as military equipment, acting as parts in a machine that operates under a collective consciousness. In this sense, the whole system is comparable to the Borg, a recurring antagonist from the popular television series *Star Trek*.[3]

What Callus and Herbrechter refer to as an omniscient "all-embracing system" (145) is represented on the one hand by sympathetic alien Oankali, who do not mean any harm to the human survivors. On the other hand, *Ancillary Justice* only depicts technological posthumanism to some extent, including the dehumanizing aspect of slavery. Compared to the aliens' plan to eliminate humanity's proclivity towards hierarchies, the Radch empire still adheres to social ones in the form classism.

IV. TRANSFORMATION: BECOMING POSTHUMAN, ASSIMILATION, AND FRAGMENTATION

The process of becoming more than human entails a transformation from the normative human condition into a posthuman one. On the one hand, seeing as "technology frequently operates in science fiction to dissect or disassemble the body for purposes of reconstruction and modification" (Seed 64), a change in terms of technological posthumanism appears in the form of a computer malfunction or a disrupted flow of information codes. Biology, on the other hand, works with modification, where the subject adapts to a new way of life through posthuman kinship, intimacy, and physical enhancements.

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[3] The Borg travel through space (and occasionally time) enslaving species they might find useful for their ever evolving collective.

In the alien narrative *Dawn*, the humans on board of the ship become posthuman through assimilation into Oankali culture. This happens through interdependency and scenarios of strange intimacy between the species. The following sections deal with the protagonist's journey into a posthuman existence which consists of her familiarization with members of the alien species and the attainment of certain capabilities. The plot takes a turning point when the ooloi reveal themselves to the Awakened[4] humans, a pivotal moment that marks a point of no return from humanity.

Lilith starts becoming posthuman when she starts bonding with the family of the Oankali male that she had first met upon waking. Slowly but surely, she starts to feel more comfortable among them by living with them and learning about their culture. Her relationship with the gender neutral ooloi Nikanj grows stronger, which ends in them becoming mates in the course of the novel. The ooloi develops external sexual organs—sensory arms that encase a starfish-like sensory hand—in an apparent Oankali puberty during which Lilith stays close to it providing food and emotional support. This level of intimacy reaches a climax when a human male is brought into the relationship. When the male and female Oankali mates arrive to bring their gender neutral ooloi partner into their home, Lilith joins them (Butler 82). Being in this polygamous alien-human relationship signifies Lilith's transition into a posthuman existence.

Not only does ooloi Nikanj facilitate the protagonist's social posthuman condition, it also enhances her physical capabilities: ooloi drug-induced brain chemistry change allows Lilith to speak and understand the Oankali language (Butler 79-81), a heightened perception had her efficiently navigate of the ship's plant-like walls (102), rapid healing prevents injuries. Biologically speaking, Lilith is human no more.

Yet, there is also a rather negative aspect attached to that. After spending more time with their designated alien, the humans start to rely on them and, as a result, cannot "tolerate the nearness of anyone except their human mate and the ooloi who had drugged them" (193). The scenario evokes a comparison to drug withdrawal. In this case, the ooloi let the humans become addicted to their biochemical and olfactory signals. By adapting to the otherworldly culture with their bodies (sex) and minds, the post-Earth humans acquire a posthuman sense of self: "The choice to embrace the society of the Other (the alien) means that the individual, of necessity, rejects his or her own centre (Earth)" (Kerslake 15).

Despite the Oankali's apparent dominance, posthuman intimacy also works the other way around. The ooloi themselves are also dependent on their Oankali male and female mates as well as their human ones: "Ooloi did not endure well when bereft of all those who carried their particular scent, their particular marker … Metabolisms slowed, they retreated deep

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[4] Both the adjective "Awakened" as well as the verb "Awaken" in its other tenses are deliberately spelled with a capital letter throughout the novel. It signifies a specific group of people who have been kept in suspended animation and are now waking up to a new future.

within themselves" (Butler 206). The relationship between the species is thus interdependent. With each moment both species spend together, the lines between Self/Other dissolve. From the humans' perspective, they move beyond the normative category of "humankind." Thus, they become posthuman by becoming an Other.

The protagonist of *Ancillary Justice* is not human and never has been, which is why her transformation involves moving from an imitation of the human condition to a posthuman existence. One Esk's connection to the ancillaries dissolves and the AI manifests in one single cyborg body, namely Breq, a process I will refer to as fragmentation. In order to determine her posthuman condition, it is vital to ask whether an artificial human condition in terms of cognition (psychology, emotion) is a necessary prerequisite for becoming posthuman. This is done by finding evidence for (near) human qualities exemplified by the AI and its relationship to Lieutenant Awn.

A partial transformation of the AI One Esk occurs in a scene set in the Temple of Ikkt. The Lord of the Radch pays a visit to the city Ors, currently under control of Lieutenant Awn. A false accusation involving conspiracy theories among two citizen groups results in the brutal execution of innocent civilians. Unfortunately, The Lord of the Radch does not tolerate accusations lacking evidence and orders the citizens' execution by the ancillaries of One Esk. A mysterious signal interference renders the AI temporarily powerless as it becomes partially disconnected from its segments:

> Four hours before dawn, things went to pieces. Or, more accurately, *I* went to pieces. Each segment could see only from a single pair of eyes, hear only through a single pair of ears, move only that single body … From that moment I was twenty different people, with twenty different sets of observations and memories. (Leckie 112)

Although the segments are not entirely detached from the collective will of the AI, the collective subjectivity still suffers from a form of disembodiment. The cessation of the information flow results in a fragmented subjectivity (Leitch, "N. Katherine Hayles" 2162). Yet, the former human victims do not truly reclaim a sense of their selves; the incident merely resembles a technical malfunction.

The final fragmentation of One Esk's subjectivity leads to the creation of single cyborg Breq. After the debacle in the Temple, the Lord of the Radch confronts the Lieutenant about the incident. In a turn of shocking events, it is revealed that Lieutenant Awn had served her purpose as a pawn of the Lord's inner conflict. For some time now, the alien Presger have been corrupting a part of Anaander Mianaai's identity, which resulted in the Lord's split personality: "I am at war with myself … I have been for nearly a thousand years … At war over the future of the Radch" (Leckie 245). This puts ancillaries like One Esk in a predicament, as it cannot disobey the Lord. But obeying one part means automatically disobeying the other. Lieutenant Awn is caught in that crossfire, and having done nothing wrong, she is still betrayed by one Anaander Mianaai. The Lord orders ship AI One Esk to execute its own

superior. Yet, due to the ship's loyalty to Awn, its segment One Var immediately attacks one of the Lord's bodies in an act of retribution. This ultimately leads to the fragmentation of the ship AI: "I formed intentions, transmitted orders to constituent parts … And then I fell to pieces" (248-49).

Segment One Esk's decision to rebel is an expression of free will that turns into a "mutation within a paradigm of pattern/randomness" (Leitch, "N. Katherine Hayles" 2162). It is this segment that would then become Breq. In this case, the fragmentation is a technological malfunction, a disruption caused by the informational overdrive of the ship AI. Its bond to Lieutenant Awn is so strong that the guilt of executing her caused the sudden detachment of one ancillary body from the collective. Here, Breq defies Hayles' concept of the posthuman cyborg because from that moment on, the protagonist develops a self-will that is distinguishable from an other-will (4).

What Hayles refers to as the "displacement of organic presence by information pattern" (Leitch, "N. Katherine Hayles" 2163) cannot be applied to the transformation that creates Breq. In her case, the shift is reversed as the information that used to flow from AI to the different bodies is permanently disrupted; pattern/code (information flow in ship) is replaced by an organic/mechanical presence (ancillary cyborg body). After the single segment escapes, the ship explodes, on board the corrupted part of the Lord and the other Radchaai soldiers. The collective consciousness of Justice of Toren is destroyed, or deconstructed, but not entirely lost due to the fragment that becomes Breq.

Moving from the artificial human condition, she is now reconstructed in a posthuman condition. Following Haraway's principle of the cyborg subject, "[a]ny objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly" (Leitch, "Donna Haraway" 2204). The destruction disassembles the ship as an entity, but the posthuman emerges as the fragment of one segment detaches just in time. Likewise, Hayles' concept of construction and reconstruction (3) is also exemplified in this scenario: the ship is deconstructed and put together again in a different manner. This complex process of fragmentation in *Ancillary Justice* aptly represents technological posthumanism.

In spite of her insistence that she is not human, Breq/One Esk does show feelings of love and devotion, even if they are just an imitation of human emotions. These sentiments persist after the fragmentation, which is the sole reason for Breq's quest for revenge. Having the courage to face the all-powerful Lord to avenge Lieutenant Awn. A temporary lover of Awn, Lieutenant Skaaiat, points out the strong bond: "You're the ancillary, the non-person, the piece of equipment, but to compare our actions, you loved her more than I ever did" (Leckie 370). Love out of loyalty is equally as valid as romantic love in human relationships.

Compared to the "true" human Lilith who biologically transitions into a new being, the protagonist of *Ancillary Justice* moves from an imitation of the human condition to a true posthuman one. Whether it is posthuman intimacy or fragmentation, Lilith and Breq must come to terms with their new situation. To further analyze how each form of posthumanism

is conveyed in both novels, it is imperative to examine the state of being more (or less) than human.

V. HYBRIDITY: BEING POSTHUMAN, CYBORG ANXIETY, AND BLURRED CONCEPTS

Hybridization in posthumanism is "both a notion of human-machine merging and the rather specific nature of the merging envisaged" (Clark 131). Haraway's cyborg is either a being that blurs dichotomies such as human/machine or human/alien, and transgresses binaries which have, in the Western world, resulted in categories like male/female or masculinity/femininity. While dismantling these dualisms might liberate an individual, it can also lead to negative reactions when blurring distinct entities means abandoning a part of one's identity, an aspect represented by the Self/Other paradigm (Mack 194).

The protagonist of Butler's *Dawn* exemplifies a blending of the human Self and the alien Other, hence, she is a posthuman cyborg. While this hybridization liberates Lilith in multiple ways, it also has the negative consequence of alienating her from fellow humans. During her time teaching the group survival skills, Lilith is met with open hostility because of her alien advantage. In the final battle scene, she must choose a side in the conflict between humans and nonhumans.

Lilith must defend her leadership along with her posthuman identity when specific members of the group revert to old patriarchal modes of dominance and prejudice like racism, homophobia, and misogyny (Butler 159). Retaining one's humanity becomes a battle cry for the resisting humans. Binary dichotomies reappear as a reaction to cyborg anxiety, which is simply the fear of humanity becoming impure through means of an Other influence: "[I]n times of genetic breeding, the boundaries between human, animal and machine are being eroded, questioning traditional 'purities' and provoking new visions of hybridity and anxieties about purity as a result" (Callus and Herbrechter 150). In the context of Butler's *Dawn*, the term cyborg anxiety describes the fear of anyone who is not truly human attempting to contaminate human purity. Contamination connotes illness, toxicity, and even poison (Mack 191), therefore it is not beneficial for the human self.

Three men from the group challenge Lilith's leadership and by doing so they reject the merging of Self/Other. Curt, Peter, and Gabriel openly antagonize her by accusing her of not being human enough, even insinuating that she might just be enjoying her sick privilege with the Oankali. In contrast to a non-hierarchical posthuman society, these three male characters symbolize toxic patriarchal masculinity. In terms of gender dynamics and performativity, protagonist Lilith transgresses traditional behavioral concepts of gender roles only to a certain degree. She questions her leadership skills as a woman and thus contemplates her own femininity. She feels like she is too vulnerable and not mentally prepared to be responsible for parenting a group of forty humans. She imagines if a man were to be chosen as leader: "He

could undermine what little civilization might be left in the minds of those he Awoke[5]. He could make them a gang. Or a herd. What would she make them?" (Butler 118). Lilith is self-conscious of her womanhood and slightly frightened by the prospect of dealing with violent men who openly challenge her authority.

In one scene Lilith exemplifies typically masculine traits when she uses violence to end violence within the group. Lilith quickly intervenes to stop a sexual assault by fighting the aggressors with her enhanced strength. While the men use violence to assert patriarchal superiority, Lilith uses it to reinforce human decency by protecting her fellow woman: "Nobody here is property … There'll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit! … We stay human. We treat each other like people, and we get through this like people" (Butler 178). Lilith urges everyone to remember the virtue of humanity—compassion and respect for one another—an aspect that might also be interpreted as a call for a posthuman way of going beyond binary distinctions.

One could go ahead and call her androgynous as she exemplifies both feminine as well as masculine characteristics (Zaki 246). Yet seeing as she no longer fits into the normative definition of human, she need not adhere to any of the aforementioned categories. A compromise might be achieved by employing the neutral dichotomy of assertive/reserved. It would be even more fitting to say that as a posthuman Lilith is non-binary due to the influence of the alien Oankali.

The conflict between benevolent aliens and human aggressors reaches a climax in the final parts of the novel. Human extremist Curt radically labels those who willingly choose the Oankali's protection and anyone who displays posthuman capabilities as traitors. He is responsible for the tragic death of the protagonist's mate Joseph, after seeing the ooloi Nikanj heal him (Butler 220-23). Joseph's posthuman condition is seen as a threat, genetic modification represents alien corruption: "This conflict is expressed in xenophobia on part of the humans, and the idea of the posthuman, the blurring of boundaries between the human, the animal, the machine, the male, and the female … poses a threat, a dystopia, to the human character" (Georgi 263).

In the face of an increasing hostility from the humans, the people in the group start accusing each other of cooperating with the Oankali and thus betraying the human species. It is here where Lilith boldly solidifies her posthuman identity by accepting her Self/Other union during the final battle: "Lilith found herself standing with the aliens, facing hostile, dangerous humans" (Butler 227). Her conscious decision confirms her cyborg identity: she possesses human and alien elements by supporting the Other.

Even though Lilith the cyborg transcends the human/alien dichotomy, this affirmative hybridization is only temporary. Lilith herself feels cyborg anxiety and feelings of abjection when she learns of how the ooloi Nikanj had inseminated her through its genetic engineering

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[5] Spelling in novel, see footnote 4.

skills. The protagonist realizes how she truly feels about the collective plan to create a hybrid species and calls her unborn child a monster. Her attitude reflects some of the other humans' stance when she wishes for the human condition to end with dignity and not to become a messy posthuman condition (Butler 246).

Consequently, the "question of hybridization versus purity becomes a matter of species survival, asking whether any process of genetic manipulation, no matter how well intended, should be permitted to triumph at the exposure of another species' extinction?" (Roof 129). This pregnancy is not entirely consensual: for the sake of a collective will, Lilith was gently pushed into a risky leadership but is met with hostility and rejection due to cyborg anxiety. With this "monster" growing inside of her she rather unwillingly abandons her human condition. Moreover, by challenging her leadership the Awakened survivors challenge her humanity.

Breq as a cyborg embodies the traditional merging of human/machine, albeit in a different manner: she is not a human subjectivity inside a machine (Hayles 238) but rather an artificial subjectivity in an enhanced female body. *Ancillary Justice* is exemplary for "texts that have served to disrupt or challenge normative cultural understandings" (Merrick 241) by creating a gender-neutral society and featuring a protagonist who challenges the dichotomies of sex (male/female) and gender expression (masculinity/femininity).

Radchaai society does not adhere to the strict gender binary, every aspect is quite ambiguously gendered. This is reflected by the language: "Radchaai don't care much about gender, and the language they speak … doesn't mark gender in any way" (Leckie 3). Breq has some difficulty when she meets people from cultures that have linguistic markers for gendered identities. In one instance she tries to assume a non-Radchaai perspective when she observes a crowd of people:

> I saw all the features that would mark gender for non-Radchaai – never, to my annoyance and inconvenience, the same way in each place … Thick-bodied or thin-, faces delicate-featured or coarse-, with cosmetics or none. A profusion of colors that would have been gender-marked in other places. All of this matched randomly with bodies curving at breast and hip or not, bodies that one moment moved in ways various non-Radchaai would call feminine, the next moment masculine. (283)

Radchaai gender norms go beyond the set dichotomy of femininity/masculinity. There is not opposition or distinction between the two, blurring or even escaping the categories is normalized. As a result, it would be fitting to consider the Radch empire a cyborg society not only in terms of their military technology (AI and segments), but also in reference to their cultural gender ambiguity. Technology then becomes "a site of cultural anxieties about gender" (Merrick 246) by adding inorganic elements to organic bodies and having former humans transcend gender. It cannot be ignored that this is quite negative seeing as the ancillaries are crudely objectified.

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The cyborgs Lilith and Breq both transgress gender and identity dualisms. The pivotal scenes mentioned above solidify their posthuman condition. Hybridity in technological posthumanism works with the oscillating flow of information and the constant change of perspective, whereas the biological posthumanism in Butler's alien narrative revolves around the anxiety of becoming Other and abandoning one's (human) Self.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Butler's *Dawn* (1987) and Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013) depict two future scenarios in which humankind exceeds its normative condition. With the help of posthumanism we can question humanity's centrality in the universe as well as become aware of the possible consequences of a post-anthropocentric world through literary narratives. It might be non-hierarchical under the guidance of an alien species and therefore a positive prospective. Another possibility entails the emergence of a new military power with the need to civilize space. This may include uniting different places on many planets under a negative collective will, annexations, and technological slavery.

The protagonists of both novels become more than what they once were, acquiring skills but also losing some they might have had before. Their transformation gives them enhanced capabilities which solidifies their hybrid identity and existence. In sum, the narratives of Butler and Leckie exemplify biological and technological posthumanism concerning the aforementioned aspects of an omniscient authority, a change of physical constitution, and the transgression of boundaries resulting in a liberation from certain social hierarchies. As such, the core arguments of this essay develop Haraway's and Hayles' work on the posthuman cyborg further in that hybridity can also be regarded in a biological context. Regarding other genres of speculative fiction, this new approach to Science Fiction, horror, or even fantasy narratives opens up new methods of interpreting characters who have hybrid identities that go beyond the typical human/machine cyborg.

Posthumanism offers a path to redefine humanity in ways that liberate some people in terms of physical and social dualisms, whereas it may evoke anxiety in others at the mere mention of nonhuman entities. It is effective because it challenges our understanding of what it means to be human.

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MISCELLANEA

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GOTHIC HEROINE
IN GEORGE A. ROMERO'S *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* (1968)

Benjamin Brown
University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that George A. Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) subverts traditional ideas of the gothic house by relocating it from the decrepit castle in a foreign land to an isolated farmhouse in Pennsylvania. The house itself is introduced as an ominous location, isolated from the rest of society and, as a result, viewers are presented with a Gothic structure that calls to mind the previous iterations of the genre. In doing so, the film immediately creates a level of uncertainty, that forces the viewer to reassess their understanding of the safety and security that a home would traditionally provide the occupant. As the film progresses, the house becomes a microcosm for the events that are happening within it. Just as the characters begin to turn on each other and their humanity begins to degrade, so too does the structure itself. By making these connections between human psychological and structural degradation, the film presents a location that mirrors the loss of humanity and rationality that the characters experience and further emphasises the shift to barbarism that occurs both inside and outside the building. The paper demonstrates how the traditionally threatening gothic castle has been replaced by the seemingly inconspicuous setting of the American household as a place of terror and uncertainty in a manner that domesticates the horror and brings the otherness of the gothic back home.

Keywords: fairy tale, Gothic, masculinity, race, disability, queerness.

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The Gothic heroine has been fighting off monsters, ghosts, vampires, and ghouls from the genre's inception in the late eighteenth century right through to the contemporary examples being produced today. Despite the changing time-periods and cultural concerns, the Gothic remains as popular a genre today as it was directly after its initial inception. In fact, the genre has expanded its prevalence in contemporary culture. No longer is it simply confined to literature but pervades a wide variety of popular cultural forms such as cinema, television, and video games. Despite these evolutions in form, the genre is still remains populated with

heroines who all seek to escape the dangers of the real and supernatural world. The prevalence of these heroines is so apparent that a whole genre, the female Gothic, has grown out of the texts that priorities female characters. A notable example of a contemporary work that engage with the female Gothic is George A. Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The events that befall its female protagonist, Barbara, establish her as a heroine who structured according to traditional female Gothic tropes. She finds herself trapped both physically and psychologically within the confines of a patriarchal structure that ultimately leads to a level of danger she is unable to comprehend. With that said, the film also enacts a subversion of Gothic tropes in order to create its own distinct form of Gothic text. In past examples of the female Gothic genre the pursuer would often have been characterised by gender. The heroine is usually pursued by an antagonistic male figure. Although ghosts and supernatural apparition are often present, they do not present the greatest danger to the protagonist and are often explained away by the end of the narrative. The same is also partially true in *Night of the Living Dead*. During the course of the film, Barbara finds herself pursued by the undead—referred to by Romero himself as ghouls—and is forced to seek safety in an abandoned farmhouse that serves as the setting for the majority of the narrative. Although the ghouls are initially presented as the greatest threat to Barbara's safety, and are never explained through rational means, it is still ultimately the human male characters inside the farmhouse who are responsible for the events that lead Barbara into the greatest amount of danger.

I. EVOLUTIONS IN THE FEMALE GOTHIC

In order to better understand how evolutions of the Gothic heroine took place in the texts that precede *Night of the Living Dead*, it is important to understand what is meant by the term female Gothic. Critics such as Ellen Moers, who coined the term "female Gothic," argued that it constituted "the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (77). Moers reading of the female Gothic encapsulates any text that has been produced by a female writer working within the Gothic genre. Several Critics have sought to build on this initial reading of the female Gothic including Kate Ferguson Ellis in *The Contested Castle* (1989); Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith in their essay collection *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2004); and, more recently, Avril Hoerner and Sue Zlosnik produced an Edinburgh companion on *Women and the Gothic* (2016). In the introduction their collection, Wallace and Smith expound upon Moers' initial reading of the genre by arguing that "the female Gothic plot, exemplified by Ann Radcliffe, centralised the imprisoned and pursued heroine threatened by a tyrannical male figure, it explained the supernatural, and ended in the closure of marriage" (3). In these female Gothic works, women are centralised and become a vehicle through which the events of the narrative are presented. This placement of women as central figures represents a departure from earlier male Gothic which present a "masculine transgression of social taboos, characterised by violent rape and/or murder, which tends to resist closure, frequently leaving the supernatural unexplained" (Wallace and Smith

3). In these earlier male Gothic texts then, women are presented as object upon which men exercise their own transgressive nature, as opposed to the female Gothic in which the heroine's own thoughts and motives have the greatest significance in the text.

As the Gothic genre shifted into the twentieth century so too did the concerns and locations of these narratives. Texts such as Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) transport the Female Gothic from the earlier settings of crumbling castles and places the genre within a more contemporary setting. The narrative takes place in a large manor house within contemporary America. However, the focus on the female protagonist, Eleanor Valance, remains central to the novel's plot. As Clair Kahane notes, "Jackson dislocates me in typical Gothic fashion by locating me in Eleanor's point of view, confusing outside and inside, reality and illusion" (341). The novel centralises Eleanor's point of view and she becomes the character through which the narrative is reflected. Jackson's novel adheres to Anne Williams' definition of the female Gothic which "generates suspense through the limitations imposed by the chosen point of view; we share both the heroine's often mistaken perceptions and her ignorance" (102). The text uses Eleanor's perspective to present Gothic elements within its narrative, and the reader experience these Gothic tropes through the female protagonist. In contrast, Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (1974) utilises a narrator who "observes Carrie rather than allowing us to share her perspective" (A. Williams 103). King's novel encourages the reader to relish in the events that Carrie is responsible for whilst offering little insight into her true motivations or feelings. The reader is directed to the external consequences of the transgressive action, as is the case in earlier male Gothic works, rather than the internal psychological motivations of the woman, which serves as the generic basis for the female Gothic.

The proliferation of the Gothic into other mediums allowed for new forms of the genre to establish themselves. The influence of the Gothic is certainly visible in the horror cinema being produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These films often focused on the principle that "there is no escape from the encroaching violence in American society because the violence is in *us*" (Towlson, Subversive Horror, 12). Towlson goes on to note that as a country America was founded upon the killing of Native Americans and this violent past has remained a defining characteristic in American society. He also cites the horror of the Vietnam war as another source of American violence that served as a stimulus for these horror films. The images of Vietnam acted as a reminder of the human capacity for barbarism that still exists in contemporary society. For the filmmakers who witnessed these events, the horror genre served as a means to demonstrate their larger social concerns in a fictional genre, just as the Gothic was able to do in the late eighteenth century. Horror films, like the Gothic beforehand, played upon the social fears of an individual indulging violent urges within American society itself, rather than in the seemingly chaotic and primitive environments that exist outside of western culture.

The distinctions between the male and female Gothic genres can be found within contemporary horror cinema as well. The films that Towlson cites, specifically Wes Craven's *The*

Last House on the Left (1972) often present violence predicated by men against helpless women. Marie Mulvey-Roberts indication that the Gothic genre "mirrors in myriad ways the violations perpetrated against the female body which continue unabated today" (*Subversive Horror Cinema* 117) is certainly applicable to Craven's film. Mulvey-Roberts reading of the genre is indicative of the ways in which Gothic texts reflect specific issues of misogyny and patriarchy within the society in which they were produced. The stimulus for the plot of *The Last House on the Left* is also marked by violation of women's bodies, specifically the rape and murder of two teenage girls by a group of criminals. The film takes great pains to show the details of this attack through the lens of a voyeuristic outside perspective, in much the same way Wallace and Smith indicate that the male Gothic focuses on male transgressions against women in its own narratives. The viewer is voyeuristically encouraged to take pleasure in watching this act of brutality. These women's experiences are used to entertain rather than encourage a condemnation of the physical and psychological trauma that they are being forced to endure, just as was the case in the earlier male Gothic texts.

II. NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD AND THE FEMALE GOTHIC GENRE

Night of the Living Dead refuses to engage with the trope of having the strongest acts of violence be predicated purely towards women. The film centralises Barbara (Judith O'Dea) as the character through which the narrative premise is introduced. From the film's outset, there is a focalisation of the female perspective which is essential to the female Gothic. The plot itself concerns a small mixed-gender group of survivors who all take refuge in the abandoned farmhouse after the recent uprising of the undead. Throughout the course of the film, neither the men or the women are presented as being in any less or more danger from these creatures. As *Night of the Living Dead* progresses, the survivors' options become fewer and fewer as the number of ghouls increases throughout the narrative. It is this collective danger that ultimately causes the greatest level of threat from within the house as well. In this sense, the film actually engages the Suburban Gothic sub-genre that emerged in the twentieth century. As well as establishing an outside danger, the ever-approaching ghouls, the film also employs the Suburban Gothic idea that "one is always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats" (Murphy 2). Bernice Murphy goes on to posit that in these texts, danger "invariably begins at home, or at least very near to it" (2). The film itself utilises both of these observations that Murphy makes on the Suburban Gothic. Barbara is threatened by both the physical dangers of the ghouls outside, and the patriarchal dangers posed by the two male leader inside the house. *Night of the Living Dead* indicates that it may be the external stimulus of supernatural horror that initiates the danger that the female heroine faces, but it is ultimately the flawed patriarchal structures within society that lead to her demise.

During the second half of the film tensions begin to arise between the two leaders of the group: Ben (Duane Jones), a young African American man who seeks refuge in the house after

his car is destroyed in the chaos occurring across the landscape, and Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman) a middle-aged White man whose family members have taken refuge in the basement of the house before Barbara and Ben even arrive there. The tension and arguments between these two characters allows them to dominate the group in terms of authority, whilst the other survivors—most noticeably Barbara—are afforded far less agency as a result. As the situation become more desperate and the house itself is revealed to be incapable of protecting the inhabitants, Ben and Harry continue to argue more violently over how best to deal with the situation. However, both men's inability to compromise ultimately leads to more danger for all of those occupying the house. It can be argued that, indeed, they resemble the tyrannical male villains of the female Gothic far more than they do heroes. The film engages with elements of the female Gothic mode in order to construct a female heroine, but it also utilises these elements to demonstrate the true patriarchal dangers that already exist for women within contemporary society.

III. BARBARA: ESTABLISHING A FEMALE GOTHIC HEROINE

Night of the Living Dead quickly establishes the Gothic heroine trope during the opening of the film. Barbara and her brother Johnny (Russell Steiner) visit their father's grave where Barbara kneels and begins praying. Johnny, on the other hand, stands aside and begins to tease Barbara for her display of religious devotion. After a short pause, Johnny comments that praying belongs in church, to which Barbara responds, "I haven't seen you in church lately" (00:05:36). Johnny replies by suggesting that "there's not much sense in my going to church" (00:05:38). The film also takes advantage of the black and white colour palette in order to further contrast the personalities of the characters. The most evident features of Johnny's clothing are his black suit and black driving gloves. Barbara on the other hand is dressed in light colours, that appear almost white on the screen. The choice to dress Johnny is these dark colours immediately signals him out as a potentially evil antagonist in contrast to the purity that the white of Barbara's clothes. The two characters, at least to an extent, adhere to Maggie Kilgour's observation that Gothic novels revolve around "a battle between antithetical sexes" in which the male character who "wants to indulge his own will, is set against a passive spiritual female, who is identified with the restrictions of social norms" (12). Barbara is very much the conforming to the expectations of the society she lives in. She prays at the grave of a dead parent, and it is implied she regularly attends church. Johnny, on the other hand, rejects these religious social norms by expressing his desire to not attend church or pray for his dead father even if it is at odds with the dominant ideals of the culture. By presenting Barbara as a typically conformist, pure, and passive female from the outset, *Night of the Living Dead* is able to establish her very quickly as the Gothic heroine within the narrative of the film.

Barbara's position as the Gothic heroine is further solidified when she and Johnny first encounter a ghoul. After initially childishly mocking the ghoul, believing it to be a dishevelled cemetery visitor, Johnny runs away. Conversely, Barbara attempts to remain composed and

walk past the creature in a more refined and adult manner. However, upon attempting to pass the ghoul, Barbara is attacked by it. Johnny immediately pulls the ghoul away and attempts to fight it off. Meanwhile, Barbara escapes and—in an act of further passivity—watches as Johnny is killed. The ghoul then proceeds to pursue Barbara through the cemetery and to the sibling's car, until she is eventually able to escape. Throughout the pursuit, the camera shifts focus between distanced long shots of the predatory, near animalistic actions and movements of the ghoul and close-ups of Barbara's terrified face as she is subjected to this danger. Barbara is now being actively pursued by a true embodiment of the Gothic male character. The film depiction of the ghoul reduces the idea of the Gothic hero-villain as "moodily taciturn and violently explosive by turns" (Stoddart 112) to its most basic terms. The ghoul is initially so taciturn that it appears to be an old man wandering about the graveyard, and is unable to speak at all, before switching immediately to a mode of unprovoked violence at the mere sight of Barbara and Johnny. Barbara is now a heroine who is very much at the mercy of this villainous character pursuing her. Whereas her relationship with Johnny helped to establish her position as a typically passive Gothic heroine, it is with the introduction of this truly violent male ghoul that the framework for the Gothic narrative is fully established within the film.

The scene itself certainly presents the "focus on female suffering, positioning the audience as voyeurs" (A. Williams 104) that is indicative of the male Gothic. However, in Williams's reading of the male Gothic, the narrative centralises the male attacker's viewpoint as he pursues these female victims. This centralising of the male perspective echoes Andrew Tudor's perspective on contemporary horror cinema which he states features a "continuing pattern of male domination of the genre's central situations. Women have always featured as horror-movie victims" (127). Films more contemporary to *Night of the Living Dead*, such as Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963) or Bob Clark's *Black Christmas* (1974) focalise the aggressive male perspective right from the outset. They both maintain the tropes that have been established through the male Gothic genre despite taking place within a contemporary twentieth century setting. The male perpetrator's actions are focalised as a source of pleasure for the character, and the same feelings are therefore encouraged in the viewer. However, by making Barbara the focal point of this experience, *Night of the Living Dead* starts to blur the lines between male and female Gothic. Despite focusing on her personal suffering, these events are presented through Barbara's eyes rather than that of the ghoul. Consequently, the sense of voyeuristic pleasure is weakened by through the film's choice to focalise the victim, rather than the perpetrator. The viewer is forced to sympathise with Barbara, a central motif of the female Gothic mode, rather than take pleasure in her suffering, as is often the intention of the male Gothic.

IV. THE FARMHOUSE: A CONTEMPORARY FEMALE GOTHIC STRUCTURE

In order to escape this predatory ghoul, Barbara takes refuge in the abandoned farmhouse that serves as the main setting for the rest of the film. When Barbara moves through the house

and into the dining room, the film quickly cuts between the stuffed heads of animals on the wall. The sequence is accompanied by a sudden loud musical eruption in order to heighten the level of fear. Just as these animals have been hunted and killed by the former occupants of the home, the occupants are now being hunted by the ghouls roaming outside. In his reading of the film, Tony Williams notes that these images "symbolise a reverse world where humans change from being consumers to a hunted species facing consumption; humans now face becoming sustenance for zombies" (31). Whereas these trophies would typically represent the contemporary dominance of humanity over nature, *Night of the Living Dead* turns them into reminders Barbara's own vulnerability and victimisation at the hands of the ghouls. It serves as a physical manifestation of Sigmund Freud's famous definition of the uncanny or *unheimlich* as the intrusion of the unfamiliar when the familiar is expected. By recasting elements of domestic safety as dangerous, *Night of the Living Dead* engages with Gina Wisker's argument that "[t]he uncanny, as a tool of the Gothic, reveals what is concealed and unexpected: those alternative versions of self, of relationships, home and family, which relate to everyday 'reality'" (15). Specifically, the film reveals the alternative version of these hunting trophies as reminders not of human superiority but as representations of the vulnerability of all animals when faced with a more powerful predator.

Following this scene, Barbara climbs the stairs and the camera cuts to a close-up this time of a dead and rotting body lying on the landing. The corpse further reinforces the notion this is a space of great danger, rather than providing any sense of reassurance to Barbara. The house only serves to remind her of the danger that still exists outside and continues to pursue her. Within the context of the female Gothic, this entrapment was once limited to the "foreign, 'ancestral' location" (Davison 93), that has become ruinous over a long period of time. However, as the genre has developed throughout the twentieth century and beyond, this foreign and ancient location has now been replaced by the contemporary home of middle-class society that exists within the suburban Gothic mode. The film itself follows this course in its own presentation of the Gothic abode. Barbara's imprisonment takes place in a setting that may not be totally familiar to her—she has never been to this particular location before—but still includes signifiers of the contemporary domestic space such as an oven, fridge, and cutlery draws. Through the equation of these familiar domestic elements with the ever-approaching danger from outside, *Night of the Living Dead* removes the potential safety that Barbara may expect to find in the house. Instead, the building is transformed from traditionally comforting structure it into a source of terror. The film adheres Bernice Murphy's definition of the Suburban Gothic in which terror no longer stems from the purely foreign or outside dangers, but from within the very locale that is supposed to shield the individual from these threats in the first place (2).

In terms of the external terror that Barbara faces, *Night of the Living Dead* subverts Kate Ferguson Ellis's definition of the male Gothic. In her reading of these earlier texts such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and Bram Stoker's

Dracula (1897), Ellis notes that Gothic is preoccupied with "the failed home" from which "some (usually "fallen" men) are locked out" (ix). Ellis's reference to these men being fallen is indicative of their exclusion from accepted society. As Ann Williams points out, in these texts "the hero/villain is an isolated overreacher [*sic*] punished for his hubris, his violation of the Law" (103). Characters such as Dracula and Melmoth are depicted as indulging their own attempts at immortality and are punished for doing so in their respective novels for these acts of transgression. This trope is even visible in the cotemporary Gothic. In her analysis of Clive Barker's *The Hellbound Heart* (1986), Lucie Armitt indicates that in these contemporary Gothic texts, "suburbia [is] revealed as only deceptively cosy in structure, in actuality housing nightmares within its bounds" (65). It may be set in a more contemporary structure than Dracula and Melmoth, but *The Hellbound Heart* is still focused on an individual, Frank, who "looks to invent new ways in which sexual gratification can take him beyond the limits of mere pleasure" (Armitt 63). Frank's desire to push the limits of sexual gratification again singles him out as transgressive within society's norms. The transgressive and predatory male figure has now been allowed to enter the suburban, domestic space, but their characteristics remain strikingly similar to the predecessors who were still excluded from wider contemporary society.

As a text that engages with the female Gothic, the ghouls represent an extrapolation of the single tyrannical male figure—such as Dracula, Melmoth, and Frank—that Wallace and Smith state is central to the genre. Furthermore, the film also undermines Holly Blackford's argument, which specifically cites Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), that in "more modern Gothic literature" the heroine typically finds "the house embodied in the figure of not a villainous father or husband but a creepy servant, who seems to surface from the very walls and who largely works alone" (236–37). Although the villainous figure has changed, Blackford still notes that these antagonists "largely work alone" in their evil. In contrast, *Night of the Living Dead* removes the concepts of gender, class, or singularity from the equation. The ghouls do appear as undead men and women, but both genders of creature are depicted as equally vicious throughout the course of the film; their social position is irrelevant because they no longer occupy one. Furthermore, rather than working alone, as the film goes on an increasing number of ghouls represent a threat to Barbara's safety. This ever-increasing mass of attackers outside of the house allows the film to enhance the level of terror surrounding her. Barbara is not threatened by a singular tyrannical male anymore, but a large mass of multi-gendered antagonists, unmotivated by anything other than a desire to consume—rather than take authority over—her body.

V. Ben and Harry: The Patriarchal Antagonists

The film reinforces Barbara's lack of escape routes from these aggressive creatures when she immediately tries to leave the house after witnessing the deformed corpse. As she reaches the door, she is prevented from leaving by an African American man named Ben, who will become the central male lead for the rest of the film. Ben forces Barbara back inside and takes

charge of the situation. Barbara, on the other hand, regresses into a state of shock, continually asking Ben "what's happening?" (00:16:02). Ben then asks her if there are any more ghouls around to which Barbara replies "I don't know" (00:16:29), repeating the phrase over and over until she reaches a state of near frenzy and collapses onto a nearby sofa. Ben has immediately attempted to take control of the situation and, although he appears to have good intentions, is already trying to assert patriarchal dominance over Barbara. In fact, when Barbara tries to leave for a second time, Ben strikes in the face. This causes her to faint and begin to enter the state of silence and passivity that she occupies for the majority the film. Whilst this may appear initially to be for Barbara's own safety, his willingness to use violence so quickly against her suggests an underlying patriarchal danger that may already be beginning to manifest itself towards Barbara through Ben. The film hints that Ben may not be a potential saviour for Barbara, but the tyrannical male figure that seeks to oppress her, as is the case for other heroines within the female Gothic genre.

As the narrative continues, Ben and Barbara discover several more survivors. These characters include Harry and Helen Cooper, a married couple who, along with their ghoul-bitten daughter, have taken refuge in the farmhouse's cellar. The introduction of these characters, specifically Harry Cooper, leads to another strong male presence within the film. They are revealed to be hiding with a young couple named Tom and Judy, who have also escaped the events occurring outside. As these new characters are introduced, Barbara becomes less and less involved in the events taking place around her. She is not even able to ask the questions that she previously posed to Ben when they first met. Barbara's state of shock and the internalisation of her trauma is an example of women in the male Gothic being "trapped by societies that will not recognize the heroine's plight as caused by factors external to her, but instead blame that plight on the fact she is female" (Heiland 158). Heiland's reading of the Gothic heroine argues that the main plight of these women stems from their gender. *Night of the Living Dead* indicates that this is also the case for the male characters within the film. Barbara's earlier encounter with Ben, and the introduction of Harry lead to her being dismissed as ultimately incapable of acting her own interests. Instead, she is placed in a position of subservience to the aims of the male characters who surround her. The film introduces the concerns of the male Gothic genre, specifically the misogynistic treatment of women, into the plot in order to demonstrate the way in which even in contemporary society women are marginalised and ignored by patriarchal male figures.

In terms of 1960s American culture, Barbara's character "would seem to support certain sexist assumptions about female passivity, irrationality, and emotional vulnerability" (Waller 283). Waller's assertion echoes Kilgour's characterisation of the passive female heroine in other Gothic texts. The film typecasts her into the vulnerable women role, who must be protected by strong assertive men. Stephen Harper counters Waller's reading of the film by asking "[c]an Barbra [*sic*]—who is in shock after the death of her brother—be blamed for her passivity?" (3). Harper goes on to point out "the patriarchal domination of the house is

unremitting. Barbra [*sic*], in particular, is subjected to relentless abuse by the film's male characters" (3). In contrast to Waller, Harper argues that the combination of witnessing her brother's death and the strong male presence of the film prevents Barbara from taking a greater level of agency. His argument revolves around the position that anyone is this situation would react in a similar way to Barbara regardless of gender. However, all of the characters have also witnessed horrific events, and the film still chooses to present the most extreme response through the female character of Barbara. Furthermore, even Harper acknowledges the abuse that Barbara receives from the male characters. The film itself acknowledges the sexist tropes that exist within the contemporary society in which it takes place, bit also appears to adhere to them in this respect. In spite of the fact that Barbara is presented as having the potential to become a true heroine, the film does not allow her the opportunity to do so as long as there are male characters around to dominate the discourse amongst the survivors.

Night of the Living Dead maintains this patriarchally dominated mode until the final act of the film, when the conclusion subverts the traditional ending of both the male and female Gothic. In his exploration of the genre, Fred Botting indicates that the traditional Gothic novel results in heroines/heroes returning "with an elevated sense of identity" (*Gothic* 7). The characters in these Gothic narratives are often threatened and entrapped, both physically and psychologically, but end the text with a stronger idea of their personal self then they had at the beginning. However, in *Night of the Living Dead* this heightened sense of self never occurs for any of the characters. In fact, Ben and Harry spend much of the film bickering and arguing with each other, so much so that by the time they come to any concrete decision it is too late for any of the survivors to escape. In his reading of the film, Jon Towlson argues that the ghouls are representative of "a society devouring itself from within" (Towlson, "Why Night of the Living Dead" n.p.). Towlson understands the ghouls to be reflection of the culture that they threaten to destroy with the film. These creatures are presented not as othering forces in the sense that they wish to invade and challenge social convention, but as reflective of the basest instincts that already exist within society. However, the same is also true of Ben and Harry. They too reflect a society that is populated with male characters so concerned with their own authority that they are willing to bring about the destruction of the foundational elements, in this case the domestic and familial structure, in order to achieve a sense of personal authority. This sense of self-reinforcement is so pervasive that it ultimately leads to all of the characters losing not only their own sense of identity, but their lives as well.

Through the negative depiction of these two arguing male character the film satirises the patriarchal dominance of society through the tropes found in female Gothic narratives. These two dominating male figures are unable to compromise and help each other even in the face of mortal danger. As Ben and Harry continue to argue, the ghouls grow in number and even show signs of working together in order to achieve their ultimate goal. During an escape attempt late into the film, several of the characters attempt to reach a fuel line in a pick-up truck that will allow all of the survivors to drive away from the house. However, when the

ghouls see the humans, they immediately begin to collectively attack them. Rather than trying to assault each other in order to get to their victims, the ghouls remain focused on stopping the survivors. The implication being that they realise working together will give them the greatest chance of achieving their own goal. In his reading of the film, Robin Wood points out that "[t]he zombies attacks […] have their origins in (are the physical projections of) psychic tensions that are the product of patriarchal male/female relationships or familial relationships" (103). Wood's argument points towards two very specific forms of relationship that are present in the film, but as I have argued, there is also the patriarchal male/male relationship that forms the film's greatest tension. Ben and Harry are constantly trying to confront each other in order to assert their own personal tyrannical views. The ghouls on the other hand have no understanding of these patriarchal hierarches and are not restricted by them. The lack of mental ability to form such hierarchical structures is presented as actually better suited to working together equally than the apparently more psychologically advanced patriarchies of the human characters.

By having the escape inevitably fail, *Night of the Living Dead* further erodes the possibility that a return to the realities of the past is possible. As the characters around her continue to fight against each other, Barbara's own hopes of survival are lost. In fact, the only other active contribution Barbara does make comes at the very end of the film. She briefly regains her cognisance during an attempt to help Helen Cooper. In these final minutes, Barbara resembles Radcliffe's heroine, who despite displaying "a relative passivity in female attitude" does unlike the heroines "of Walpole, for instance, … take the initiative in certain instances" (Tóth 25). Tóth acknowledges that the heroines are still relatively passive in Radcliffe's and other female Gothic writers' works, but they still display more agency than those in the male Gothic. This principle would be carried through into the later slasher films of the 1970s and 1980s with the advent of the "final girl" (Clover 35) trope. Female characters in films like John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980) are often the final survivors in these films, usually after defeating the antagonist themselves. The moment of self-elevation that Botting cites as crucial to the Gothic genre is achieved through this process of survival. Often these women end the film emotionally traumatised but also defiant in their refusal to return to the position of innocent victim that they appeared to be in the film's opening.

Night of the Living Dead refuses to offer this same moment of revelation. Barbara's attempt at one last act of autonomous bravery is what ultimately solidifies her total destruction, rather than the salvation afforded a traditional final girl. During this episode, Harry has been killed and Ben has already retreated, abandoning Helen to the ghouls. It is with this failure of patriarchal dominance that Barbara is finally able to act in her own interests, and the interest of another woman. In her reading of the Slasher genre, Carol J. Clover discusses the final girl's "castration, literal or symbolic, of the killer at hand" (49). Though Ben and Harry are not the central villains here, at least not in terms of the physical threat to Barbara, they too are castrated symbolically by the abandonment of their patriarchal positions. Barbara, on the other

hand, begins to exhibit the features of the final girl in that she "specifically unmans an oppressor whose masculinity was in question to begin with" (Clover 49). Harry is always presented as a coward trying to hide rather than fight. He wants to stay in the basement locked away for the majority of the film, rather than actively attack the approaching ghouls. Furthermore, whilst Ben appears to occupy the opposing role to this cowardice, he too retreats when presented with the ghouls that threaten Helen Cooper. The implication being that once the male Gothic aspect of the situation has been removed, the patriarchal characters have been unmanned, the female Gothic is able to re-assert itself. Although it is too late for Barbara and Helen, there is still a suggestion that had this mode remained in place all along the characters may well have been able to survive and defend each other.

VI. CONCLUSION

Night of the Living Dead inverts the typical narrative of the Gothic heroine. Even though Barbara has much in common with the female Gothic heroine, the film's conclusion demonstrates the crucial difference between her, her predecessors, and those who would follow in her footsteps. Both early Gothic texts, such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), and horror films, such as John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), typically end with "the destruction of threatening, unsanctioned otherness" which allows "cultural anxieties (the apprehension of a gap, a rupture or hole in the fabric of ordered reality) to be expunged and limits and values to be pleasurably reasserted." (Botting, *Limits* 26). However, *Night of the Living Dead* indicates that it is possible to fight off the societal threat, but the issues will still exist even if the threat is erased. Barbara is unable to vanquish these creatures because she does not have the support structure, both physically and psychologically, to do so. She is not only a victim of the ghouls that exist at the boundaries of society, but also of the patriarchal structures that claims to be able to protect her. When she is isolated from these male-led influences after the film's opening attack and in the film's concluding scenes, her own need for self-preservation allows her to take on the role of female Gothic heroine. She is forced to take responsibility for her own escape from the threat with which she is faced. However, as soon as men begin to enact an influence upon her, her role as autonomous heroine is relinquished. Her immediate transformation into a catatonic state, simply following the instructions of the men around her, demonstrates the lack of agency that women are afforded within the film's society. Not only is Barbara assumed to lack the ability to defend herself by those around her, but she also already assumes these things about herself. Rather than an active heroine, trying to save herself from destruction, she is forced into a position of death by the men who claim to know better.

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Flânerie and the Transnational Deterritorialization of 9/11 in Teju Cole's *Open City*

Beatrice Melodia Festa
Università di Verona / Università di Bari

ABSTRACT

Even though Teju Cole's debut novel, *Open City*, has often been analyzed within the spectrum of themes such as racialization and ethnicity, its relevance in the post-9/11 canon is worthy of attention. As such, this contribution seeks to examine the salience of September 11 and the role of the protagonist, as post-9/11 flâneur, considering how Cole's novel reframes the political and transnational consequences of 9/11 drawing from flânerie to offer a wider viewpoint on the national and interracial implications of the attacks. As the article aims to show, the narrative adopts flânerie as a strategy to ponder on the post-9/11 phenomenon memorializing the attacks in New York and consequently reterritorializing terrorism in Brussels to engage in an international perspective. Aligning with the contention that post-9/11 narratives have been concerned with revising the city as the origin of a discussion on the attacks, the essay aims to show how Cole leans toward a universalist view of the event so that the novel engages with the transcontinental impact of 9/11. This article's ultimate intent is to consider the flâneur as the thread that guides to a broader challenging discussion on the significance of 9/11 respatializing the consequences of the terrorist attacks beyond the United States.

Keywords: post-9/11 novel, flâneur, terrorism, memorialization, collective mourning.

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Despite two decades went by, the significance of 9/11 as a cultural and national tragedy implies a global sense of trauma. Over time, however, more nuanced and socio-historical perspectives about 9/11 and its impact on America and the world have emerged. Even though literature and cinema have addressed the emotional and psychic consequences of the terrorist attacks, the gravity of that day was documented by the media whose coverage later evolved to inflict a devastating sense of loss deemed to become a historical legacy. Even after the immediate shock of 9/11 had decreased, concerns over terrorism remained at higher levels all over the world finding its fullest expression in the growing body of literature defined as the

"9/11 novel" or 9/11 fiction (Keeble 5).[1] In that sense, a crescent number of literary texts have represented the difficult and problematic aspects related to the tragedy.

Thus, one question emerges. If the enduring power of 9/11 as a global tragedy is clear, what does define a post-9/11 novel? The point has been raised by critics and scholars who, in the aftermath of what is known as "the post-9/11 moment," faced the rousing examples of narratives illustrating the traumatic effects of the tragedy. Drawing in part from Arin Keeble's seminal analysis, we can say that the corpus of novels classified as 9/11 fiction has cumulatively much to say about the implications and patterns of the wider and global response to 9/11 (5). That is to say that narratives considered part of the canon provide in-textual analyses of conflictedness, memorialization and traumatization, offering nuanced depictions of the cultural consequences of the attacks. In so doing, these novels internalize the effects of terrorism contextualizing the traumatic effects of the tragedy in post-9/11 scenarios. As Keeble further notes, "9/11 novels when examined as documents or artifacts, unravel conflictedness providing a reflection of the ways in which society (in particular American society) has negotiated this struggle over the last decade" (199).

If carefully read, the first literary success of Nigerian American writer Teju Cole, *Open City* (2011), can be labeled as a post-9/11 narrative or—as I aim to show— a novel that delves into the implications of September 11 from an interracial and borderless perspective. In *Open City*, Cole constructs a narrator who deals with the cumulative response to terrorism examining the transnational consequences of 9/11 through the practice of flânerie. Setting the novel in the landscape of post 9/11 literature, my aim is to show how Cole draws from the figure of the flâneur in New York to develop a universalist view of September 11, respatializing the question beyond America's borders. My argument then runs in two directions; first outlining Cole's ambitious revitalization of the flâneur as a cosmopolitan character, and ultimately showing how the narrative departs from flânerie to engage in a political and global consideration on the matter of 9/11 touching on themes such as anti-American ideology and Islamophobia.

I. RETERRITORIALIZING SEPTEMBER 11: THE CASE OF *OPEN CITY*

On the whole, *Open City*, centers on the figure of Julius, a psychiatrist of German Nigerian extraction,[2] who roams the streets of Manhattan as a voyeur of city life drifting through the United States and Europe as he struggles with concerns such as identity, history, memory, and ultimately race. The novel is set in the aftermath of 9/11 (autumn of 2006), and the narrator is an immigrant living in New York, born in Nigeria from a German mother and a Nigerian

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[1] Scholarship on 9/11 fiction is extremely vast and diversified. Yet, for a preliminary discussion on 9/11 fiction, which for various reasons I cannot extend here, see Arin Keeble, *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity: A Critical Study of an Evolving Canon* (2014).

[2] An autobiographical reference to Cole.

father. Given his presence in New York as an immigrant, a cosmopolitan and a foreigner, as he engages in compulsive walks through the city, the protagonist's itinerant experience becomes a cumulative investigation of complicated issues among which Black discrimination, slavery, the American past and ultimately the enduring post-9/11 malaise. As the plot unravels, the narrative remains caught in a set of diffused preoccupations that become one of the most enigmatic aspects of a seemingly simple plot. Throughout his nomadic journey, Julius undertakes a mental and physical flight across continents (from America to Europe and back), that culminates in a mental and psychological evasion that Cole illustrates through a smoothly elegant prose. In this scenario, the protagonist is alternatively imbued with the complex aspects of different areas of the cities he has visited, struggling to connect the stories of the people he encounters with his personal observation of the areas and its vicinities (Ameel 265). Breaking down linguistic and cultural barriers, the protagonist dialogues and observes a sheer variety of ethnicities by conversing with people who, like him, are citizens of the world.

While the cosmopolitan and transnational motifs are undoubtedly some of the central themes of the novel, an equally present but undoubtedly less obvious trope is related to 9/11 and the question of terrorism examined from a multi-ethnic perspective. With remarkable consistency, the novel provides a dualistic attitude on September 11 respectively illustrated in the first and second section of the book. Considering its date of publication and the context in which the novel is set, 9/11 occupies a relevant role within the plot. Nevertheless, the post-9/11 malaise in New York is first depicted as Julius walks and stops at the site of Ground Zero to recall the effects of the tragedy within the American context. In turn, halfway through the novel, the discussion of terrorism shifts the focus of narration from New York to Julius's encounter with Moroccan immigrants in Belgium and their conversation engages in Islamophobic sentiments that culminate in a provocative statement on anti-American radicalism.

By undertaking the examination of 9/11 as a prominent theme in *Open City*, the analysis of Julius as a flâneur proves its significance highlighting the novel's revival of the archetype to engage in a discussion on 9/11 that sets the question of terrorism outside the United States. To state the obvious, attention to terrorism in literature increased after the attacks at the World Trade Centre and, following Peter Herman, after September 11 terrorism has become a critical concept in literature that reshapes the way we read novels set in the post 9/11 landscape (2018).[3]

Susana Araujo suggests, "9/11 literature should not be read exclusively in relation to US culture but from a transnational perspective" (Araujo 1). Most of the works devoted to 9/11 have considered the event prominently through trauma theory focusing on it as an exclusively national American experience. Conversely, it can be argued that Cole addresses the tragedy through a transcontinental approach that considers the city a palimpsest of American remembrance and as the starting point to look at the event from a transoceanic perspective as the

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[3] For a preliminary discussion on terrorism and literature see Perter Herman's *Terrorism and Literature* (2018).

flâneur leaves New York re-examining the question in Brussels. In effect, Araujo further notes how it is well-known that "the terrorist arracks of 9/11 provided shocking images which the Western psyche had to come to terms with" (1). It indeed was a historical event whose meanings and repercussions were discussed and debated all over the world and that inevitably induced an outpouring of fiction associated with it (Araujo 10).

In face of this, Kristiaan Versluys remarked that, thanks also to the visual media that shaped a collective sense of mourning, novels with characters who are not American demonstrated how September 11 has been a global event (65). Yet, among post-9/11 narratives, novels have been concerned with revising and depicting the city as the site of collective grieving. In a combination between urbanism and the literary text, narratives have often portrayed New York as the place to initiate the discussion on terrorism and the site of remembrance in what has been mostly classified as the "New York novel." As Araujo additionally clarifies, these texts navigate and re-think the "eventfulness" (Araujo 19) and the consequences of September 11 examining the attacks in light of historical, political, and social meanings, so that these novels reflect different trends and positions in relation to the urban memory of 9/11 (Araujo 24) from a multinational approach.[4] Nevertheless, my classification of *Open City* as a post-9/11 novel holds the narrative within that canon of American literature that—instead of directly revolving around the event itself—retrieves the possibility of a wider approach.

II. Julius as Cosmopolitan Flaneur

Cole's protagonist ventures alone into the streets of post-9/11 New York as a foreign character recalling the urban memory and the results of September 11. In this way, *Open City* invites the reader to (re)focus on the urban space to explore the tragedy expounding a collective response to the event. That said, the narratology of the novel suggests *Open City* does engage with the global impact of 9/11, for which Cole leans toward a universalist or particularistic view. Indeed, the novel's criticism has recurrently considered the protagonist as a valid example of an early 21st century update of the figure of the flâneur (Vermeulen 2013; Hartwiger 2016; Faradji 2022).[5] From the beginning, Cole's protagonist frames his role as a contemporary flâneur,

> I began to go on evening walks last fall … These walks, a counterpoint to my busy days at
> the hospital, steadily lengthened, taking me farther and farther afield each time … In this

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[4] Novels such as Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2011) approached the tragedy beyond American boundaries illustrating the consequences of 9/11 beyond its traditional US orientation. For a broader discussion on the topic see Bohemer and Morton's work Terror and the Postcolonial (2010).

[5] Peter Vermeulen's essay "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's Open City and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism" (2013) and Alexander Hartwiger's analysis "The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest" (2016) provide a thorough investigation to contextualize the flâneur within the novel. A recent analysis can be found in Sara Faradji's "A Walk to Forget: The Postcolonial Flâneur's Negating Journey in Teju Cole's *Open City*" (2022).

> way, at the beginning of my final year of psychiatrist fellowship, New York City worked itself into my life at a walking pace. (Cole 3)

Over the centuries, interpretations of the "traditional" flâneur have taken increasingly different perspectives and scholarship has recurrently explored the ambiguity of this character. In his wide-ranging study, Keith Tester argues that "Definitions are at best difficult and at worst a contradiction of what the flâneur means. In himself, the flâneur is, in fact, a very obscure thing" (Tester 7).[6] For some, this character is an emerging symbol of post-modernity; for others, the end of flânerie was marked by the erosion of collective experiences in public spaces, and other scholars consider flânerie as a private experience.

Charles Baudelaire poeticized the figure of the casual wanderer in his oeuvre, giving centrality to the character for its apt ability to establish an intimate relationship between the city and his psyche. Such view considers the reporter of street life as an artist, a nomad, who observes the urban landscape, merging with the crowd, looking at the metropolis from a detached position. Drawing from these general assumptions, Baudelaire poeticized the flâneur, seen as a spectator of city life witnessing the changes of the urban environment. With respect to this, in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), Baudelaire maintained that "The flâneur is eventually looking for that quality which we call "modernity" (12). As such, the character soon became the reporter of the modern city.

However, to sketch a more exhaustive portrait of the flâneur it is also necessary to consider Walter Benjamin's interpretation. Indeed, Benjamin's consideration of the flâneur is inextricably bound to the development of the department store that turned the idle wanderer into the prototype of the consumer. Following this logic, Benjamin argued that the traditional wanderer was detached from the city he walked, so that his strolling lost its introspective quality and the flâneur ended up wandering, seeking a new identity reconstructed through the urban setting. More broadly, in the French tradition, the 19th-century flâneur walked through the Arcades of Paris perceiving the desolation of the city with a certain nostalgia. Overall, however, the flâneur acquires existential security from the spectacle of the teeming crowds, the visible public, or the metropolitan aspect of the city.

Despite its popularization and recurring literary presence, for its complexity this character remains generally elusive and quite ambiguous. In an attempt to sketch a general portrait of the American flâneur, Dana Brand contends that in any of its multiple interpretations, the flâneur becomes a model for the creative through his panoramic interest in the life of the metropolis (8).[7] Urban observer par excellence, born within the harsh landscape of the modern

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[6] Among recent scholarship Tester's analysis is considered as the most extensive on the Flâneur. Reiterating the origin of flânerie Tester offers a clear portrait of the Flâneur developing a debate that goes beyond Baudelaire and Benjamin shedding light on flânerie as a contemporary and extremely modern practice.

[7] In a short essay, I cannot hope to deal with the whole discussion on flânerie for it is out of the scope of this analysis. For preliminary discussion on the flâneur see Tester (2015) and Brand (1992).

city, the flâneur embodies the desire for human freedom encompassed by the individual imprisoned by territorial, ideological and professional constraints. Transplanted by Parisian galleries in the suburbs and large metropolitan shopping centers, "The figure of the flâneur seems to bear witness to the sense of despair and fragmentation of modernity, exemplifying the desire to experience new relationships with places and their inhabitants[8] (Nuvolati 2013, 3)[9], a definition that can be easily applied to Cole's protagonist.

To this end, if we associate the traditional traits of flânerie to the protagonist of *Open City*, Cole proposes a nonconforming version of the flâneur. Julius rambles through the streets of New York City as an atypical urban walker strolling through the urban landscape observing the metropolis with the perspective of an immigrant and a cosmopolitan yet engaging in more than mere observation. To this end, the second half of the book respatializes the flâneur in cities such as Brussel, where the protagonist is confronted with cosmopolitan characters and their views outside the United States. Yet, another interpretation which deserves mention for its classification of Cole's protagonist as a flâneur, is that of Alexander Hartwiger. In his essay "The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest," Hartwiger observes how another element that sets Cole's flâneur apart from the traditional traits of the character, lies in its multicultural aspect. As said, Julius lives in New York as an immigrant from Nigeria travelling to Brussel combining a background which is both European, African and, to a certain extent, even American. However, as the trajectory of the novel testifies, "in the configuration of the postcolonial flâneur, postcolonial then comes to signify more than a historical moment, and is committed to interrogating the interrelated histories of violence, domination, inequality, and injustice" (Hartwiger 7). In an arguably evident way, throughout the novel Cole's protagonist distances from the conventional traits of the flâneur. Such thinking implies that, as Cole's flâneur takes readers along vivid walks through the post-9/11 city, the narrative moves away from the traditional parameters of flânerie.[10]

In her recent analysis, Sara Faradji explains that "Julius beguiles readers as he takes them on a journey through a familiar city on a renewed perspective. He particularly entices a global readership … to develop a transnational relationship between the postcolonial writer and the global reader" (2–3). In so doing, Cole revisits the traditional themes of flânerie creating an urban walker who becomes a citizen of the world or rather, a "man of the crowd," shaping a global impression charged with a cosmopolitan eye. Nevertheless, to classify Julius

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[8] Thanks to Baudelaire and Benjamin, the setting of the Flâneur is especially Paris. Although over time the act of strolling covered many other cities of the world, even today it can be said that the French capital is the most suitable place for this type of practice.

[9] My translation as others by the same author unless otherwise indicated.

[10] Here, I not mean to discuss the theme of racism which is one of the most evident of the novel, however, black discrimination is an ever-present concern that the novel addresses both in New York and in Europe. For instance, as Julius walks through Harlem he perceives the burden of discrimination and later he is severely injured by a group of teenagers.

as a multi-ethnic flâneur it is essential to consider that cosmopolitanism—a traditional theme of postcolonial literature—is often used as an effective narrative device to create empathy, acknowledging a shared sense of collectivism with readers. Indeed, Cole's flâneur repeatedly shows compassion about racial violence, terrorism and historical tragedies (from 9/11 to the Holocaust).

In what is considered as one of the most seminal studies on the novel, Peter Vermeulen observes how Cole renovates the figure of the flâneur turning him into a fugueur. He claims that "Julius's posture as a cosmopolitan flâneur is shadowed by the contours of more sinister and mostly forgotten nineteenth-century figure of restless mobility: the fugueur" (42), a dark counterpart of the flâneur. As the plot unfolds, Cole develops a "narrative fugue" (Sùnden 1) that becomes one of the central concerns of the novel; Julius escapes from himself and from his past in Nigeria and moves across continents in search of his true self.[11] Through this process, the novel draws the reader into the flâneur's psychological introspections provided by his itinerant rambles through the cities he visits, at the same time depicting the fugue of the protagonist who avoids his past dealing with unresolved emotional conflicts as he leaves New York to Brussels. Critics such as Philip Aghoghovwia echo this position additionally reading Cole's flâneur as an elusive typology of interiority, considering the inner self as the principal modality by which the flâneur interacts with the cityscape (25). In this regard, Aghoghovwia asserts that

> Julius provides the reader with peripatetic histories of New York. In the process, he creates an alternative image to the officialese through which the cosmopolitan city and the multi-layered lives of its citizen subjects, including Julius himself, are foregrounded. Julius's activity of flânerie—of walking and thinking with the physical landscape of the city—is indexical of interiority in generative ways, especially because of the intersubjective consciousness that characterises this interior–exterior exchange (24).

If interiority enables Cole's flâneur to narrate history and social consciousness, the function of wandering is to reflect on the palimpsest of the urban fabric of New York and, in the process of walking, to testify the historical and cultural changes that mark the current landscape of the city (27). In effect, from a rather broad angle, the journey of *Open City* can be interpreted as the choice of considering the flâneur[12] as the patient and attentive observer of the urban reality, which takes shape and transforms beneath his eyes inaugurating profound reflections of cultural, historical and social issues, across the urban grids. The protagonist explains,

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[11] A theme I purposefully decide not to discuss here is the importance of the past and identity as key tropes of narration. In New York Julius is forced to recall his past in Nigeria, a past affected by the traumatic rape he committed and he is trying to negate through his walking experiences which have a therapeutic goal.

[12] However, it is important to make a difference between the Flâneur and the dandy. More than observing the dandy perhaps likes to be observed even through his snobbish attitude is rather controversial (Lanuzza 1999).

> I wove my way through crowds of shops and workers, through road construction and the horns of taxicabs. Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even … (6)

In effect, these critical approaches have demonstrated how Cole flips the role of the flâneur from a 21st century perspective. Supporting this claim, Alexander Hartwiger has further observed how "Julius channels but also challenges the observant flâneur figure and in doing so inverts the point of view of the Parisian flâneur moving away from the totalizing colonial gaze to a more critical one that recognizes the complex flows of capital and people" (in Faradji 7–8). To a certain extent Cole "updates" the flâneur to the age of globalization, from New York City to Brussels, to elaborate a historical disquisition on the consequences of 9/11 as a universal event.

III. NEW YORK AS A SITE OF REMEMBRANCE

Edwin Turner observes that "*Open City* is not staged to be a 9/11 novel, nor does it dwell on that day. However, although 9/11 does not figure as prominent theme, Cole captures something of the post-9/11 zeitgeist, and at the same time situates it in historical context" (2012). For this reason, I am not examining the character's post-9/11 trauma (Julius is an immigrant and he experiences New York as a foreigner who deals with a sense of personal trauma), but I am rather focusing on the flâneur's ability to reconsider 9/11, first unravelled through the observation of New York's urban landscape as the casual wanderer transcends America's sense of grieving into a globally shared one.

To analyze this concern even further, at a critical moment in the narrative Julius begins an examination of the city's despair toward 9/11 by his on-site observation of Ground Zero, "Just below the street level, I saw the sudden metallic green of a subway train hurtling by, exposed to the elements it crossed the work site, a livid vein drawn across the neck of 9/11" (Cole 57–58). When Julius remarks on the tragedy through his sheer scrutiny of the site, he further asserts that "Atrocity is nothing new, not to humans, not to animals" (Cole 58). Such a description suggests that through the flâneur's self-reflexivity, Cole illustrates the concerns of America's national despair related to a post-9/11 ideology identified by an immigrant who is able to internalize America's sense of collective grief. In this way, the experience of the flâneur is both individual and collective as he manages to participate in America's cumulative mourning. In her study of the city since 9/11, Hilary Thompson remarks that

> If the attacks themselves appear designed to spread significance away from their particular place and time, one countermeasure that fiction with world citizenship in mind might take is to re-ground the event, to return to its epicentre. We see this, for example in Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), the peripatetic narrative of a Nigerian New Yorker who is inexplicably drawn to Ground Zero yet seems as given to psychological deflection as reflection. (174)

This statement reveals or perhaps confirms Cole's intention to address the tragedy as a "national allegory" (Thompson 174), suggesting that Julius's psychological rambles in New York might lead to the vulnerability of an exclusive national ethos. It is well-known that the attacks of September 11 brought a national sense of emotional preoccupation which from that day became America's most prominent concern and feelings such as fear and shock were widespread in the US.

Moreover, Edward Casey equally reminds us that the consideration of the World Trade Centre as a place of memory renders the site "a container of experiences that contribute so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability. We might even say that memory is place-oriented or at least place-supported" (186–87). To read the novel in these terms also implies that Cole entails the mourning of September 11 through flânerie as a place-oriented experience leading to an interpretation of the post-9/11 sentiment. Benjamin Bird insightfully identifies the representation of grief in post-9/11 fiction asserting that "Post-9/11 texts frequently hint at the necessity for a process of mourning and self-examination" (561).

In the section of *Open City* set in New York Cole insists—recalling post-9/11 scenarios such as those of Foer and DeLillo—upon retrieving and examining national grief. As the protagonist admits looking at Ground Zero, "The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased and rewritten" (59). In an interview, Teju Cole stated

> I tried to focus on a particular aspect of this historical moment: the failure of mourning. This is something I haven't seen a great deal of in the writing around this disaster. And my view is that you write about disaster by writing around it. There's a reticence necessary when you consider the suffering of others. ("Palimpsest City")

This statement draws back to Derrida's observation on the symbolism of 9/11. For Jacques Derrida, "When you say September 11 you are inviting me to speak by recalling…The very impact of what is at least *felt*,[13] in an apparently immediate way, to be an event that truly marks, that truly makes its mark a singular and, as they say here, unprecedented event" (85–86). As Derrida argues, the importance of what is "felt" is what gives meaning to the tragedy in a cumulative sense, so that the naming of 9/11 implies an immediate act of recollection and remembrance. If we align with Barry Schwartz for whom "Collective memory is a representation of the past embodied in commemorative symbolism and historical evidence" (471), we see how in *Open City* the flâneur's observation of Ground Zero as a place of recollection becomes a way to engage in the historical knowledge of 9/11 and inaugurates a discussion on terrorism and its effects in the United States.

In this sense, the novel provides the reader with an opportunity to access the tragedy through New York as a space of remembrance. Through his contemplative observation of the urban landscape Julius meditates on the consequences of the disaster from a national

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[13] Emphasis in the original.

perspective as he feels the void left by Ground Zero.[14] In her appraisal of post-9/11 America, Judith Butler maintains that "What grief displays is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways we cannot always recount or explain" (23). "I nurtured stoicism in myself and a determination to handle grief in the right way" (228) says Cole's flâneur. As Butler further notes, by referring to mourning specifically related to September 11 as one of the most tangible examples of fear and anxiety, we might also consider the experience of grieving as a condition of human vulnerability. However, as the body is the primary site of vulnerability in post-9/11 New York, Ground Zero embodies both national trauma and global vulnerability.[15] Ingrid Gessner endorses this view when she explains that Ground Zero and the World Trade Centre hold a special status in the hierarchy of remembering as America's tangible and collective expression of grief architecturally constructed to become a permanent site of memory (4).[16]

Aligning the ethics of this place with Benjamin's vision of the flâneur rambling through the arcades of the city, we can consider Cole's character as the post-9/11 flâneur who "is able to locate in the streets a 'colportage of space,' an unravelling distribution of social secrets paved over by time" (Zuber 270). As such, the construction of the character as an effective narrative thread offers an alternative way to (re)consider 9/11 by observing the city. David Zuber adds a response to this asserting that the narrative memorialization of 9/11 today typically deals with "before" and "after" scenarios at the site in New York City (270). To parse this in terms of the novel, the flâneur exposes the junction between the urban aesthetics of memorialization and collective grief. As the narrative poignantly discloses human vulnerability, 9/11 is elaborated through the philosophy of walking, an act that dictates the rhythm of narration creating an emotional trajectory in New York that leads also to the tragedy. In this

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[14] These observations chart a parallel between Cole's post-9/11 memorialization and Freud's psychoanalytic distinction between mourning and melancholia. In Freud's definition, "Mourning is regularly … the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one" (243) and as he further notes, whereas melancholia enables a work of self-reflexivity, mourning originates from an external inhibition. In this way, if melancholia is an impoverishment of the self, on the contrary mourning comes from external factors, events and situations. In addition to this, Freud explains how mourning can be classified as a temporal experience that allows the self to overcome grief to reach a state of normalcy (Freud 237).

[15] For a thorough discussion on mourning and violence in post 9/11 America see Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* Verso, 2004. In her analysis, Butler considers the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from the attack on the US suggesting that violence, arising as a consequence of post-9/11 despair, should be minimized to promote a global spirit of interdependency.

[16] As Gessner further points out, the construction of memorials relies significantly on issues such as nationalism and identity politics. For a fuller discussion memory's dependence on nationalism and identity politics see Gessner, Ingrid. "The Aesthetics of Commemorating 9/11: Towards a Transnational Typology of Memorials." *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6, no. 4 (2015): 1-4 and Said, Edward. "Invention, Memory, and Place." *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 175–92.

sense, Cole's novel considers the act of walking as a process of remembrance and commitment located in the cradle of a solemn remembrance of 9/11.

Whereas the novel's criticism tends to conflate with Cole's illustration of a general sense of collective trauma (a term that in the novel entails different discussions), my reading of *Open City* suggests that Cole captures the post-9/11 spirit "seeking out the hidden history of the cityscape the flâneur walks" (Durrant 620). In one of the novel's opening passages, Julius explains the city's collective malaise as he states, "I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counterinstinctive death-drive, into movable catacombs… all of us re-enacting unacknowledged traumas" (7). This passage motivates Julius's self-introspective incorporation of the post-9/11 spirit that comes only few chapters ahead when he claims

> The empty space that was, I now saw and admitted, the obvious: the ruins of the World Trade Centre. The place had become a metonym of its disaster: I remembered a tourist who once asked me how he could get to 9/11: not the site of the events of 9/11 but to 9/11 itself, the date petrified into broken stones. I moved closer. It was walled in with wood and chain link, but otherwise nothing announced its significance. (52)

This reflection leads to the assumption that in its etymology, "commemoration" presupposes a communal process of remembrance. Underscoring this point, Edward Casey has emphasized that "We remember through such a memorialization, which defies reduction to the separatist categories of "matter" or "psyche" – indeed to "self" and "other," or even to "past" and "present" (184). Implicit within Cole's reinterpretation of 9/11 through memorialization from a flâneuristic perspective is the belief that, as Marita Sturken has shown, "The question of memorialization of September 11 has focused on what is known as 'Ground Zero' in New York City […] making it clear that the New York site is the symbolic center of this tragic event" (375).[17] As such, it might be easy to argue that in the narrative Cole re-constructs the need of remembrance and the memorialization of 9/11 approaching the catastrophe through the flâneur's recognition of national grief in the United States.

As far as 9/11 is concerned, Ground Zero has become the site of a public drama activating the collective feelings of loss and despair which, through the 9/11 memorial then turn into collective memory.[18] Aligning with this, Igor Maver explains that, "Cole speaks about violence, trauma, war in a way, indirectly describing not the external events, but rather the consequences of suffering upon one's psyche, individual and collective memory" (4). Nonetheless, in his recent reading of the novel, Sam Durrant observes how by deploying Freud's elaboration of trauma through the distinction between mourning and melancholia, the protagonist

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[17] Additionally, Stuken observed that commemoration presupposes the involvement of feelings such as "reenactment" and "recollection."

[18] For a study on memory and commemoration see Burke Burke, Peter. "Co-memorations. Performing the past." *Performing the Past* edited by Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter, Amsterdam University Press, 2010, pp. 105–18. Burke's study prominently focuses on the relationship between memory and performance as a strategy of remembrance.

of Cole's novel diagnoses the anxiety and mimics it identifying with the city's sense of nostalgia (622). It is significant then to say that memory, mourning and self-introspection, define the flâneur in his anguished approach to the post-9/11 scenario as he uncovers the spatial memory of the terrorist attacks as a postcolonial flâneur and outsider (see Mueller 2021). Following Zygmunt Bauman's assertion that "It is the modern world which is the original flâneur" (139) we might conclude that Cole's relocation of flânerie in post-9/11 fiction re-considers the act of walking as a process of self-reflexivity toward collective memory.

As Bauman reminds us, today it is hard to resist flânerie since the modern world cannot but become the site of nomadic expressions representing that collective sense of disorientation that is deeply entrenched in postmodern reality (158). As *Open City* demonstrates, roaming the city post-9/11 allows the flâneur to encapsulate the consequence of a post-9/11 ideology re-grounded by Cole through the idle wanderer. In that vein , the narrativization of a post-9/11 setting Cole proposes is closely aligned to De Certeau's view, for whom people engage in walking, an elementary way to experience the city, making use of spaces that cannot be seen (92).

IV. FROM NEW YORK TO BRUSSELS: ANTI-AMERICAN RADICALISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

If this is perhaps the most evident connection to flânerie as the premise to begin a discussion on the consequences of September 11, the presence of 9/11 in the novel as a significant event has multiple facets. Another complicated and perniciously influential reference to terrorism occurs in the second section of the novel. Although the second part of *Open City* switches the context from America to Europe, the flaneur never loses his attitude as he roams the city and encounters people of different ethnicities and cultures observing the urban landscape and witnessing compelling discussions. In his quest for his heritage in Brussels, Julius meets two Moroccan immigrants who share an anti-American view on terrorism. As he travels to Europe in search of his estranged grandmother, Julius's activity as a flâneur persists as he walks observing the streets of Brussels. The narrator reports,

> During my visit, the mild winter weather and the old stones lay a melancholy siege on the city. It was, in some ways, like a city in waiting, or one under glass, with somber trams and buses. There were many people, many more than I had seen in other European cities, who gave me the impression of having just arrived from a sun-suffused elsewhere. (97–98)

Clearly, the second section of *Open City* provides the reader with an opportunity to re-consider the consequences of September 11 through the flâneur beyond New York as the site of US national remembrance. As the scene switches to Brussels, Cole offers insights into the experience of dislocation pointing at a sentiment of anti-American radicalism from an Islamophobic perspective. At a critical moment in the narrative, Julius encounters Farouq and Khalil, two Moroccan refugees who escaped from the oppressive monarchy in their native country. These characters open up a provocative dialogue on terrorism and Islamophobia that

constitutes, as several critics have suggested, "one of the centerpieces of the novel" (Mahajan in Ameel 273). What emerges from Farouq's thought-provoking assertions, as a consequence of September 11, is an anti-American sentiment on the matter of terrorism. One of his most outrageous and horrifying statements from an Islamic perspective lies in the contention that "For us [Muslims], America is a version of Al-Qaeda" (121). To this, in his flâneur-like attitude, Julius weighs a response that lacks a clear political engagement. After Farouq's disquieting claim, he observes that "That statement was so general as to be without meaning. It had no power as he said it without conviction. I did not need to contest it, and Khalil added nothing to it. 'America is a version of Al-Qaeda'" (122).[19]

This moment resonates with others in the fifty-page section on Brussels when the flâneur's wanderings lead him to witness "how radical Islamic movements come to existence in the context of a Western metropolis" (Ameel 266). Yet even more meaningful perhaps than the radicalism of this scene is the revelation of Khalil and Farouq's pro-Islamic sentiments, as they firmly embrace extremism and an implicit anti-American ideology, support the well-known Sunni jihadists Hamas and Hezbollah since as they declare "It is resistance, simple" (120). In what follows, Khalil claims that "True, it was a terrible day the Twin Towers. What they did was very bad. But I understand why they did it" (120). In *The Post 9/11 City in Novels*, Karolina Golimowska argues that *Open City* explains and imagines how "radical and Islamic movements come to existence in the context of a Western metropolis" (30). As known, the hijackers organized their operations in Europe and subsequently, the rise of global jihadist movements beyond the United States has increased.

Although Farouq and Khalil distance themselves from the practice of terrorism, they prove to have stereotypical anti-American considerations on September 11. As a traditional flâneur, Julius distances himself from their views observing and remaining somehow neutral to the question of terrorism. "I was meant to be an outraged American, though what I felt was more sorrow and less anger. Anger and the semiserious use of a word like *extremist*, was easier to handle than sorrow. This is how Americans think Arabs think, I said to them both" (120), he states.[20] Julius refuses to engage in political discourse limiting to transfer the feeling of the consequences of the horrific event of 9/11 and its aftermath, in and outside the United States.

Constructing a transnational flâneur decentered from the American landscape, Cole engages in a multicultural responsive reaction to 9/11 developing what Richard Gray terms "verbal impotence" (2), that is to say, an inability to take a position on the consequences of terrorism limiting instead to observation and introspective response. Departing from flânerie as the narrative trope to observe Ground Zero as the site to begin a discussion on 9/11 that is initiated on America's soil and touches on themes such as mourning and national trauma, as the novel

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[19] "Contemporary commentators have pointed to the link between the radicalizing of the characters Farouq and Khalil in the novel, and the attackers of the November 2015 attacks in Paris and the March 2016 attacks in Brussels" (Ameel 265).

[20] Emphasis in the original.

moves to Europe, the question becomes even more political. Confronting cosmopolitan characters observing the urban landscape as a traditional flâneur, the protagonist serves as a textual device for mapping out a debate on America's role through the lens of a pro-Islamic sentiment.

Another salient passage occurs after Khalil says he had disillusionments about America, as the country rejected his scholarly thesis as a consequence to 9/11 and as a prejudice against Islamic and Arabic people. Farouq states "My thesis committee had met on September 20, 2001, and to them with everything happening in the headlines, here was this Moroccan writing about difference and revelation. That was the year I lost all my illusions about Europe" (128). In a previous passage, Farouq maintains that "Many Americans assume that Europe Muslims are covered from head to toe if they are women, or that they wear a full beard if they are men, and that they are only interested in protesting perceived insults to Islam" (119). As such, aligning September 11 with an anti-racist American prejudice, Farouq once again expresses his hate for the West as his conversation with Julius reveals the burden of Muslims and Arabic people toward the US. Undoubtedly, as a consequence to the terrorist attacks, the United States saw a stark increase in discrimination, violence, and hatred toward Muslims and Middle Eastern individuals. Debra Merskin notes that, by the time Bush pronounced the State of Union address in 2002—in which he considered Islam as "the axis of evil" [with reference to terrorism]—"the enemy was fully constructed, infused by more than twenty years of media and popular culture images equating Muslims with Arabs as terrorists" (Menskin 171). The prejudice against Islam as a consequence of 9/11 is effectively captured in this passage, as Farouq expresses his resentment toward America.

Surprisingly, relatively little attention has been paid to what Cole might have meant with this provocative discussion on Islamophobia and terrorism from an anti-American perspective. However, I believe the flâneur is the motif Cole uses to initiate an extremely complex debate on the issue of terrorism, initially by observing Ground Zero as a *lieu de memoire* from an American perspective, repositioning radicalism and terrorism beyond the United States from a European Islamic viewpoint. Providing a conceptual framework to read the novel through the lens of terrorism, Erica Edwards advises that *Open City*[21] is a novel that explores the war on terror and respatializes terrorism from New York City—a visible site of national memory—to Brussels as the place to discuss radicalism through Islamophobia and an anti-American political view. In so doing, critics have noticed how Cole's narrative constructs the new post 9/11 Black novel as a literary text (Edwards 664).

To the extent that we read the novel in these terms, we see how *Open City* addresses post-9/11 aesthetics and its consequences through a significant spatial dislocation of the flâneur to elaborate a national and international discussion on terrorism. In that sense, post-9/11

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[21] Of importance in this discussion is also the title "Open City," a belligerent term used to indicate the declaration of a settlement that has abandoned its defensive efforts, perhaps a reference to New York after the tragedy of September 11.

New York—where the flâneur embarks on his journey—becomes the site to develop an intricate set of political and emotional responses to the tragedy. Yet, along with this discussion comes a consideration of the plight of transnationalism and terrorism in the post-9/11 narrative. Scholars among whom Richard Gray explain that what is generally missing in novels of 9/11 and its aftermath is a strategy of deterritorialization (141). That is to say, postcolonial narratives on 9/11

> Bear witness to the encounter of southwest Asians with America, in which the strategy very often, is to read the US through American wars waged on foreign soil as well as to show the reader what is to be American by exploring American spaces and places from extrinsic vantage points and thus have an advantageous approach for the aftermath of September 11. (Gray 141)

If this is indeed the case of postcolonial texts such as *Open City*, on the other hand, Albala Razan observes that "Anglo-American narratives, preoccupied with the private sphere, the national and the local, as they are, may seem hindered even irrelatively disabled in articulating a radical literary form in relation to the post 9/11 experience" (5–6). Additionally, in her contextualization of the cosmopolitan novel, Rebecca Walkowitz explains that

> Contemporary [post 9/11] writers have used the salient features of modernist narrative to develop a critical cosmopolitanism. This has meant thinking beyond the nation but also comparing, distinguishing and judging among different versions of transnational thought, testing moral and political norms; including the norm of critical thinking and valuing informal as well as transient models of community. (2)

Setting the discussion of September 11, from the memorialization on the site to a multiracial perspective of the event, Cole widens the foreign experience of terrorism, drawn from the eyes of the flâneur in New York, and then peripherally extending the discourse through the character's journey to Europe to shed light on the transoceanic perspective of the East. As such, rather than merely focusing on the psychological consequences of 9/11 within the United States, *Open City* chooses flânerie as the vehicle to inscribe the international effects of September 11 also through the lens of Islamism and extremism highlighting the polarization between the East and the West, as the narrative wavers between America and beyond.

V. Conclusions

This reading of *Open City* has foregrounded how flânerie becomes a strategic narrative device to set the question of 9/11 and terrorism beyond the United States and how the flâneur, as idle wander, citizen of the world, is the thread that connects two opposing views on September 11; American and Islamic. Despoina Feleki critically examined how the novel holds a special place in the canon of post 9/11 literature and it "can be also read as an attempt to reconcile the trauma not only caused by the terrorist attack on 9/11 but also by a guilty American past,

characterized by imperial policies and stories of invasion" (259).[22] As seen, by using the flâneur Cole ponders the resonances of 9/11 and on a more complicated and political imperialistic perspective on the implications of terrorism from Ground Zero as the site of collective grievance, to Brussels as the place to elaborate extremist views on America and Islam. For this reason, it needs to be recalled an observation Teju Cole made on September 11 in an interview for *The Hemingway Society*, he stated,

> I feel very fortunate to have written *Open City* and to have been so well rewarded for it. The book began like this: late in 2006, *I was finally ready to put down some words about 9/11, not as an explanation or study of what five years in the city after that event had felt like, but as an effective response*. (Catan *Hemingway Society* n.p.)[23]

This statement clearly indicates Cole's intention to propose an effective response to September 11 and in this sense, *Open City* becomes an interesting web of transnational cosmopolitan experiments "also providing opportunities for a transatlantic and transnational engagement with US politics" (Feleki 260).

Drawing from Benjamin for whom the flâneur dwells between "Days of celebration and days of mourning" (68) we see how for Cole's post-9/11 flâneur the salience of terrorism emerges as a pivotal concern that interplays with an external social experience produced by his walks in post 9/11 New York and it is further disentangled by his itinerant rambles in Brussels, a cosmopolitan city whose inhabitants have clear anti-American radical views on the US and on the consequences of September 11.

As the novel proves, we can easily relate the twofold process of flânerie to the narrative choice of approaching a multidirectional reflection on 9/11. From the act of walking, words and thoughts flounder to create national, spatial and collective reflections on 9/11 and its global political and European resonances. In such an interpretative approach, Cole's flâneur "engages in post-traumatic state of 9/11 that helps him fight against emotional numbness" (Feleki 266); a concept that Cathy Caruth—as mentioned by Feleki—defines as the need to move from trauma to a narrative, global and collective memory (quoted in Feleki 266). As I have suggested throughout, the novel is rooted on the practice of flânerie as the illustration of a large-scale post-9/11 despair in New York and the protagonist sets his role as a typical postmodern flâneur for whom Ground Zero becomes the discursive framework to process the post-9/11 zeitgeist and its global consequences.

As a novelist who wants to stage the dialectics of September 11 elaborated through the practice of flânerie, Teju Cole sees the flâneur's wanders as a process of self-reflexivity as well as the origin of a globally shared reflection on the effects of terrorism. As such, the post-9/11

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[22] In their long dialogue with Julius, Farouq and Khalil often refer to the question of imperialism and oppression from an imperialistic perspective as well as the control of Europe on colonized territories. It is no coincidence then, that Edward Said is often mentioned.

[23] Emphasis mine.

flâneur, the postcolonial superhero, a little naive child-artist (Nuvolati 23), reflects the interest in a more itinerant and collective discussion of the attacks. To recall Art Spiegelman, Julius as flâneur perceives "the shadows of no towers" pondering on the multinational reverberations of 9/11 showing its consequences from the perspective of a foreigner who, even though not directly touched by the tragedy, enrolls in its collective repercussion through his flâneurial activities.

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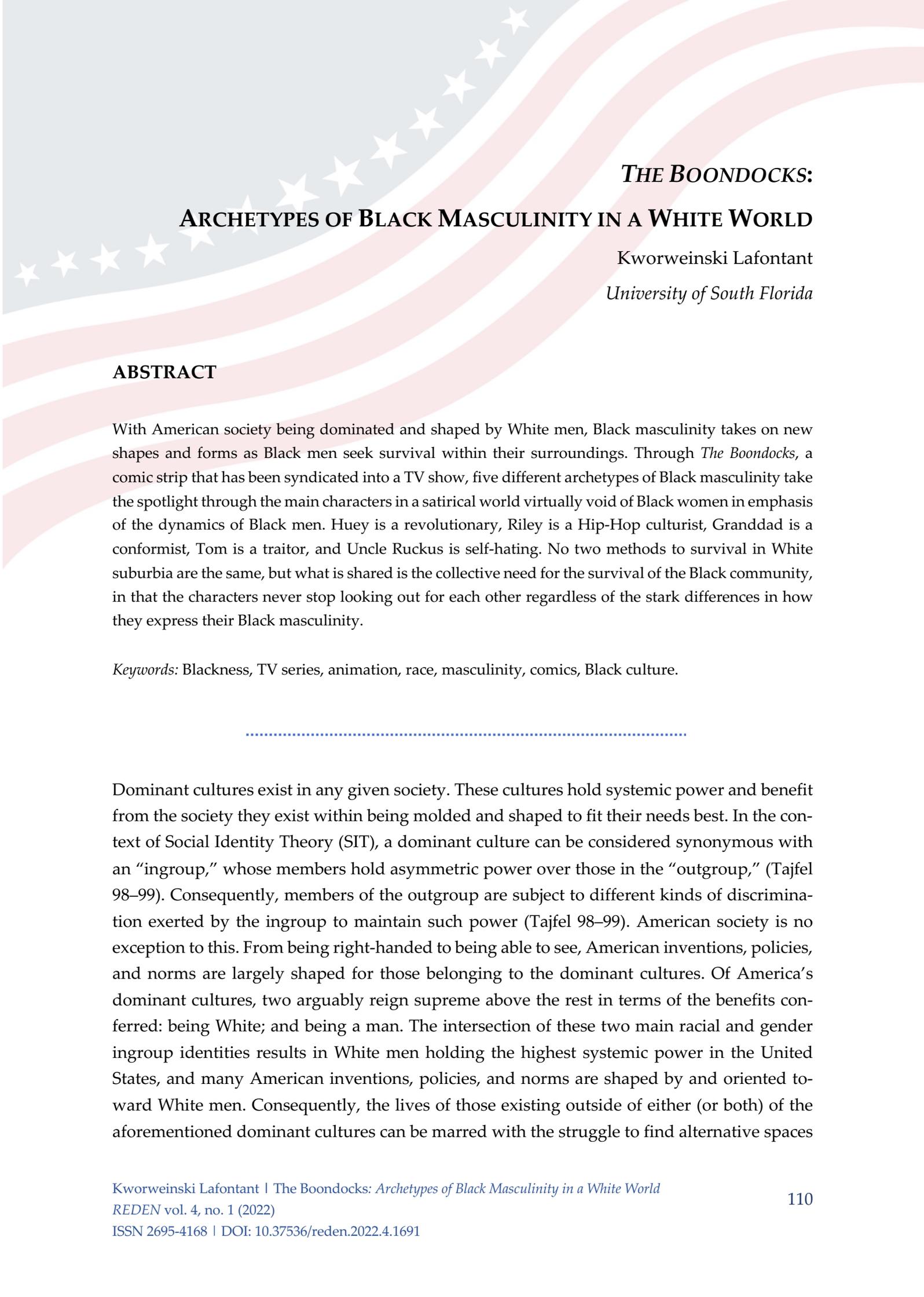
THE BOONDOCKS:

ARCHETYPES OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN A WHITE WORLD

Kworweinski Lafontant

University of South Florida

ABSTRACT

With American society being dominated and shaped by White men, Black masculinity takes on new shapes and forms as Black men seek survival within their surroundings. Through *The Boondocks*, a comic strip that has been syndicated into a TV show, five different archetypes of Black masculinity take the spotlight through the main characters in a satirical world virtually void of Black women in emphasis of the dynamics of Black men. Huey is a revolutionary, Riley is a Hip-Hop culturist, Granddad is a conformist, Tom is a traitor, and Uncle Ruckus is self-hating. No two methods to survival in White suburbia are the same, but what is shared is the collective need for the survival of the Black community, in that the characters never stop looking out for each other regardless of the stark differences in how they express their Black masculinity.

Keywords: Blackness, TV series, animation, race, masculinity, comics, Black culture.

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Dominant cultures exist in any given society. These cultures hold systemic power and benefit from the society they exist within being molded and shaped to fit their needs best. In the context of Social Identity Theory (SIT), a dominant culture can be considered synonymous with an "ingroup," whose members hold asymmetric power over those in the "outgroup," (Tajfel 98–99). Consequently, members of the outgroup are subject to different kinds of discrimination exerted by the ingroup to maintain such power (Tajfel 98–99). American society is no exception to this. From being right-handed to being able to see, American inventions, policies, and norms are largely shaped for those belonging to the dominant cultures. Of America's dominant cultures, two arguably reign supreme above the rest in terms of the benefits conferred: being White; and being a man. The intersection of these two main racial and gender ingroup identities results in White men holding the highest systemic power in the United States, and many American inventions, policies, and norms are shaped by and oriented toward White men. Consequently, the lives of those existing outside of either (or both) of the aforementioned dominant cultures can be marred with the struggle to find alternative spaces

to survive within. Black men embody a prime example of this struggle, being racially excluded from cultural dominance.

Mainstream masculinity in the United States is a set of qualities that is shaped by and for White men, going back as early as the founding of the country itself by an ingroup of White men. Thus, Black masculinity has continually been challenged to find ways to survive in a society that was not made for it. This paper argues that there is no one way for Black masculinity to counter the Whiteness of contemporary American society, and for every way that succeeds in doing so, an archetype of Black masculinity is born. The framework for these archetypes is based on the Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) and its relationship with SIT (Trepte and Loy 1). Each archetype embodies a social category, specific to Black masculinity; in response to the struggles inherent to outgroup membership in the United States, Black men further differentiate in their approach to social life and survival. This paper labels and highlights five of these archetypes: Revolutionary; Hip-Hop Culturist; Conformist; Traitor; and Self-Hating. These five archetypes can be examined best through the lens of Aaron McGruder's comic strip-turned-TV show, *The Boondocks,* focusing in particular on the first season of the animated show. By drawing on existing scholarship and analyzing each main character through the archetype of Black masculinity that they embody, and then analyzing how the archetypes interact with each other for survival, I will employ *The Boondocks* to show how Black masculinity survives in an American society and gender roles based on Whiteness.

I. BACKGROUND ON *THE BOONDOCKS*

Created by African American cartoonist Aaron McGruder in 1996, *The Boondocks* was initially a syndicated comic strip published online, as well as in American newspapers up until 2006. It was adapted as an animated series of the same name, of which the first season aired in 2005 on Adult Swim, the adult programming section of Cartoon Network. As a TV series, *The Boondocks* also later found airtime on Black Entertainment Network (BET), and ultimately ran for four seasons concluding in 2014. Both the comic strip and the TV series serve as prominent mediums for McGruder's commentary and criticisms on Black popular culture, which—during the run of both the strip and the show—were oftentimes considered controversial. Several episodes were revised or cancelled altogether, and the comic strip was relocated within a newspaper publication to reduce visibility or withheld altogether due to controversial topics discussed (Krueger 313).

The transition from comic strip to TV series thrusted *The Boondocks* into an even greater spotlight for its nuanced takes of Black popular culture in America, allowing it to spark conversation and debate amongst the masses. The TV series references notable moments in American history as well as current events, making it the perfect lens through which Black masculinity in the United States could be analyzed; *The Boondocks* bridges the roots of Black history in America with the state of Black masculinity in the early 21st century. This bridge is evident in the satire and clear references to popular culture and world events that are constantly

disseminated throughout the series. The show employs an entirely Black and entirely male main cast set in a wealthy White suburb. Such context can be read as an allegory for the position that the Black community often represents in America as an outgroup existing in tandem with the dominant White society. Through its main cast, *The Boondocks* details the variety of self-categorizations/archetypes that Black men may chose in response to their environment.

II. HUEY FREEMAN—REVOLUTIONARY

Named and modeled after the revolutionary leader of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton (1942–1989), 10-year-old Huey Freeman is the primary protagonist and often the narrator of *The Boondocks* (Tyree and Krishnasamy 320). He is "the founder of 23 radical leftist organizations, including the Africans Fighting Racism and Oppression, or A.F.R.O" (Tyree and Krishnasamy 32). Modeled after a Black nationalist, Huey is always looking out for the advancement of Black people and "[he] is very critical of many aspects of modern African American culture, politics, racism, elitism, socioeconomics, and other societal ills" (Tyree and Krishnasamy 32). In the very first episode of the first season, "The Garden Party," Huey continuously experiences a prophetic dream of himself informing privileged White people of the oppression set upon the Black community. He is often alone in these pursuits, as his grandfather (Granddad) warns Huey to not even dream of upsetting "White folks." Regardless, seeking revolutionary change through activism is the only way that Huey knows in order to survive daily life as a young Black man. SCT proposes that an individual's personal and social identity work together to guide behavior (Trepte and Loy 1), and such theoretical interpretation of social behavior is well manifested in Huey's attitude. Huey recognizes his place as belonging to the society's outgroup represented by Black men and rather than searching for a way to continue existence in the outgroup, the revolutionary youth looks for ways to restructure the power dynamics and bring the Black community into a social status as the dominant ingroup.

This desire to elevate the status of Black men in society grants Huey a notable sense of awareness regarding his community's actions. In *Manliness & Civilization*, Gail Bederman postulates that any interaction between a Black person and a White person can be taken as a representation of the Black community and its ideals against the White community and its ideals, as did the famous boxing match between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries (1–3). This refers to the principle of salience, which is a foundational component of SCT (Trepte and Loy 2). This principle suggests that certain contexts and situations can make one increasingly aware of a single social category above all others (Trepte and Loy 2). This is the lens through which Huey sees the world, and no other *Boondocks* character does the same. The many things that his fellow Black men overlook in *The Boondocks*, such as the opening of a stereotypically popular fast-food chicken restaurant ("The Itis") or the lack of accountability from the Black community

towards R. Kelly's actions[1] ("The Trial of R. Kelly"), Huey fails to brush aside as just another happening in the world. Minimizing such events would not fit his nature as a revolutionary that seeks advancement for his people through awareness. Rather, Huey recognizes those aforementioned events as salient moments for Black people, through which their lack of membership in the dominant White ingroup is increasingly apparent; the Black stereotypes that those events purport pose a threat to any positive distinctiveness inherent to being a member of the Black outgroup.

Positive distinctiveness is the combination of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation (Trepte and Loy 4). The separation of the ingroup and the outgroup relies on greater positive distinctiveness within the ingroup than the outgroup, so that the power is held by the ingroup (Islam 1782). Stereotypes and controversies feed the derogation of the outgroup and further divide the two groups (Trepte and Loy 9–10). This is why the stereotypes of fast-food chicken consumption and the controversy of R. Kelly's sexual misconduct are pressingly salient moments for Huey. Such threats dampen the revolutionary efforts that seek to transform the Black community into the dominant ingroup, which makes combatting these stereotypes and increasing positive distinctiveness a priority for Huey.

There is perhaps no greater manifestation of Huey as a revolutionary figure than in "A Huey Freeman Christmas." In this episode, Huey is redirecting his school's Christmas play to counter the White-washed Christmas narrative that is supposed to be staged. He hires Quincy Jones as the music producer for the play, fires all his classmates and replaces them with professional actors, and portrays Jesus as a Black man, much to the dismay of his school's White administration. Even when faced with something as routine and blasé as an elementary school play, "Huey ponders how to bring consciousness to people" (Tyree and Krishnasamy 35). In the end, the play is well received by a small audience of critics but boycotted by the rest of town due to the firing of their children. However, the people that attended the play were deeply moved, and the play even inspired Huey's teacher to become a professor of African American Studies. Huey views the need "to bring truth to the 'ignorant masses' [as] a heavy and complicated burden" but a necessary one (Tyree and Krishnasamy 35). Increasing awareness among the Black community is Huey's way of increasing positive distinctiveness, leveraging the spreading of information through mediums such as plays and the media that can largely impact the degree of salience by which members of a group ascribe to events and issues (Trepte and Loy 7-10). Huey's ultimate aim is to educate his own people and inspire them to arise from their current social position by avoiding derogation and increasing their own value. Through the quest for advancement within his community, Huey stays afloat in his White surroundings as a Black man.

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[1] Since 1996, R. Kelly has been repeatedly sued and criminally charged for sexual misconduct with minors and child pornography, with most of the cases ending in settlement or acquittance, and he was also at one point married to a 15-year-old while he was 27 years old at the time. In June 2022, he was finally sentenced to 30 years in prison.

III. Riley Freeman — Hip-Hop Culturist

Riley is the juxtaposed, younger brother of Huey. He is considered quite the opposite of Huey, as Riley has an "excessive identification with [mainstream] popular culture" and "rebels against anything he thinks is outside of hip-hop culture of being 'cool'" (Howard 160). Despite living an upper-middle class lifestyle in a wealthy White suburb, Riley truly "believes he is struggling in the streets to overcome 'the man'" (Timmerman et al. 172). In his performance of masculinity as a Black man, Riley embodies "cool pose," which feminist scholar Linsay Cramer defines as "a performance of individuality integral in Black culture" and "functions as a strategy for men and women who occupy Black positionality to both cope with White domination and White patriarchy and resist it concurrently" (Cramer 58). Cool pose is engrained in hip-hop culture as an emphasis on style and individual expression through music, dance, fashion, language, and more (Cramer 68). The need for performing the cool pose arises from centuries of "mistrust that the Black male feels toward the dominant society" (Howard 152).

In the context of SCT, the performance of cool pose feeds positive distinctiveness, where ascribing ingroup favoritism to the Black-created hip-hop culture gives membership in the Black outgroup credence that is not afforded to the White ingroup. Riley recognizes the societal and political power that the dominant White culture holds, but he also recognizes the immense societal power that the Black outgroup holds through hip-hop and defining what is "cool." This gives distinctness to Riley's approach to survival compared to Huey, as they both self-identify greatly with the Black outgroup and fundamentally would not stray from it. However, Huey seeks to transform the Black community into society's dominant ingroup, while Riley labels the Black outgroup as cool and rejects the notion of being a part of anything other than his marginalized cultural community. As a Black man surrounded by the Whiteness of his spatial community represented by the upper-middle class suburb, Riley relies on the cool pose to survive this environment while also maintaining his Black identity and avoid assimilation into White culture.

In a similar manner to Huey, Riley heavily advocates for the success of the Black community, but through the attitudes connected to cool pose aesthetics rather than societal advancement. In "The Trial of R. Kelly," Riley helps lead a protest in defense of R. Kelly that vastly surpasses the support of the prosecution. The young man sees more fault in the legal system itself and the victim rather than R. Kelly and asks the prosecutor, Tom DuBois, why "[he] should have to miss out on the next R. Kelly album for that" ("The Trial of R. Kelly"). Through his stance intrinsic to the performance of cool pose, the value of R. Kelly's contributions to hip-hop outweighs the value of legality, which is purported by a system that is known to be systemically oppressive (Solomon 44; Pew Center 3). The value of an artist's contributions to the ingroup favoritism of Black hip-hop culture is so high for Riley, that he even risks his life in "The Story of Gangstalicious" to protect rapper Gangstalicious when hitmen attempt to assassinate him multiple times. Protecting hip-hop culture and its members fosters a

community within Black culture that sees value in its products of music, fashion, and art which ultimately increases the positive distinctiveness of being Black. It is through that community that Riley employs his cool pose masculinity to survive the pressures of White culture and represents all other Black men who do the same.

IV. GRANDDAD—CONFORMIST

While his grandsons each seek to resist the forces of White culture assimilation in their own ways, Robert Jebediah "Granddad" Freeman puts up little resistance to the systems of oppression. The man is a former activist from the Civil Rights Era and played a role in nearly every major event of the Civil Rights Movement, as seen in "Return of The King," although many of those roles were minimal and even counterproductive, such as sitting next to Rosa Parks during the bus boycott and attempting to shift the public attention onto himself. Yet despite his past, he no longer fights "the White power structure, [but] is known to work with and manipulate it for his own advantage" (Timmerman et al. 172). It is through his flexibility in assimilating and conforming to the White mainstream culture and power structures that Granddad has managed to survive this long unscathed, and even prosper as he is now living his dream to leave a poverty-stricken life in the south side of Chicago for an accommodated life in White suburbia. For example, in "The Real," Granddad poses as a blind man that is running a homeless shelter out of his home in order to receive expensive makeovers from TV shows such as *Pimp My Ride* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*[2] at no cost, simultaneously taking advantage of the dominant ingroup's pity for the marginalized and living amongst the ingroup in their suburbia. While Huey is morally opposed to the plan (to avoid controversy) and Riley is overly enthusiastic about it (to increase the social value of their home and car), Granddad remains a true conformist in the middle, going along with the plan until it eventually backfires, upon which he reverts back to the next thing that will prolong his survival: parenting Riley and Huey.

Granddad's archetype can be considered an example of what Trepte and Loy describe as "social creativity," which is a strategic approach to taking advantage of the benefits of membership in a certain group without being an actual member of the group (5). Granddad takes advantage of whichever group will provide him the most benefit, but he crucially never denies his membership in the Black outgroup. Rather, he assimilates into White culture whenever convenient through his superficial behaviors. For his approach and stance, Granddad could be considered a cultural code-switcher. Code-switching is the use of multiple communicative styles in the same instance (Koch et al. 31). Such practice is often examined in the realm of linguistics, but it is traceable in behavioral tendencies as well. Granddad's understanding of the positive distinctiveness held by both the dominant White ingroup and the

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[2] These are real TV shows, which represent one of the many real-life references to pop culture in *The Boondocks*.

Black outgroup leads him to play on each group's strengths when possible and code-switch back and forth in order to remain on the side that offers the most to gain in any situation and avoid derogation. Throughout the series, Granddad's conformity/code-switching is also manifested through his linguistic patterns—his functional deployment of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black English, as well as Standard English (Koch et al. 30)—and it can also be seen through his very clear decision to move his Black family to White suburbia in the first place.

Granddad's manipulation of the White power structure can perhaps be best seen through the very first episode, "The Garden Party," in which he sets out fancy cheese because "White people love cheese" and attempts to wine and dine with the upper echelons of White society at Mr. Wuncler's garden party to prove that he is sophisticated and worthy of living in the White suburbs—and thus avoid eviction. Yet, a few episodes later, Granddad showcases his ability to conform to Black culture when it is necessary as well. In "Granddad's Fight," the man fully leans into a "n*gga moment," (defined by Huey in the episode as an abandonment of rational thinking that leads to self-destructive actions) despite several warnings from Huey not to, in order to physically protect himself and his masculine pride and even goes as far as to tell Huey that he "doesn't have a choice" when determining whether or not to fight Col. Stinkmeaner, another elderly man who publicly berated Granddad.

Granddad manipulates and conforms into whichever culture/group will provide him with the biggest benefit at any given moment. By being a conformer that constantly code-switches to whichever side is at the advantage, Granddad manages to thrive in a White society that has held back so many of his fellow Black men.

V. Tom DuBois—Traitor

Named after both W.E.B DuBois and Uncle Tom, Tom DuBois is an intellectual Black man that almost completely lacks what most people would consider to be a connection to Black culture. Tom is Black by appearance but "has assimilated to the dominant White culture of Woodcrest, married a White woman, prides himself on his Irish heritage, and speaks with an exaggerated White accent," marking his traitor-ship into Whiteness and White masculinity (Timmerman et al. 173). His assimilation into White culture has come with nearly all of the ingroup benefits, as he "is the most educated character in the show and the only regular character with a 'white'-collar job as District Attorney of Woodcrest" (Timmerman et al. 173).

Tom and Granddad both employ social creativity to take advantage of the benefits that come with membership in the White ingroup despite being members of the Black outgroup. However, unlike Granddad's temporary assimilations in and out of White culture, Tom's near-permanent residence in White culture leaves him unprepared for the realities that he faces when his identity as a Black man is foregrounded. For example, in "A Date with the Health Inspector," Tom is falsely accused of a crime because he "fit the [generic] description" of the perpetrator as a Black man. Tom is faced with his greatest fear of being sent to prison

and anally raped (on top of it, for a crime that he didn't commit), which is a reality that many Black men are aware of and experience (Rowell-Cunsolo et al. 59). His fear of "[being] made 'somebody's b*tch' by means of anal rape" leaves Tom in tears while Huey is unfazed and Riley even finds humor in Tom's predicament, reminding him not to "drop the soap" (Cooper 1186).

Tom is a representation of the Black men that make it out of the confines of White society's oppression of Black people and try to never look back. In order to survive, he aligned himself with the societal group with the most power and stayed put, abiding by the dominant culture values and expectations. Any momentary regression back into his Blackness—which serves as a stark reminder that he and other Black men can never entirely be a part of White culture—shakes up Tom's White world.

Drawing on the parameters defined by SCT, Tom exhibits a degree of depersonalization, which is a redefinition of one's self-concept to fit within a certain group (Trepte and Loy 7). His very character is a reference to the embodiment of Black depersonalization and the main character of Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Uncle Tom. However, Tom only exhibits a partial degree of depersonalization, which is alluded to in the inclusion of W.E.B Du-Bois, a well-educated Black author and sociologist, as the other half of his character reference.

Riley and Huey lived the majority their lives in the predominantly Black south side of Chicago (before being forcibly moved to Woodcrest) and never seek to leave Black culture. Granddad code-switches back and forth between Black and White culture for his own advantages, but any time he spends in White culture is as an assimilating poser as he is always deep down rooted in his Black identity. Tom resides in White culture and rarely strays into Black culture, making his assimilation nearly complete and rather permanent. Yet, there is one final character that takes this progression into White culture even further and gives contrast to the degree of depersonalization that Tom exhibits.

VI. UNCLE RUCKUS—SELF-HATING

With a name alluding to both Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus (a fictional southern Black man within Black culture that tells folktales about life for Black people on plantations[3]), Uncle Ruckus is a White supremacist that worships the very existence of White people (Timmerman et al. 172). He is a self-proclaimed White man living with "revitaligo…it's the opposite of what Michael Jackson got" ("The Trial of R. Kelly"), leveraging once again a renowned popular culture reference. Uncle Ruckus has a profound belief in the White supremacist notion that African Americans are an inferior race. His views on Black people align with the "Black buck and jezebel" stereotype that is outlined in feminist scholarly literature (Edgar 152). When it

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[3] Stories of Uncle Remus date back to the late 1700s and most of the stories were first documented by Joel Chandler Harris in the 1880s. Prior to their documentation, the stories were passed down verbally throughout the Black community in the southern US.

comes to Black people "[Uncle Ruckus] wouldn't exactly call them people, but yeah…[he] has a deep distaste for negros" (Collier 174). From the very first episode, Uncle Ruckus shows his disdain towards Black people by harassing Granddad, Huey, and Riley at the garden party and singing an original song titled "Don't Trust Them New N*ggas Over There" for the White partygoers in an attempt to ostracize the new Black family in town ("The Garden Party").

Differing from a traitor such as Tom, who recognizes his origins in an outgroup and consciously tries to assimilate into the ingroup—albeit without being a proper member of it—Uncle Ruckus finds survival by denying ever being a part of the Black outgroup in the first place. This phenomenon, in the context of SCT, is an advanced form of depersonalization and is considered "individual mobility" (Trepte and Loy 7). Whereas someone exhibiting depersonalization such as Tom places a large emphasis on their connection to their preferred social group and attempts to gloss over existing roots in their own culture, someone exhibiting individual mobility is choosing to completely transfer over and exist in a different social group, disowning any claims to their previous home (Trepte and Loy 7). By rooting himself in White culture for the entirety of his existence, Uncle Ruckus attempts to escape the plights of Black people. It is important to note, however, that this approach does not work flawlessly for Uncle Ruckus, as he still finds himself in a Black man's place from time to time. For example, in "The Story of Gangstalicious" he is held at gunpoint by a rival rapper and his entourage, and in "The Garden Party" all of the White party guests withhold their outrage over his racist song, "Don't Trust Them New N*ggas Over There," because they view Uncle Ruckus as a Black man who can say the N-word. Uncle Ruckus is the only main character that views himself as a White man, and those few moments of being treated like a Black man would serve as a reminder of his inability to wholly detach from his Black identity, but Uncle Ruckus is so entrenched in his White identity that those potential reminders do not faze him, whether they come from Black or White people alike.

For Uncle Ruckus, it is not enough to distance himself from Blackness and place favoritism in White culture, but he must also put Black culture down through hate and insults performing overt social derogation. No character in *The Boondocks* achieves the range in their racial slur vocabulary like Uncle Ruckus does, and his insults are all directed towards Black people, whereas he places White people (and especially men) on a pedestal. In "The Passion of Reverend Ruckus," he goes around preaching about White Jesus and how President Ronald Regan is the literal savior that welcomed him to "White heaven" in a prophetic dream, conflating religious, racial, and conservative ideologies. Uncle Ruckus is very specific about race in his prophecies, because "every time Uncle Ruckus opens his mouth, he preaches publicly or visits a talk show to express his views on blonde haired, blue-eyed Jesus, he reaffirms the power associated with hegemony" (Collier 173). Despite Uncle Ruckus's claims, all the other characters still see him as a Black male, and that may be the only reason why they still interact with him throughout *The Boondocks*. Regardless of Uncle Ruckus's actions and hatred, he is

still considered a Black man by the rest of the main cast and thus his survival is important to the Black community around him.

VII. ARCHETYPE INTERPLAY

Huey, Riley, Granddad, Tom, and Uncle Ruckus each possess a different style of survival for Black men in a White society and yet they interact and rely on each other often throughout *The Boondocks*. However, before one can dive into how they interplay with each other, it is important to note a fundamental factor missing from the equation: women. There are no female main characters in *The Boondocks*; the only recurring female roles are Tom's wife and his daughter, Jazmine. The absence of female characters in *The Boondocks* creates a fictional society with a shortage in female leaders, role-models, and mother-figures, which is a satirical reverse to not only the reality that Black culture exists in today, but to the longstanding concept of the Black matriarch.

The Black matriarch could be considered one of the archetypes that Black women take on in response to being part of an outgroup much like Back men (and as women even more-so than Black men due to the intersectional discrimination they are subjected to as women and members of the Black outgroup). As early as 1965, the Black matriarch has been explored in academic literature, with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965)* (also known as *The Moynihan Report*) often being the source of discussion. The Black matriarch is a category of Black women that spearhead and keep together a family unit and oftentimes an entire community as sources of leadership and authority (Moynihan 20). This archetype is pervasive in Black popular culture, as evident with references in movies such as the *Big Mama* series starring Martin Lawrence and Tyler Perry's slew of films starting the fictional character "Madea Simmons[4]," and in music through artists' monikers such as Big Momma Thornton and Ma Rainey. Questionably, *The Moynihan Report* proposes that the Black matriarch is the root of the struggles that the Black community faces, that a family unit ought to be led by a man with a woman as the secondary authority figure, and that a Black woman-led household is deviant (Moynihan 18–19). Critics of Moynihan's work cite the lack of control that Black female slaves had over their own families and procreation as evidence that the Black matriarch is not where Black oppression is rooted (Davis 4). Others criticize the lack of inclusivity inherent to the concept of the Black matriarch, acknowledging that it is possible to for a variety of successful leadership structures to exist in a family, as well as a Black woman's existence outside of a family unit altogether (King 40). *The Boondocks* creates a world in which both criticisms are explored. Black men are shown living outside of normative family units (Uncle Ruckus being the only example in the main cast) and voiding the cast of any female

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[4] "Madea Simmons" is a fictional female character and main character in a series of films that are popular amongst African American audiences. Madea is a Black matriarch and is played by male actor/comedian, Tyler Perry.

leadership eliminates any arguments that the Black matriarch is the root of Black oppression. Rather than expound on the Black matriarch being a deviant power structure in the Black community, *The Boondocks* satirically creates a power structure that is truly deviant with regard to how Black communities in America are typically shaped today.

Fathers, male leaders, and male role-models are the groups that are often in short supply in Black communities today, perpetuated by the stereotype of absent fathers and the high incarceration rate of Black men in America, among other factors. According to a 2018 New York Times article by David Brady et al., single parenthood is one of the four indicators of poverty (together with forming households at a young age, lack of education, and unemployment), a reality that has characterized many Black households for centuries. Furthermore, according to 2016 US Census data, approximately 5,000 Black households have both parents present, whereas approximately 6,000 Black households are composed by a single mother and her children (US Census Bureau). The statistics suggests that it is more common for a Black household to have just a mother rather than both parents, and yet *The Boondocks* portrays a world bereft of Black mothers, and in doing so highlights how Black men can support each other subverting stereotypes and normative configurations.

With the role of mother/matriarch absent, the men find themselves covering affective positions usually connected to mother figures when needed. For example, in "Granddad's Fight," when Granddad is feeling sad about himself it is the revolutionary Huey that steps in and fills the motherly role of comforter (Jenkins 94). This is a deviation from his usual revolutionary survival strategy, as "traditionally, the mother figure comforts… Huey continues to show his maternal instincts by providing [Riley and Granddad] support, even if they are troubled by an obstacle he warned them about" because their survival is linked to his own survival within their White environment (Jenkins 94). In times when parental figures such as Granddad or Tom occupy a needy or distressed position, Huey and Riley step into a parental role to counter and help them survive despite their differences. In "A Date with the Health Inspector," Tom is given one phone call in jail and in his time of need, he turns to Huey, the Black revolutionary character that is anything but assimilated into White culture like Tom. In "Guess Hoe's Coming to Dinner," Riley and Huey are the ones that must prevent Granddad from losing everything they own to A Pimp Named Slickback and Cristal. Even Uncle Ruckus helps out; in "The Real," he poses as a homeless man to help Riley and Granddad in their scheme to scam mainstream TV shows for free rewards. From the Black revolutionary all the way to the White supremacist, the Black archetypes are flexible in their positions within society in order to help each other survive. They embody their individual strategies for survival, but in the end seek for the survival of each other as part of the Black community as well.

A unifying thread throughout each of the five main characters is the pursuit of positive distinctiveness. Huey seeks to attain it by decreasing the derogation of the Black community. Riley seeks to attain it by focusing on the favoritism that Black culture holds. Granddad combines both Huey and Riley's approaches but applies it to only himself to achieve consistent

positive distinctiveness no matter which social group holds it. Tom seeks to align himself with the group in possession of the most positive distinctiveness, and Uncle Ruckus completely rejects the notion that he was ever apart of Black culture, finding positive distinctiveness by both derogating the Black community and displaying great favoritism for the White community. Each archetype chases positive distinctiveness because the group or individual that wields it also wields the societal power that comes with ingroup membership. The adaptation towards survival by these five archetypes is to seek and obtain increased sociocultural power.

Throughout *The Boondocks*, the archetypes of Black masculinity manifest themselves through the five main characters. Focusing on each character highlights their take on personal survival and power struggle through a society that is dominated and controlled by White culture. And while not all five characters reside inside the Freeman family unit, they all rely on each other from time-to-time to fill in the gaps within the community's support structure to keep their community afloat, even with little to no women present. In the end, their personal survival is essential, but they comprise virtually all the Black males that reside in their White society, so supporting each other is also essential. Archetypes manifest at the individual level, but the survival of the community is paramount and necessitates the breaking of archetypical molds.

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