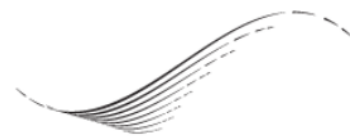


# LLIDS /e'lidz/



Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies

ISSN 2457-0044

PRESENT TENSE PEOPLE  
URBAN INDIGENOUS  
EMMANUEL LEVINAS  
ALTERITY  
POSTHUMANISM  
NOVUM  
FREDRIC JAMESON  
POLYPHONY  
THE ARCHIVAL PROJECT  
HYPER-REALITY  
JEAN BAUDRILLARD  
POLYPHONY  
SPOKEN WORD VIDEOS  
SUBVERSION  
AUTOMODERN FEMME  
CONSUMERISM

ISSUE 3.3 © SPRING 2020

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All over the world, people are taking necessary precautions to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19. With its outbreak taking toll on the physical and mental health of the entire world, all of us struggle to keep ourselves healthy by working from home and caring for our loved ones who may be directly or indirectly affected by this calamity. While all of us fight our own personal battles with anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of insecurity, there are health-care workers who are braving the exposure to this disease for our well-being and protection. The team of LLIDS salutes their spirit of duty towards the human kind and expresses whole-hearted gratitude towards them. The path forward is difficult as we navigate towards an uncertain future but we wish for everyone to fight this uncertainty by being a part of positive e-communities, programmes, and drives.

We hope to come out stronger at the other side of this pandemic, and wish everyone health and fortitude in these testing times.

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**LANGUAGE, LITERATURE,  
AND  
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES**

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# EDITORIAL

*Md. Faizan Moquim*

As our civilization faces probably its worst crisis in the form of the pandemic COVID-19, through which thousands have lost their lives while millions are infected globally and billions are at severe risk, we head towards an uncharted territory with unforeseeable socio-economic and geo-political scenarios. With the entire world grinding to a halt through lockdowns and quarantine, our team of editors has been working overtime to publish this Issue: to feel the normalcy of life by warding off the sense of doom that awaits outside our closed doors.

This dystopic experience of the world disjointed in time also serves as a point of departure to reflect upon the category of ‘human’ itself—for ethics invariably depend upon the ways in which one makes sense of or defines human which is a contentious site—vis-à-vis the emergent concepts of posthuman as well as their praxis within our civilizational context. In the modern humanist thought of the West, category of ‘human’ is conceived as a rational being who is “...epistemologically self-transparent, all-knowing, all-seeing agent of history” (Soper 5). Cartesian cogito sets itself up as one who has the audacity to be at the center of existence to perform the ethical task of conquering nature which, like all other non-human reality, remains at his beckoning. This idea of modern praxis underlines a shift away from the Aristotelian ethics, which advocated benefits for both the self and the world he inhabited, towards performing this task of conquest either as a duty (Kant) or as a utilitarian engagement with the world around us (Bentham). In each sense, cogito’s ability to act inevitably calls for an implicit conception of ethics: a set of shared notions of values within a community to which cogito subscribes. Anthropocentric ethics’ fondness for notching up watertight boundaries, within which this humanist ethical praxis flourishes, manages to exclude all other non-human forms of life—organic, inorganic, mechanical, artificial—from its ambit. This ethical tangent of praxis at the center of humanist thought, shaped by cogito’s will and grounded in his actions, involves both existential as well as moral questions that are now being challenged by the emerging posthuman deliberations attempting to overthrow these long-held ideas of human exceptionalism and open its folds to incorporate others. Posthumanist thought therefore problematizes any sense of demarcation that requires passports legitimizing the anthropocentric

ethics—such as rationality, linguistic code, appropriate biological form or psychological frame—for affiliations to the ‘human’ community.

An inclusive Posthumanism that refuses to privilege human species at the cost of other existing or emergent species may seem contrary to the rationale of Darwinian evolutionary paradigm, but its elements remain available within the existing humanist discursions because, as Katherine Hayles claims, human beings have always been posthumans. Within such deliberations, however, can we also look forward to a suitable form of posthuman praxis that is waiting to be born within the anthropocentric ethical framework, possibly through the labours of a necessary/imaginary midwife, Science Fiction, or do posthumans need alternate grounds for ethical praxis altogether? “SF,” Sheryl Vint states, “is particularly suited to exploring the question of the posthuman because it is a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine bodies and selves otherwise, a discourse defined by its ability to estrange our commonplace perceptions of reality” (qtd. in Gomel 2). Ethical praxes within SF then introduce readers/viewers to a palpable world of imagination where humans’ encounters with a range of posthuman entities, as their ‘other,’ play themselves out in myriads of ways. Here ethical praxes work within two broad tropes—firstly, where both humans and their ‘other’ struggle to survive at each other’s expense and, secondly, where both attempt to coexist, acting outside of the given boundaries of their ethical practices, and bring about a shared vision of peaceful coexistence. Common among these tropes within SF, as the vehicle for posthumanist thought, lie a spectrum of nuanced positions which invite the readers/viewers to collapse, or at least to blur, the anthropocentric distinctions between the human, in itself one of the most tortuous categories of recent decades, and non-human organic-inorganic forms. Reinforcing this collapsing of distinctions between the human and posthuman, once again prompts an enquiry into ‘what it means to be human’ and manifests itself not only as a way of thinking about ‘humans’ but also demonstrates modes through which it purports to overcome the same.

Keeping in line with the above issues, Jonathan Hay’s paper in the themed section speculates upon the already manifest posthuman characteristics of our technologized society via the concept of ‘mundane.’ Deriving from Darko Suvin’s notion of ‘cognitive estrangement,’ Hay comes up with the concept of ‘cognitive engagement’ and reads this concept in Russel T. Davies’s narration of Doctor Who’s journeys through time. Oluwadamilare I. Bello, on the other hand, explores the emergence of ‘Automodern femme’ through our access to digitized performance platforms that dispense agency to women who are, conversely, denied the same in physical world. Contextualizing his paper

within Robert Samuels's concept of 'automodernity,' alongside Eva Alordiah's development of 'Spoken Word Videos' as a genre, Bello reflects upon the paradoxes of public and private, automation and autonomy, machine and human that are inherent in technology.

The Special Submissions section of this Issue showcases Rosanne Ceuppens's exploration of Paul Celan's poetics of otherness, as expressed in his speech "The Meridian," in relation to Emmanuel Levinas's theorization of the Other in *Existence and Existents*. In doing so, Ceuppens discusses in detail Celan's as well as Levinas's reflections on the ideas like nature of language in its relation to the Other, the (im)possibility of representational thinking through language, and poetry's movement to the Other in Silence. Greg Riggio's essay deplores the representations of Indigenous peoples as relics in the American marketplace and captures their struggle to be a 'present tense people.' Through a critique of technology and the connectivity Tommy Orange's *There There* provides, through deployment of post-modern literary techniques, Riggio puts forth strategies for Indigenous peoples to be 'modern, relevant, and alive.' Houda Hamdi, likewise, reads Don DeLillo's *White Noise* as a critique of American postmodern consumerist culture by drawing upon Baudrillard and Bakhtin. Hamdi explores supermarket as a metaphor for the simulated and postmodern world as well as a polyphonic space within the fictional world, where the act of shopping is seen, among other things, as a way to ward off the existential consciousness of mortality.

In these times of unprecedented global calamity, we remain deeply grateful to our Authors and Peer Reviewers who, despite their own struggles in this quarantine, have extended their support and cooperation to make this Issue possible. We hope to keep doing justice to the faith of our readers by our publications.

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# The Posthuman Lifeworld: A Study of Russell T. Davies's *Doctor Who*

Jonathan Hay

## Abstract

Via the analysis of a cross-section of episodes from Russell T. Davies's era of the revived BBC Science Fiction television series *Doctor Who* (2005–2010), this paper demonstrates that the programme utilises representations of the viewer's everyday lifeworld to figure a posthuman rhetoric. Through the viewer's in-phenomenal interaction with its representation of the mundane, the show emphasises the already significantly posthuman nature of the technologically saturated lifeworld of the contemporary individual. It challenges Darko Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement, which fails to describe the show's Science Fictional<sup>1</sup> discourse, and instead proposes the alternate mechanism of cognitive engagement. This inquiry, therefore, reappraises the thematic concerns of the show during the years when Russell T. Davies served as the programme's showrunner, revealing *Doctor Who*'s emphasis upon the everyday (post)human lifeworld. It concludes that the show refutes technocentric ideologies, and thus rigorously demonstrates the consonance between the (post)human present and posthuman future.

**Keywords:** *Cognitive Engagement, Mundane, Novum, Science Fiction, Critical Posthumanism, Television Studies, Darko Suvin, Doctor Who*

In their attempt to characterise the contemporary position of the Science Fiction<sup>2</sup> genre, Brian W. Aldiss and David Wingrove assert that since the beginning of the 1970's, SF "[...] has gone forth and multiplied to a remarkable extent. What was once virtually a secret movement has become part of the cultural wallpaper" (Aldiss and Wingrove 14). Hence, the pervasiveness of contemporary SF in modern societies establishes a significant correlation between the genre and the realm of the cultural mundane. As John Rieder likewise suggests, the "center of energy, or the fund of cultural capital, for the genre now depends [...] heavily on its central position within the entertainment industry" (168). Rieder furthermore affirms that since, "SF is organic to mass culture [...] constructing, maintaining, and contesting the category of SF actively intervenes in promoting the distribution of a certain kind of fic-

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter referred to as SFnal.

<sup>2</sup>Hereafter referred to as SF.

tion” (10). This suggests that an intriguing feedback loop is at play; contemporary SF narratives are ubiquitous enough to constitute a form of cultural mundanity, and yet, it is necessarily through the realm of that same mundane lifeworld that the reader approaches cognisance of SFnal novelty. The paper, accordingly asserts that the everyday lifeworld is a prominent component of the rhetorical strategy by which the revived series of the BBC television show *Doctor Who* phenomenologically<sup>3</sup> positions its viewers within a mode of cognitive engagement<sup>4</sup> with its SFnal discourse.

The paper begins with the assumption that these hypothetical viewers of *Doctor Who* are not human. In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles emphasises that “[m]odern humans are capable of more sophisticated cognition than cavemen not because modern humans are smarter, [...] but because they have constructed smarter environments in which to work” (289). The technologically-mediated development of our species is an emergent phenomenon, actualized by our creation of ubiquitous technologies which collectively surpass the limits of our individual intellects, and render the category ‘human’ obsolete. In terms of its definition, Hayles argues that, “[a]lthough the ‘posthuman’ differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine” (2). In concord with Hayles’s joint contentions that technological and social progress are inextricably “seriated” (20), and that we currently inhabit an intermediary stage between being human and posthuman, this paper refers to our species as “(post)human” (Hayles 246).<sup>5</sup> From this present (post)human situation, we are engaged in the non-eschatological and largely stochastic process of becoming increasingly posthuman.

The generic rhetoric of contemporary SF texts—such as the revived series of *Doctor Who*—explicitly intersects with Posthuman philosophies. For instance, emphasising on the posthuman character of the show’s narratives, Bonnie Green and Chris Willmott argue that, “*Doctor Who* has always presented the Cybermen as quintessentially posthuman; as human beings, transformed through the integration and fusion of organic, mechanical and cybernetic parts” (56). The presence of the Cybermen in the show’s visual rhetoric “[...] alerts us to the very proximity of the posthuman era, providing a space in which we —

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<sup>3</sup>This paper uses the terms phenomenological and phenomenologically in order to assert that the observation of any phenomenon is subjectively actualized, and therefore entirely contingent upon the interpreter’s cognitive processes. For a far more detailed description of the importance of phenomenological considerations in the digital age, see Ihde 1993.

<sup>4</sup>A definition is provided for this term later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> See also; Midson, 2019; Hay, 2019.

human, [...] and posthuman alike — can imagine and shape and create our future together” (68). Whilst Green and Willmott are correct to contend that *Doctor Who* signifies matrixes of posthuman possibility explicitly, this paper demonstrates how *Doctor Who* also intersects with Posthuman philosophies implicitly by virtue of the dialectical relationship formed between the viewer and the show phenomenologically. Elana Gomel states that:

Not only does SF vividly dramatize the implications and consequences of new technologies and new discoveries, it is also a powerful influence upon culture, creating a feedback loop of images and ideas. Many central concepts of posthumanism, such as cyborg, clone, android, human-animal hybrid, and alien, originated in SF. (340)

Hence, Gomel contends that SF functions as a cultural site that literalizes the emergent posthuman “[...] potentiality of *Homo sapiens* whose biological and cultural self-fashioning ceaselessly generates new modalities of subjectivity and consciousness” (353). Thus, SF is an important constituent element within the cultural and social spheres which, in our (post)human age, plays a vital role in the development of our species. This space of posthuman potential, however, is not simply literalised by SF’s estranging narrative strategy, but rather is located in the intersection between the SF narrative and its generic form, its mundane features, and the viewer.

In order to comprehend the rhetorical territory of *Doctor Who*, it is crucial to study the importance of both the show’s phenomenological aspects and its mundane components. As Don Ihde asserts, the mundane lifeworlds of (post)humans are crucial to understandings of phenomenology, and vice versa, since technologies “[...] are non-neutral and deeply embedded in daily life praxes” (13). Accordingly, the technologies we use habitually “[...] are transformational in that they change the quality, field and possibility range” of (post)human experience and, thus, our technologized lifeworlds are profoundly dependent upon our phenomenological perspectives (33). Also, the Davies era of *Doctor Who* explicitly draws upon the ability of its (post)human viewers to assimilate the original novelty of technologies, until they appear mundane from their subjective viewpoints. Hence, it becomes necessary to foreground the shifting phenomenological perspectives of *Doctor Who*’s viewers in order to delineate the dialectical relationship between its SFnal discourse and the viewers that the rhetorical mechanism of the show intends to provoke.

The contention that SF interpellates its reader through a subjective cognitive process characterised by the assimilation of nova is conversant with Paul Ricoeur's treatise on the discursive relationship between the reader/viewer and narrative. Whilst the paper concurs with Ricoeur's contention that, "language configures and refigures temporal experience" (*Time and Narrative* 1984, 54), it challenges his correlated assertion that successful narratives therefore function to bring "[...] about an increase in being in our vision of the world which is impoverished by everyday affairs" otherwise (81). It is precisely the everyday (post)human semantic field which *Doctor Who* deploys to interpellate its viewers towards the cognisance of posthuman newnesses. Likewise, Ricoeur is partially correct when he presumes that the metaphoricity of a text "[...] is too successful, [when] the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and readers, feeling themselves to be on an equal footing with the work, come to believe in it so completely they lose themselves in it" (Ricoeur 1990, 169). The SF genre is fated to persistently fail to narrate the unfamiliar, and its preordained failure to do so is because of its reader's/viewer's cognitive ability to assimilate the posthuman potentialities enclosed by its speculative aspects.

While Darko Suvin asserts that SF texts are underpinned by a mechanism of "cognitive estrangement" (12), the paper instead demonstrates that the viewers of *Doctor Who* engage with the SFnal primarily through their familiar mundane lifeworld. Through the formulation of cognitive estrangement, Suvin proposes that SF is a literature dually characterised by the reciprocal interplay between "scientifically" grounded cognition, and "radical estrangements" (28). Yet, as this paper analyses, SFnal cognition in Davies's *Doctor Who* is consistently generated by characteristically non-estranging means. Therefore, the paper coins the term cognitive engagement, and asserts that the show is just as much defined by its non-radical mundane components; its mundane components are cognitively engaging, rather than estranging, since they are eminently familiar to viewers. The viewer's perspectival outlook is altered in the process of assimilating nova, generating a phenomenological "shift in vision" towards cognition of the SFnal (Ihde 30). The viewer's present self is not subverted in the process of watching *Doctor Who*, but is rather refigured by its imaginative engagement with the show. Therefore, the reciprocal relationship between the (post)human present and posthuman future, which is discursively foregrounded by the dynamic of cognitive engagement, may be understood as a central aspect of the show's posthuman rhetoric.

The four series of *Doctor Who* for which Russell T. Davies acted as the programme's showrunner can productively be read as per-

inent examples of this rhetorical strategy, as analysed in the representation of cross-section of episodes from that era of the show.<sup>6</sup> As Joel Krueger argues, “[...] technological augmentations of mind, body and self are not simply exotic possibilities in the distant future. Rather, these augmentations are already a central part of our everyday lives” (174). Resultantly, the in-phenomenal “[...] *experience* of augmenting and extending our embodied and cognitive capacities in various ways” is a significant undertaking of televisual SF texts such as *Doctor Who*. The Davies era of *Doctor Who* in particular has adapted “[...] itself to the very different cultural and televisual environments of the twenty-first century” since the programme’s revival (Leach 93). This period of the show is therefore a particular object of study for this enquiry, since it not only depicts the mundanity of viewers’ technologized lifeworlds, but in addition, is itself a component of them. The paper, therefore, proceeds to read a number of episodes from the Davies era as technocultural productions that are both symptomatic, and revealing, of the mundane essence of (post)human everyday life.

Suvin characterises SF as “[...] a symbolic system centred on a novum which is to be cognitively validated within the narrative reality of the tale” (Suvin 80); he proposes that nova are typically futuristic technologies, species, or cultures (64). Likewise, he claims that genres like SF deploy nova in order to engender “[...] a formal inversion of significant and salient aspects of the author’s “empirical environment” (236), which can only be achieved via depictions of “genuine newness” (217).<sup>7</sup> Suvin’s conceptualisation of the SF genre, however, tends towards teleological determinism by presuming that the novum or nova of a SF text alone facilitate its rhetorical capacity. Conversely, *Doctor Who* solicits the viewer’s mundane lifeworld, and hence retools it as a dissimilar means of accessing that same cognitive territory of posthuman possibility. The emphasis upon nova alone within the Suvinian paradigm therefore fails to accurately describe *Doctor Who*’s SFnal schema, as the (post)human everyday lifeworld comprises a crucial constituent of the show’s rhetorical discourse.

In the first four series of the revived *Doctor Who*, the diegetic world of the show is heavily predicated upon the (post)human everyday lifeworld. The ninth episode of first series “The Empty Child” (2005), for instance, explicitly states that in between their intergalactic

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<sup>6</sup>It lies beyond the scope of this paper to analyse each of the sixty episodes released during Davies’ tenure as showrunner on an individual basis. For a comprehensive academic survey of this period of the show, see Bradshaw et al.

<sup>7</sup>For more on the Suvinian novum, see chapter 4 of Suvin, 1979. For an alternate account of the role which the novum plays in contemporary SF, to that proposed in this paper, see chapter 5.3 of Andolfatto.

escapades Rose and the Doctor have to return to Earth regularly, as they both are of the opinion that the milk they drink onboard the TARDIS “has to come out of a cow” (00:01:43–00:01:44). Although the two of them, have seen Earth engulfed by the sun in the year 5,000,000,000, fought the Gelth with the help of Charles Dickens, and prevented the Slitheen from invading Earth, they must return often to unremarkable periods of Earth’s history in order to stock up on a contemporary means of nourishment which is produced by anthropocentric biopolitical industries. The Doctor’s penchant for cow’s milk therefore seems antiquated—perhaps even conservative—only a decade and-a-half after the episode’s release, in light of the growing popularity of vegan lifestyle practices and discourses. As in this instance, through its enthrallment with the everyday (post)human lifeworld, the Davies’s era of *Doctor Who* recurrently proposes that posthuman life too will be significantly mundane.

The show emphasises that technological progress is always incremental rather than revelatory, and that the future will appear just as mundane to the (post)humans who inhabit its temporality as the technologized present does to ourselves. It does so, in part, by depicting the journeys of the Doctor’s (post)human companions into numerous periods of their own species’ posthuman future, and by dramatising the ways in which the (post)human society of its diegesis is always already significantly posthuman. This is apparent in the manner in which the show’s visual rhetoric frequently reinforces its prominent depiction of the (post)human everyday lifeworld, as in the series one episode one “Rose” (2005). Although the opening shot of the episode—and hence the revived series of *Doctor Who* as a whole—at first depicts Earth from space, it quickly pans in to a close-up shot of Rose’s digital alarm clock, which promptly sounds. Besides foreshadowing the fact that the collective narrative of series one is exclusively set either on Earth, or in orbit of it, this shot emphasises that the (post)human everyday lifeworld is the essential bedrock of the series. This shot is followed by numerous shots of traffic moving through the streets of central London. These subsequent shots function to establish the episode’s setting, but do not appear to enclose any SFnal content whatsoever. Rather, the centralising novum of the episode’s SFnal premise—the Autons—are altogether visually indistinguishable from its mundane *mise-en-scène* at first. Rose is entirely habitualised to working with mannequins through her job at a department store, and so enters a basement room filled with largely indistinguishable Autons without giving them a second glance. Even after the Autons have become animate and attacked her, she hypothesises that they must be “students” pulling a prank (00:05:59–00:06:00). At this point her initial, habitualised, perception of reality has failed to rationalise the events in the storeroom, and so

Rose cognitively comes to terms with the SFnal event she has witnessed via a different interpretation of it—an interpretation which likewise presumes that it was an entirely mundane phenomenon. However, after the Doctor disabuses her of this hastily formed assumption, Rose’s habitual perception of reality is shattered. When she emerges wide-eyed from the basement back onto the streets of London, she has become dehabituated to the contemporary world following the novelty of encountering an alien species, and is subsequently almost run over by a taxi after walking out into the road. The taxi comes just as close to killing her as the Autons did; therefore, the banal threat of a road accident temporarily subsumes the existential threat of the Autons within the episode’s rhetorical sphere. Likewise, when her alarm clock sounds next, the shot in which it does so ostensibly appears to be an exact recreation of the shot in which it sounded the previous morning. She turns it off automatically, only for her mother to remind her that there is no sense in her getting up, as she has “no job to go to” (00:09:55–00:09:57) after the Doctor exploded the department store at which she worked, in order to destroy a number of Autons.

At this early stage, the SFnal nova of the show’s narrative exert a profound impact upon Rose’s life, but over the course of her travels with the Doctor throughout the following series, her everyday life gradually becomes increasingly SFnal itself. Consequentially, the nova she encounters become familiar to her, and her twenty-first century life on Earth phenomenologically becomes unfamiliar to her. A few episodes later, she becomes so inured to existence aboard the TARDIS that she is able to explain to her boyfriend Mickey that the reason pedestrians do not notice the time machine is due to its “cloaking device” (“Boom Town,” series 1, episode 11, 00:05:28–00:05:28). She is no longer remotely attuned to the mundane existence Mickey continues to live on a daily basis, however, and is consequently surprised when he tells her that he is now dating “Trisha from the shop” (00:28:40–00:28:42). Rose is specifically surprised to be reminded that the mundane lives of (post)humans in her contemporary world have continued unabated in her absence.

Rose’s experiences are the precursors to the alteration of the mundane lives of her entire species within the show’s diegetic world. The Davies era of *Doctor Who* ostensibly begins at a point at which the (post)human species makes first contact with aliens, and in subsequent episodes, set in the contemporary world of the intended viewer, continues to document our species’ subsequent encounters with aliens, along with detailing the related effects that such nova have on (post)human daily life. The extent to which the contact with aliens has changed the (post)human people of the show’s contemporary Earth is

particularly evident in the third series' twelfth episode "The Sound of Drums" (2007). At this point, the (post)humans of the show's diegetic world are habitualised to interacting with "all those ghosts and metal men, the Christmas Star" and similar alien species and technologies ("The Sound of Drums," 00:13:07–00:13:12). As they become familiar with alien contact, they are susceptible to the Master tricking them into believing that the fictitious Toclafane have made contact, and wish to offer their species a "place in the universe" ( 00:14:05–00:14:07). Notably, Martha's sister Tish nonetheless refers to making contact with the 'Toclafane' as "first contact" ( 00:16:19–00:16:19) in a subsequent scene of the episode. Presumably to her, previous instances of first contact now seem mundane in contrast with the upcoming inter-species negotiation that ostensibly promises (post)humanity access to technologies with which interplanetary travel could be facilitated. Despite this opportunity to explore the cosmos soon being thwarted, the (post)humans of the show are shown to be already beginning to develop advanced technologies by retro-engineering alien ones left behind by invasion forces. They do so in response to the threat posed by the recurrent alien invasions depicted throughout the narratives of the Davies era. The airborne aircraft carrier *Valiant* that is depicted for the first time within "The Sound of Drums," for instance, is a novum capable of atmospheric flight, and so exceeds the technological horizons of the contemporary reader's own (post)human society.

The Davies era of *Doctor Who* also regularly depicts the everyday lifeworlds of societies that are far more alien, as it does in the third episode of third series "Gridlock" (2007). Nonetheless, after the TARDIS lands in New New York—which is actually the fifteenth 'New' York to be built—Martha's initial assessment of the city is that it "[...] looks like the same old Earth to me, on a Wednesday afternoon" (00:03:40–00:03:44). This instance slyly provides a meta comment on the series' budget-circumscribed SF aesthetic, but also demonstrates the alacrity of Martha's (post)human mind at assimilating nova. The episode's subsequent SFnal premise centres upon the city's circular motorway, which is overpopulated by flying cars to the extent that it now takes six years to travel ten miles. As the character Thomas Kincaid Brannigan tells the Doctor, he has been able to drive "twenty yards" means that he's "having a good day" ("Gridlock" 00:11:41–00:11:43). Through his everyday existence it is revealed that almost the entire population of New New York is living their lives without leaving their cars, trapped within the traffic jam on the motorway. Any progress they make on the motorway is necessarily recursive, however, given that it is circular, and all its exits have been quarantined.



“Gridlock’s” central novum has the estranging quality that is characteristic of SF, yet it takes its speculative premise from extrapolating the (post)human social concern of overcongestion; therefore, its novelty is also directly cognisant to its (post)human reader. The novel qualities of the traffic jam have largely faded by the midpoint of the episode, and the Doctor takes a journey down through the cars on lower layers to reach the fast lane at the bottom of the queue. With each subsequent car he enters, his interaction with its residents takes up a shorter proportion of the episode’s narrative. Hence, with each subsequent car he enters, the episode’s plot is further elided. The assumption guiding the production decision here operates on the presumption that the viewer’s mind must be guided towards further nova within the text for it to continue to comprise cognitively engaging SF.

Nova, such as the airborne cars of “Gridlock,” undergo novum decay intratextually, by becoming phenomenologically familiar to viewers. As David Roden emphasises, “we do not know what it would be like to encounter or *be* posthuman” (124), and hence the tendency of nova to fade in the imaginative potency within the narratives of *Doctor Who* gestures towards the show’s non-linear and hence non-eschatological figuration of technological development. Consequently, as the mechanism of cognitive engagement portends, Davies’s *Doctor Who* does not depict a plethora of nova in order to suggest that “the destiny of humanity is [...]” to be found in our technologies (Suvin 13). Rather, it depicts such nova as a statement upon the entirely mundane fundament of our technologized existences as (post)humans. Hence, the show critiques the technocentrism of contemporary societies, by demonstrating that posthuman existence will appear just as mundane to us as our present daily lives do.

The episode seven of third series “42” (2007) provokes another conspicuous dramatisation of the co-constitutive relation between the (post)human present and posthuman future. It formulates this posthuman drive by overtly rendering the dialectical tension between the SFnal elements of its narrative and Martha’s relationship with her mother, who remains “half a universe away” back on Earth (00:04:08–00:04:09). At the beginning of the episode, the Doctor upgrades Martha’s mobile phone to give it “universal roaming” (00:00:10–00:00:10), a privilege he had also previously granted to Rose. Nevertheless, he makes it clear that she will still need to “know the area code” (00:00:22–00:00:23) in order to call any specific planet—the upgrade is evidently not enough of a technological advancement to save her the mundane task of having to remember to prefix Earth phone numbers before she makes a call. Therefore, each time she wishes to call anyone on Earth she now has to enter an additional set

of digits. In technological terms, this upgrade is a downgrade with regard to practical usability from Martha's perspective, tempering the newfound functionality of her phone to call other planets with a decidedly mundane carryover.

In the same episode, it also becomes apparent that a series of twenty-nine identical security doors sealed with different passwords stand between the crew of the *SS Pentallian* and its auxiliary controls. By the time Martha reaches area seventeen, however, the episode's narrative has depicted only three of the twelve verification questions which have elapsed within the plot. Since there are more interesting novelties playing out onboard the ship at the same point during which Martha and Riley are progressing systematically through the series of doors, the narrative depicts the other events instead. Their further progress is therefore elided, once it has been established that their endeavours are repetitive enough to scarcely merit being detailed within the programme's narrative any further. In order to open one of the security doors, Martha must use her newly upgraded mobile phone to call her mother back on Earth. She does so in order to ascertain whether it was Elvis Presley or the Beatles "who had the most pre-download" number one singles (00:09:39–00:09:40). This scene not only implies that the survival of the crew of the *SS Pentallian* depends on a mundane fact from Martha's (post)human life in modernity—and thus there is a direct causal relationship between the (post)human past/present and the posthuman future—but also employs the interchange between Martha and her mother to comically undercut the dramatic tension of the SFnal scene. The phrasing of this security question additionally implies that the advent of the Internet continues to comprise a historically significant threshold of (post)human progress in the forty-second century.

In E. M. Forster's short story, "The Machine Stops," in which the concept of the internet originates, characters using it already refer to it as "the wearisome Machine" (92). Therefore, in direct contrast to its momentous importance in the narrative of "42," prior to it being a tangible technology, the fictional progenitor of the internet was already a SFnal novum rendered in mundane terms. As this suggests, the proliferation of the notion of the Internet into (post)human life is rhizomatic and, likewise, the processes by which technologies are created and disseminated are rarely linear. As Roden stresses, although "the human population is now part of a complex technical system whose long-run qualitative development is out of the hands of the humans within it," our species is inclined to quickly transition from regarding discrete technologies as novel to regarding them instead simply as cultural wallpaper (Roden 165).

Martha's survival depends on her ability to convince Francine to research the answer to the Elvis/Beatles question online, yet her mum is principally annoyed that Martha hasn't been answering her phone calls or replying to her messages. Even when Francine does sit down at her laptop in her mundane white-walled living room to attempt to find the answer, she is delayed by the fact that "the mouse is unplugged" ("42" 00:11:15–00:11:15). The ludicrous contrast between their respective situations functions to put Martha's plight in proper perspective, and makes the strange happenings onboard the *SS Pentallian* cognitively resonant. As Francesca Ferrando states, since "most human societies have increasingly adopted daily habits of living that are leading to a point of non-return in ecological and sustainable terms," the everyday lifeworld must accordingly be recognised as an essential site through which (post)human agency is manifested (104). If we are to become posthuman, Ferrando suggests, the damaging environmental consequences of our everyday lifeworlds upon the planet we inhabit must be understood. This objective, the paper suggests, is achieved by viewers' cognitive engagement with the manifest depiction of their everyday lifeworld within the Davies era of *Doctor Who*.

After the correct answer—Elvis—has been used to open the security door, Francine demands "a serious talk" ("42" 00:12:44–00:12:46) with her daughter, only for her demand to be drowned out by a nearby crew member's scream as another crew member vaporises her endothermically. Although the present and the text's future are engaged in a ludic interplay which emphasises the posthuman potential of our species, the two timeframes of "42" are different to such an extent that they can scarcely coexist in dialogue with each other. When she and Riley are on the verge of falling into the Torajii sun, Martha calls Francine once more, this time desperate to talk about anything other than her own impending demise, such as "what [her Mum] had for breakfast, what [she] watched on telly" ("42" 00:28:27–00:28:31). Martha can gain comfort through this act, but the act of calling her mother cannot prevent or even delay her impending incineration. Martha's mobile phone thus figures within the schema of "42" as a modern (post)human apparatus that is not only an intermediary means of advancing towards a broadly defined posthuman state, but also an apparatus which will be redundant, even laughably anachronistic, in such a setting. Hence, in this instance, the yawning technological lacuna between the two timeframes of the episode—in one, a (post)human struggles to operate a laptop and in the other an utterly routine interstellar travel—symbolically demonstrates that our (post)human societies are far from being truly posthuman.

Later in series three, the episode “Blink” (2007) once again employs the (post)human mundane lifeworld as a central aspect of its SF narrative. While the vast majority of alien species in *Doctor Who* are designed along aesthetic lines which deviate from the visual rhetoric of the viewer’s everyday life, the Weeping Angels introduced by the episode are visually indistinguishable from statues. Indeed, as the episode’s coda emphasises—through its rapid montage of shots of numerous real-life statues—humanoid statues are near ubiquitous in modern societies, and it is precisely the uncanny figure of the (post)human everyday lifeworld which haunts “Blink.” As Erik Davis contends, our everyday lives are predicated upon the basis of ingenious technologies which, for instance, “[...] use the electromagnetic dimensions for heating up Pop-Tarts and transmitting golf tournaments” (40), despite the fact that the scientific and mechanical basis of these technologies remains alien to the vast majority of us. “Blink” is considered by many fans and critics to be one of the scariest episodes of *Doctor Who* (Jones; Raisler et al.) because its near-invincible antagonists uncannily play on the notion that the unexamined aspects of the technologized lives we all live daily, yet take for granted, might in fact harbour secret meaning—and perhaps even embody danger. When she first glimpses a Weeping Angel in an abandoned house, the episode’s prime protagonist, Sally Sparrow, has no idea whatsoever that she is looking at a creature almost “as old as the universe” (00:31:39–00:31:40). She is likewise entirely unaware that it is genetically coded to remain quantum-locked when viewed by any living creature and, hence, although it ostensibly appears to be an utterly inanimate humanoid effigy made of rock, it is actually one of the fastest and deadliest creatures in the universe. By evoking the arcane aspect of the Turing Paradox<sup>8</sup> in explicit relation to the manner by which the Weeping Angels’ statuesque state is simultaneously unknowable and unobservable to (post)humans, their tendency to become quantum-locked whenever observed can be seen to emblematises the impenetrability of our species’ scientific advances. In a similar vein, by underlining “[...] the dependence of subjectivity on [the] iterating technical infrastructure” of everyday life, Roden emphasises that the technologies we use on a daily basis fundamentally—yet unpredictably—alters the mental disposition of our species (189). The gnostic quality of the Weeping Angels is, therefore, symptomatic of the ubiquity of scientifically and technologically mediated products within contemporary (post)human societies, expressing a trepidation at our reliance upon such products given their cognitive impenetrability.

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<sup>8</sup>[For a succinct definition, see Harris](#) and [Stodolsky](#), 1982.

When Sally later returns to the house, and remarks that the episode's premise is a "bit ITV" ("Blink" 00:04:53–00:04:54), she remains convinced that the Weeping Angel is nothing more than a statue. This assumption structures her thought processes to the extent that she is initially unable to parse the visual evidence that "It's got closer to the house" in the intervening time (00:05:40–00:05:42). Specifically, Weeping Angels prey on the tendency of our species to become habituated to seemingly motionless objects. Their mode of offense, thus, exploits the extent to which millions of years of evolution have conditioned the action of blinking to be such a habitual act that we are scarcely able to prevent ourselves from doing it impulsively, even when we consciously try to take control of the semi-autonomic reflex. Weeping Angels remain quantum-locked when within another creature's visual field. Therefore, Sally and Larry's best defence against them is to hold visual contact with them and refrain from blinking for as long as physically possible. This, they soon realise, is a task which is far easier said than done. In multiple instances, a character is left alone face to face with a Weeping Angel and must make a concerted effort to maintain eye contact with it by not blinking—in a way that they are not touched by it and transported backwards in time as a result of it feeding off their temporal energy. In each of these sequences, the camera slowly pans forward into a close-up shot of the character's eye as they face a statue exhibiting teeth and claws significantly larger and sharper than they had previously seemed.

The phenomenological aspect of novelty in everyday (post)human life is also emphasised in the episode "Partners in Crime" (2008), which opens series four. At its outset, Donna Noble and the Doctor separately infiltrate the headquarters of Adipose Industries, both doing so under the guise of being health and safety inspectors. They both interview workers at the company's call centre and separately discover that it is in fact the front for an alien breeding scheme which mines the body fat of (post)humans—not through any palpably defamiliarising alien technology—but rather through a new variety of diet pills.<sup>9</sup> Those taking the diet pills inexplicably lose one kilogram of their body weight at precisely "ten minutes past one, every night, bang on the dot without fail" ("Partners in Crime" 00:06:18–00:06:22). Unbeknownst to its users, the pill causes the parthenogenesis of their body fat at this time in the morning, generating a live Adipose from it. Although (and perhaps precisely because) they do not understand exactly how it operates, most of the pill's users have already accepted the

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<sup>9</sup>Medicines are a pertinent example of a technology which the majority of (post)humans interact with, yet which few cognitively comprehend the full scientific basis of.

imposition of this strange technology into their sociocultural lifeworld. To the (post)humans of the episode's diegetic world, the diet pills are now just another 'thing' within lives already saturated with 'things.' Along the same line of thought, Donna herself has decided that the spaceship Titanic, which nearly crashed into Buckingham Palace during the earlier episode "Voyage of the Damned" (2007), was simply "a hoax" ("Partners in Crime" 00:25:24–00:25:24). She accordingly only comes to understand the alien nature of the pill inadvertently, after using the toilet room where another character happens to be undergoing full bodily parthenogenesis. Later, when Donna arrives home, her mother berates her for having missed tea-time, remaining entirely unaware of the alien events her daughter has witnessed. The diet pills and the Adipose are therefore symptomatic of the hegemonic predominance of fatphobic ideologies in contemporary Western societies. The episode patently science-fictionalises the ubiquity of such currents of thought and, by doing so, reveals the extent to which fatphobic ideologies comprise a banal yet pervasive form of biopolitical control.

"Partners in Crime" additionally makes it apparent that Donna no longer feels that she belongs on Earth since the SFnal events of the episode, "The Runaway Bride" (2006), and, at the beginning of the episode, she is consumed with the prospect of finding the Doctor again, in order to be able to journey through time and space with him once more. She states that she "[...] woke up the next morning [to the] same old life" ("Partners in Crime" 00:33:24–00:33:26), and struggled to deal with its absolute normality since her phenomenological perspective had been altered so radically. For her, contemporary life has become too mundane in contrast with all the strange 'things' that she witnessed during the process of suppressing the Racnoss invasion. The next day, she and the Doctor continue their parallel investigations into Adipose Industries. In order to be able to stay in the building overnight whilst remaining undiscovered, Donna hides in a toilet cubicle, and the Doctor hides in a broom cupboard. After the humanoid alien, Matron Cofelia, discovers them, they attempt to flee in a cradle—which would usually be employed to clean the windows of the office block—but their escape is thwarted by Cofelia's sonic pen. Thus, as the episode progresses, the ostensibly pedestrian office block and its associated paraphernalia become defamiliarised by playing host to numerous SFnal set pieces, to the extent that eventually the office block is a SFnal setting in all but aesthetic.

In the Doctor-lite series four episode "Turn Left" (2008), Donna is possessed by a Time Beetle after meeting an enigmatic fortune teller and is forced to relive a pivotal decision in her own timestream. This pivotal choice is the moment at which she chose to turn left in-

stead of right at a road junction and consequently got a temp job at H.C. Clements, met and fell in love with Lance Bennett and in turn met the Doctor in “The Runaway Bride.” The first iteration of this pivotal, yet ostensibly utterly picayune, decision is rapidly followed in quick succession within the episode’s narrative by its second iteration in which Donna is forced to make the opposite decision and consequently turns right instead. By its conceit—that as a direct consequence of this alternate everyday decision Donna never met the Doctor—the episode proceeds to formulate an alternative history of the revised series of *Doctor Who*’s own established canon.

Since Donna never met the Doctor in this new chronology, she is not there to save him from his hubris at the centre of the Earth during “The Runaway Bride,” and he subsequently dies after preventing the Racnoss invasion, without getting a chance to regenerate. Donna thereafter relives many of the subsequent alien invasions of the Davies era within the new timeline the Time Beetle has created—a timeline in which the Doctor is no longer alive to intervene on behalf of the interests of Earth’s (post)human population. Therefore, when the Judoon teleport the Royal Hope Hospital onto the moon in “Smith and Jones” (2007), there is only one human survivor of what has become a tragedy, and Martha is among the dead. Donna watches coverage of the extraterrestrial occurrence on the news with her mother, Sylvia, and her grandfather, Wilf. Donna and Sylvia, however, are far too cognitively absorbed by the mundane aspects of their lives to expend any attention whatsoever upon the momentous events unfolding on the television screen. In despair, Wilf remarks, “they took that hospital all the way to the moon, and you’re banging on about raffle tickets!” (“Turn Left” 00:12:52–00:12:56). Although the lottery is a weekly occurrence, and the Judoon’s transformation of the hospital is a unique phenomenon, such a novel event has only momentarily interrupted the routine mundanity of Sylvia and Donna’s lives.

In a meta comment on the Davies era’s recursive penchant for alien invasions of Earth in Christmas episodes, Rose advises Donna to “get out” of London the following Christmas (“Turn Left” 00:15:23–00:15:23). She does, and thus survives the nuclear holocaust visited upon London by the collision of the spaceship Titanic with Buckingham Palace. The Adipose devastate America. The Sontarans’ ATMOS stratagem is narrowly thwarted, but only by the Torchwood team sacrificing their lives to save (post)humanity. Subsequently, all the lights of the surrounding galaxies begin blinking out—without the Doctor’s intervention, the sentient populations of their planets are just as condemned to extinction as (post)humanity itself. As “Turn Left” therefore emphasises, Donna’s decision to turn either left or right out of Lit-

tle Sutton Street becomes truly momentous, and she must now return to “the most ordinary day in the world” (00:37:55–00:37:57), in order to change the momentary decision she made.

In the third narrated iteration of her decision, Donna rewrites her altered past by committing suicide and causing a traffic jam on the road leading to Griffin’s Parade, so that her past self turns left to avoid the traffic, and eventually meets the Doctor once more. The multiple iterations of Donna’s turn left/turn right decision are therefore central to the episode’s SFnal premise—despite their everyday character—and counterpoint the episode’s revisitation of the alien invasions of Earth by alien species in earlier episodes. By taking a recursive journey through the Davies’s era of *Doctor Who*’s established canon, “Turn Left” ultimately affirms that although he may need to be assisted by a (post)human companion, the Doctor is the predominant constituent of the show’s canon which is responsible for the continued existence of (post)humanity.

As becomes clear by the copious number of alien invasions of Earth—and of London in particular—during the Russell T. Davies’s era of *Doctor Who*, this period of the show challenges human exceptionalist ideologies by rhetorically positing that a superior alien must repeatedly intervene in (post)human affairs in order to ensure our survival. The show which bears his namesake contends that without the Doctor, we would have been annihilated numerous times, and emphasises that his continued heroism is entirely unmatched by any value exhibited by our own actions. It delegitimises teleological humanistic narratives of progress which presume that we are the authors of our own destiny. If, “the story of technological progress continues to hold such power [because] it literalizes a quest myth we can no longer take seriously in ourselves” (Davis 325), then by evoking the (post)human viewer’s everyday lifeworld in a manner which subverts the linear narrative of technological progress, this period of *Doctor Who* demonstrates that the (post)human present and posthuman future are sharply co-constitutive. By refuting the “notion of a one-dimensional becoming” in this manner, the show simultaneously implies that the very indeterminacy of our species’ future comprises a distinct prospect for the materialisation of (post)human agency (Ferrando 181).

As this paper demonstrates, the Davies era of *Doctor Who* utilises the mechanism of cognitive engagement to produce its SFnal discourse. Via the phenomenological means by which it operates rhetorically, the show comprises a critique of technocentric ideologies by affirming that posthuman life will be just as mundane as our daily (post)human lives are. As such, the importance of novum decay to the



show's SFnal discourse suggests that the Suvinian paradigm must be further challenged by Critical Posthumanist scholars of SF.



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# Spoken Word Videos and the Automodern Femme: Subversive Agency and Technologizing of Safe Spaces

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## Abstract

The emergence of digital media and the world-wide-web altered the texture of agency, and digitally-mediated performance poetry like the spoken word became pivots to women agency. But how do pre-programmed technologies like new media—as social forces—permit human autonomy without hedging it? What concessions are made or limits excised when women wrestle repression through automated units? To what extent do women exercise agency through technologized forms like spoken word, considering the inherent contradiction? Engaging these questions, this paper argues that the paradox is resolved in the automodern femme, a female who is automation-/technology-reliant yet autonomous. Formulating its theoretical base within feminist thought in combination with Robert Samuels's automodernity, and using selected works of Eva Alordiah, the study reflects on how spoken word provides safe avenues to thread female experiences. It identifies new media's automated infrastructures as exploitable tools against repression. Tropes of self-retrieval, self-imaging, and self-therapy in the selected performances challenging notions of what is permissible and taboo for the woman are engaged. The paper also explores how female autonomy is achievable and enhanced via new-media's automation by isolating technologies of performance and performative techniques that aid creation of safe spaces for agentive and therapeutic purposes.

**Keywords:** *Spoken Word Videos, Automodern Femme, Performance poetry, New-Media, Automodernity, Technology, Robert Samuels, Eva Alordiah*

In an age where technology persistently conditions humanity, redefining the limits of human subjectivity or what it means to be human, perform humanness, and co-exist with mechanized social forces, the idea of an 'automodern femme' is not fantastic. The paper addresses the texture of female agency through oral performance in a modern digital age. Does technology shape women's performance of individuality, particularly through new media? To what extent does digital-reliant performance poetry like the spoken word allow women to establish agency? What concessions are made, paradox created, or boundaries

erased when women seek to wrestle repression through (pre)programmed technologies? Ruminating these questions, the paper explores the idea of the ‘automodern femme’ as a female whose sense of autonomy is heightened by her transactions with technologies and who achieves agency through algorithmic and pre-programmed digital media. This allows for establishing a convergent zone between directions in media studies, postcolonial feminist theorizing, and key positions in oral literary studies. In addition, foregrounding the idea of the automodern femme as the female digital subject whose agency is ‘uncaptured’ through her interaction with new media, and who relies on technology generally to perform individuality and engage female experiences, expounds on the idea of automodernity. It projects oral performances such as spoken word<sup>1</sup> as organic systems defined by inherent contradictions and composite interactions between technology as an automated force and the human as an autonomous unit. In exploring automodernity’s relationship with spoken word, the paper expounds on the relevance of the concept beyond its current emphasis on human uses of technologies like “automobiles, personal computers, word processors, iPods, and computer games” (Samuels *New Media* 15) by applying it as a paradigm to study the performance of self through new media-generated poetry and the use of technologies by performance poets as apparatuses of engaging with the self.

New media studies like Samuels and Baya (2013) have theorized on the idea of the automodernity as an age of unusual concessions and paradoxical collusions between machine automation and human autonomy and as a theoretical concept capable of unpacking these contradictions. These contradictions characterize much of contemporary cultural history. Exploring female spoken word performances as avenues of technologizing safe spaces, cyber-therapy, and exhibiting subversive agency—that is, empowering the woman through technology—helps to locate the place of performance poetry and emphasize oral literature’s relevance within this cultural history, implicating spoken word as manifesting this crucial paradox. To drive home its arguments, the paper centers between a more generic viewpoint on spoken word as automodern and using the Eva Alordiah ex-

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<sup>1</sup>In this study, reference will be made to ‘spoken word’ as the broader form/genre with several performative realizations and sub-types like spoken word CDs, audio tapes, stage performances, etc. Spoken word video is a sub-form and is used to designate spoken word in audio-visual format. Spoken word texts as specialized poetry are performances; hence, with the study’s focus on oral performance, the term spoken word performance is used where performance is emphasized. Also, spoken word poetry and spoken word are used interchangeably, since spoken word is inherently poetic.

ample, that is performing a close-reading of three of her spoken word performances.

In refuting universal truths, modernist positions or its regnant logic, the postmodernist philosophy births aporetic conditions where complications flourish, fracturing reality into irreconcilable bits. However, in the process of grappling with the consequent ruptures, we are paradoxically returned to a dualist reality that Abdul Janmohamed affirms as a Manichean<sup>2</sup> metaphor of binary oppositions, albeit a veiled one (4). Set binaries like good and evil, modernity and primordiality, self and other, subject and object, nature and culture, machine and human return as foundational structures securing composite realities that ultimately fail to rest those familiar stereotypes, incidentally priming arenas for the transgression of overt boundaries. Past historical structures are never simply eradicated, Robert Samuels claims, a position in consonance with the foregoing given that “older models of culture and subjectivity are constantly being retained and remediated by newer models...[and] modernity helps us to see how the undermining of traditional foundations often results in a call to return to these discredited formations” (*New Media* 35–36). In validating Samuels’ proposition, new media proves an instructive apotheosis. The proliferation of new media compels curious concessions and unities in the pursuit of representation and control. Netizens, a demographic comprised mostly of iGens and Millennials, then Gen X and Baby Boomers, utilize technology as an integral part of the circadian experience in fermenting individuated truths. The number of internet users worldwide from the global digital report as of 2019 peaked at 4.388 billion, social media users at 3.484 billion, and mobile phone users at 5.112 billion; this is 57%, 45%, and 67% of the world’s over 7.7 billion population respectively (Kemps).

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<sup>2</sup>Manichean, as used here, is anchored in the philosophy of dualism, borrowing from Janmohamed’s recognition of a binary configuration to postcolonial (African) reality (in literature, social-history, culture, and politics). It also follows in the logic of Frantz Fanon’s reference to the colonial world in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as a Manichean world defined by binary splits, particularly to the extent that colonialism (its machineries and structures) is a footnote to postcolonial reality. Both Janmohammed and Fanon admit to a bifurcated representation of life within the postcolonial imaginary, either in response to colonialism or rejection of the driving philosophies of colonialism. This term is used here to brand present-day modern reality as pillared by such bifurcations, especially since modernity (as it is presently), European modernity (its industrial revolution), colonialism, and postcolonial realities are all diachronically related and since postcolonial reality, with its colonial trappings, is essentially a modern one. Adopted and adapted to signify beyond its (post)colonial inflections, the term references the fundamental dualistic schisms inherent in life/modernity as a product of historically configured negotiations occasioned by European colonialism and carried over to or transparent in postcolonial spaces as sites of modernity.

This demographic relies on the smart phone, computer technologies, or the internet to exercise selfhood, privatize experience, or communicate, bringing to the performance of self-sufficiency a reliance on automated technology and digitized participatory networks. Such ‘universal’ acts are exhibits of the unification of conflicting forces: machine automation and individual autonomy, private and public realms, self and other, machine and human. On the surface, the algorithms, mechanizations, and programming that permit automaticity, through which technologies function in predetermined ways, challenge human self-control. Maintaining human sovereignty from technology’s predetermined imperatives therefore requires preserving the human-machine split. However, this is hardly convenient in the digital age where technology blurs distinctions between producer and consumer of media/culture, and aids the personalization of technology and culture (Samuels *New Media* 33). The impracticality of divorcing the human from the machine, the private from the impersonal, and the self from the other demonstrates the superficiality of these binaries—even though these binaries secure personal truths, ultimately fostering deep contradictions.

New media compels the ‘techno-aestheticization’ of cultural phenomena. Oral performance and poetry in the digital age experience momentous redefinitions via electronic digital imaging technology that has expanded the limitations of physical performance (de Hass 1). Accessibility to previously exclusive media like video and electronic technology democratizes performances (Meigh-Andrews 3), as internet technology fosters the recording, transmission, and reception of these performances. The intersection of technological progress and cultural evolution is bound to galvanize creative reinvention of extant folkloric forms. Apropos oral performance an effective admixture is the spoken word (hereafter SW) which harnesses the infrastructures of new media/digital technology in remediating poetry performance. Spoken word, used synonymously with spoken word poetry (hereafter SWP), is a contemporary poetic form that fuses old media such as live and stage performances and the technology of print culture with those of new media like social media applications, internet, digital media, and computer technologies to register its artistry. As oral performance, it is characterized by distinctive verbal poetics, oratorical strategies, gestural and tonal inflections, kinesis, and audience engagement; it is also replete with sound metaphors and imageries, affecting subjects and other textures of performance identified by scholars of African orality and performance.<sup>3</sup> Its contemporariness styles its reliance on

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<sup>3</sup>For detailed explanation, see Beidelman and Finnegan (141), Akporobaro (3–4), Okpewho (6), Sekoni (141–142); and Finnegan’s *Oral literature in Africa*.

digital and mobile technologies for its performativity, re-emphasizing a quality Samuels describes as the “synchronic layering of new media on old media” (*New Media* 3). Spoken word facilitates paradoxical reconciliations: its video realization (as videopoetry) technologically juxtaposes the visual (text, images, and the corporal), the verbal, and the audible (aural or sonic)—previously mutually resistive and independent poetic mediums—for the production of a different form of poetic experience where, as Tom Konyves posits, there is a perceptible but unique synthesis (4). Furthermore, it presents technological automation as an effective fulcrum for performers questing for representation. In dismantling fixed divisions, reconciling contradictory forces, revising and re-adopting existing media, and synchronizing multiple modes of media production for maximum agency, spoken word obviates the logic sustaining the Manichean reality.

The paper focuses on the texture of female agency through oral performance in a modern digital age by exploring how spoken word as digital poetic performance facilitates femme agency and how the unique symbiosis of automated technologies and human autonomy in spoken word videos (hereafter SWV) engender the construction of safe sites for representation and agency. In addressing the interconnections of poetry performance and digital technologies, the study accentuates the profile of the automodern femme as technology-reliant but equally autonomous female digital subject resolving paradoxes and enabling unusual concessions. To do this, it interrogates how predetermined technological facilities facilitate the technologization of safe spaces for engaging female issues, subversive performance, and agentive representation. Also, it examines how technologies, as social forces and pre-programmed units, shape human performance of individuality, indicating a resolve of the aforementioned contradictions and polarities. The paper proffers modes of realizing individuality and rescuing the self from oppression through programmed technologies with the help of arguments that establish parallels between automodernity, spoken word, and the automodern femme, and that map aestheticization of oral performance through technology in spoken word, and construct safe spaces for females, as such Alordiah’s example, to substantiate its position. The combination of oppositional forces in the performances, the automodern leanings in SW, and the idea of an automodern female are engaged with the intent of emphasizing the contradictions contouring the contemporary cultural period, and that SWV synthesizes these paradoxes to advance self-preservation.

Automated infrastructures of mobile and digital technologies persistently shape contemporary reality as the human species advances through/with technological progress. Peter-Paul Verbeek’s hermeneu-



tical and practical mediations, instructing on technology's influences on perception and actions, respectively, buttress this point<sup>4</sup>: digital technologies shape patterns of interaction while also redefining human conception of space. Beyond this though is a level of co-dependence: the extent to which programmable devices occasion accessibility to resources, condition subjectivity, or rethread sociality confirms this human-machine interrelatedness. On the one hand, algorithmic processes rely on human aptitude and programming, while on the other hand, technological artifacts as social forces shape subjectivity. However, in assessing this interdependence, pessimistic positions have emphasized a rhetoric of technology's dominance (Giroud 2), construing the digital subject as passive, autonomy or agency as illusory (Dean 2), and technology as commodifying subjectivity (Jekins and Carpentier 2; Dean 3). Pigeon-holing technological infrastructures as predetermined, they question the formation of subjectivity through programmed algorithms thought to secure capitalist agendas or serve state regulation; the resultant automation is tagged as 'capturing' or trapping digital subjects, thus foreclosing individual resistance or rendering them politically passive or disengaged (Giroud 6).

This reaffirms the alarmist rhetoric that technological automation and human independence are irreconcilable, with the former adjudged to hedge the other's autonomy by ensnaring users in communicative loops.<sup>5</sup> Longstanding estimations like these establish mechanical predetermination as antagonistic to individual autonomy (Samuels, "Automodernity" 210), proffering orthodox binaries of social/cultural, public/private, self/other, living/machine as irreconcilably discrete. They also find traction in the future industry's apocalyptic envisioning of lifeworlds overrun by sentient machines. However, in reinforcing these positions, three pertinent things are often glossed over: human-machine intersubjectivity is best valued in performance not (social) roles; technologies and humans are complementary (social) forces; the interactivity of both portends a discrete cultural eon. This cultural period has the markings of automodernity as digital youths turn to automated technologies and virtual publics to assert their individuality and privacy.

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<sup>4</sup>See Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do* for more explanation on this.

<sup>5</sup>Dean and Giroud explain unfulfilled desires as the continued quest for visibility and collectivity, with which capitalist networks 'capture' digital subjects, trapping users in communicative loops under false impressions of sustaining communication through participatory networks.

Automodernity, a term coined/theorized by Robert Samuels,<sup>6</sup> marks a distinctive shift in human cultural history where technological automation and human autonomy are combined for social action. This cultural period is loaded with contradictions, evinced by the collapse of the “[...] modern divide pitting the isolated individual against the impersonal realm” (Samuels, “Automodernity” 219)—a divide that postmodernism, championed by theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard as succeeding modernist cultural aspirations, radically intensifies (84). The fusion of these opposing categories kept distinct by postmodernist theorizing is integral to the character of this automodern age, which Samuels posits is replete with paradoxes and the logical successor of modernity (“Automodernity” 210). The premise of Samuels’ argument is that automodernity advances, and not effaces, modernist aspirations: “While the key ideological processes of modernity are the separations of the individual from the machine, the private from the public, and democracy from capitalism, what we find in automodern convergence culture is a bringing together of these modern oppositions” (*New Media* 31).

So, while the predetermined mechanization of technologies that generate automaticity may, superficially, presuppose the illogicality of autonomy on the part of users, they actually do not compel the forfeiture of personal control, particularly not in the way alarmist rhetoric has espoused. New communication technologies require active participation by humans to be consumed (Samuels, *New Media* 33). This applies to the use of new media technologies in performing the self for virtual social interactivity. Automation bolsters systematic reciprocity in the navigation of individual reality and the resultant exchange of roles, discountenancing the postmodern position on the mediatized passivity of audience or users. Digital technologies endorse mutability of roles in social communication (Barichello and Carvalho 238), maintaining individual unity and agency. A crucial reference here is how researches on new media interaction<sup>7</sup> have moved from mass media’s paralysis of its audience-users via its one-way interactivity to the active user-audiences of new media communication, who can be followers, fans, and buddies at the same time, armed with various

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<sup>6</sup>See for a better understanding of the concept from several perspectives Robert Samuels, *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernism: Automodernity from Zizek to Laclau*.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, John L. Sullivan, *Media Audiences*, (Sage Publications, 2012); Marilyn Cooper, “Postmodern Pedagogy in Electronic Conversations,” in *Passions, Pedagogy, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Technologies*, eds. Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe (Utah State University Press, 1999); Jenny Pickerill, *Cyberprotest: Environmental Activism On-line*, (Manchester University Press, 2003); Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference*, (Duke University Press, 2008).

agendas, political or cultural. Apart from being involved in an organized system of exchange, users are active and engaged; they possess heightened senses of agency and autonomy through involvement in participatory networks.

Presenting automation as hostile to self-sufficiency betrays a failure to separate political and aesthetic aspects of new media consumption (Baya 158), or failure to unsubscribe to postmodern invalidation of any (inherent technological) truth as suspect, identifying virtual subjectivity within algorithm-charged new media as an evidence of consumer-capitalism's commodification of user experiences for the market (Giraud 7). Media studies with postmodern social cynicism often queries the nature and end of virtual participatory communication or the autonomy new media purportedly grants since it feeds information to the capitalist networks in charge of its programming, signaling the location, intention, and participatory networks of the communicants (Dean, *Blog Theory* 24). An evident flaw in this position is that it conflates the capitalist networks' political orientation with the users' in a way reminiscent of old media use, disregarding the subjection of automation to personal use. Unlike old media, new media technologies afford users an increased sense of control, freedom, and choice over the public sphere and what is provided/produced or consumed ("Automodernity" 229; *New Media* 16–17). In the same vein, spoken word performers use new media technologies to achieve control and freedom, a position reinforced by David Yanofsky et al. that spoken word has become a popular tool for youths to unmask and sustain their voice in a world filled with irrelevant clutter (340). This ability to use automated systems to contrive such levels of individuation and individuality is what automodernity champions.

While postmodernism's distrust of technology glosses over the facility of users to utilize unregulated automated social systems (like the internet/YouTube) in fashioning an increased sense of control and power (Samuels, "Automodernity" 226), automodernity provides avenues to create these unregulated automated social systems, fueling the resolution of social and cultural conflicts. It, thus, stands to reason that spoken word performed through digital media constructs worlds where, as Desai asserts, performance can "[...] foster civic engagement, increase critical thinking, provide safe spaces to discuss oppression and a site for transforming...individuals" (8). By doing so, digital automation induces the connection of the private with the public, permitting the recording, observation, commentary, and viewership of personal performances. In its redefinition of interaction, technological automation increases the capacity required to reinforce selfhood, so that pegging automation as opposed to autonomy is simply glossing

over the ironies that human-machine combination creates—which automodernity provides an improved understanding of, compared to other approaches. Automodernity not only stimulates the reconciliation of previously discrete social forces and spaces, resolving longstanding antagonism in the process, but also offers insights to the modes and patterns of compromise prompted by human use of technologies. Its emphasis, for instance, on the publicizing of the private realm and privatization of the public by humans in their use of computer technologies for communicative goals tends toward identifying the ironic collusion of opposing spaces for human self-representation in a digital age. By providing insights to new patterns of communication that involves unusual fusions of previously considered antagonistic forces, automodernity demonstrates itself as an important paradigm toward creating and comprehending a unified reality. Essentially, while post-modernist conceptions continually fracture structures of unified subjectivity, unified science/technology, or objectivism, millennials and their cohorts return to automated technologies to locate individual unity and control, reinforcing these modern universal realities in the process. One such way is through spoken word whose reliance on technology confirms what Samuels asserts as “...the power of new technologies to reinforce the imaginary and real experiences of individual autonomy through automated systems” (226).

In light of the afore-discussed, the profile of the automodern femme as automation-reliant continues to reject postmodern argumentations that discount virtual subjectivity. Automodernity’s spotlight on technological access as heightening a sense of individual self-sufficiency extends into the psycho-technological underpinnings of autonomy (Samuels, “Automodernity” 225). Self-hood is an invention of self-reflection or a corollary of a process of differentiation initiated by the presence of the ‘other,’ reflective or representational (like lenses, mirrors, cameras, or humans)—a theoretical pivot in psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic thought and phenomenology, the concept of the mirror stage offers important insights to the process of self-recognition by subjects, owing to its position that the mirror as a literal object or any symbolic contrivance capable of inducing experiential self-awareness—that is, apperception—is pivotal to the structure of subjectivity or principal to recognizing the self. Initially preoccupied with infant development, the theory, through Jacques Lacan, would be expounded to account for development of human identity and personality by adults.<sup>8</sup> Selfhood in adults is often a corollary of the moment of achieving wholeness, i.e., attaining knowledge of the self. Attaining

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<sup>8</sup>For improved understanding, see Jane Gallop, “Lacan’s ‘Mirror Stage’: Where to Begin,” *Substance* vol. 11/12, 1982, pp. 118–128.

selfhood is usually contingent on the presence of the other as an antipodal entity against which the self can be defined; this other could be the Constitutive other, whose differences from the self as another human constitute an essential cumulative part of a person's self-image or validates the knowledge of the self's realness and, hence, is essential to self-definition. It could also be what Lacan tags the ego as mirror-image,<sup>9</sup> that is, the self's specular image, which helps the fragmented body<sup>9</sup> achieve wholeness through self-recognition of the ego as other-identification. Whichever is the case, both validate the idea that the self is always bound up in the scope of the other, for they propose that self-hood is determined to a large extent by the existence of the other. In a sense, selfhood is anchored in identification via a symbol capable of inducing (ap)perception. Technology in the hands of the automodern subject can be a self-affirming and mirroring object, inducing reflection, identification of the other, or apperception. The camera induces apperceptions, affirms selfhood in the process, and facilitates the procedures of identifying the other—whose presence is implied in the act of recording for others' consumption—serving as a symbolic mirror. As opined by Krishner, the extent to which the self, its feelings and desire, are heard by others determines the psychotherapeutic effects on the self, including self-acceptance, increased freedom in expressing inner desires, and heightened comfort in relating to others (159). On the other hand, utilizing computer technologies for self-affirmation presupposes or manifests an implicit recognition of a present other. Essentially, the image of the performer onscreen is the specular image that proffers a sense of wholeness to the self.

Automodernity's conflation of automation and autonomy mandates a paradoxical collusion—not collision—of the self and the other, as self-autonomy through automation requires a degree of 'othering'—of recognizing the place of the other as integral to the performer's recognition of self. This presupposes the essentiality of the 'constitutive other' in the moment of self-awareness induced by technological interaction. The extent to which digital technology users, like a spoken word performer, achieve self-sufficiency is significantly anchored in the range of the performance/performer's desire to be visible and visi-

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<sup>9</sup>The idea of the fragmented body in psychoanalytic thought proposes that the body is being pulled apart from within, which is exemplified by the various and partial drives, and the fragmentary or incoherent states in an individual. An encounter with the image of the self (the ego as/or the other) assists in unifying these fragmented pieces of the body. This idea is held by Melanie Klein and is linked to Lacanian conception of the symbolic and mirror-image. For more explanation see Jacques-Alain Miller, "Microscopia," in Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment* (London, 1990) and Robert Hinshelwood et al, *Introducing Melanie Klein*, (Cambridge, 2006).

bility to other users. If audience is central to performance (Akporobaro 3; Sekoni 141), recognition and viewership are germane to digital performance, essentializing the dynamics of digitally defined differentiation/contrast. In comparing spoken word performances with conventional poetry recitals, for instance, de Hass reiterates the expansive nature of the former: “In contrast to conventional readings of poetry, during which the audience’s role is mainly that of listeners, spoken word performances feature an ‘immediate, often urgent relationship between the...poet and the audience’” (5). This interactive audience can be physical or virtual, depending on the interactive framework. The real time communicative quality afforded by digital technologies to users allows born-digital spoken word performances<sup>10</sup> to be situated in an immediate communicatory network of virtual performer and audience. For digitized spoken word performances, the audience is extended into the virtual public; while the traditional conception of time is distorted for each performance by the process of digitization, the phenomenon of real-time communication, which allows for instantaneous interaction between digital subjects maintains the audience-performer network. Despite experiencing time differently, owing to the translocation of performance from a physical setting to a virtual one, audiences of digitized performances can interact while engaging with the digitized performance as a new or recurrent experience, without losing the sense of immediacy that comes with each interaction. The fact that performer employs facilities of automation in technologizing the performance for increased impact across senses transforms the spoken word performer from a user to a producer.

A public invite for witnessing private performances and communing privately—even in a virtual public sphere—is initiated and rewarded with audience. Unlike with post-modernist posturing as regards ‘othering,’ this virtual differentiation summons and reassigns power equitably between the distinct parties, provoking a rethinking of the Manichean stereotype of othering. The paradox is even more palpable: the virtual world is the deregulated social public where the private space is constructed. This, like Samuels reiterates, does not imply the substitution of the public realm with the private realm, but rather the privatization of the public and publicizing of the private, which “...echoes the larger political movement to undermine the notion of a modern public realm protected by [regulatory forces]” (*New Media* 17). The public is therefore that required ‘other’ to witness this performance, engage it, and participate in what is a private commune,

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<sup>10</sup>‘Born-digital’ is a category often used to refer to works (text or recordings) that are both created and produced on the digital network. They are produced in digital form rather than converted.

while the regulatory force of the public realm is obviated, expunged, or hidden. In the digital age, boundaries are collapsed as they are maintained, a point Samuels in *New Media* accentuates: “In this radical reworking of the private and public realms, new media serves as both a disruption and a connection between individuals sharing the same social space” (31).

Set against postmodernist socio-cultural philosophies, automodernity, as laid out by Samuels, offers significant insights into these paradoxes and the fusion of contradictory forces shaping agency in the digital age. Virtuality and psychological representations as elements of selfhood are indispensable to the forging of contemporary subjectivity. Where postmodern social commentaries highlight social structures of subjectivity, to the relative neglect of the psychological, automodernity emphasizes the virtual and technological as integrated, negating a generalized undermining of any unified subjectivity. The fusion of advanced mechanical automation with an increased sense of personal autonomy through technologies such as digital recording cameras, mobile devices, computer programs/technologies, electronic sound systems, and the internet reflects the contradictions of the contemporary world: where automation customarily signified loss of control, but now defines augmentation of individual freedom (Samuels “Automodernity” 219). Automodernity, for that reason, accounts for the particularizing reconciliations of these contradictions that are testaments of new (technology-mediated) approaches to social-cultural activity. The automodern femme naturally embodies these paradoxical combinations; through social action and the threading of private experience in the (digital) public, her use of new media technology displays an unusual symbiosis of virtuality and subjectivity, self-independence and external (other) validation in ways that instruct on how new media is being lived and experienced.

The automodern femme, as conceived in light of the aforesaid, is the female digital subject whose individuality and sense of autonomy is ‘un-captured’ and heightened by her transactions with technologies. In scotching social and cultural interference in the performance of self, the automodern femme deploys new media’s mechanized infrastructures. Her aptitude in exploiting technological automation to architecture a safe space in the (virtual) public for private commune heightens her awareness of self-sufficiency, and achieves for her freedom—alluding to the paradoxical associations of the public and the private—the impersonal and the private, the algorithmic and the biologic, the automated and the autonomic, and the self and the other distinct to the digital age. In what follows, the paper puts the foregoing into practice, using selected works of Eva Alordiah—“Feed the Faith,”

“If They Broke You,” and “Dying to Live”—to explore how spoken word as a new media performance form technologizes safe spaces for self-agency.

The spoken word performances of Alordiah have their feminist inclinations grounded in teleological expressions, which are gestural, verbal, or technological. The digital and videopoetry<sup>11</sup> form of the performances provide crucial leverages in exporting the thematic underpinning of these expressions. Her works fall into that category of born-digital works primarily for being conceived in a digital format rather than merely digitized: the dynamic and mixed-media configuration of each performance as an organic unit demonstrates this. Another reason is the recreation and re-combination of naturally isolated components to allow for juxtapositions that render the agency, pre-occupations, and communication of the performer effectively. This reconstructive strategy stresses the role and agency of technology and its automatized infrastructures in contriving spaces where a host of media features are appropriated for maximum representation.

Where female representation across socio-cultural categories remains bleak, desperately deserving of expedient posturing, technology’s pervasiveness, reach, and accessibility retool it into a critical ally. Its invaluable nature becomes incontrovertible when its structures permit multimodal displays whose affect and effect on the public senses are unassailable. Spoken word video’s multi-media patterning augments a performer’s engagement with the public. Given that interaction between humans is defined by sensory exchanges, SWV’s combinatorial prospects allow for multi-tiered networks of sensory relationship. Its reliance on technology’s systematic structures in advancing teleological performances, where the end is unconcealed at any juncture, deflects a measure of technological precision and procedural order to the performance of self. Since technologies themselves are “[...] center[ed] on the preprogramming of ‘universal’ templates and systems of scientific order” (Samuels, *New Media* 17), Alordiah’s performances being methodical manifest what Foucault posits as technologies of the self: “a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rule of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing” (297). Foucault’s technologies of the self stress the tactical fashioning of the self within a systematic frame, which is

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<sup>11</sup>While the term and category of videopoetry is keenly contested with regard to what fits the taxonomy and its difference from nomenclatures like video poetry—as mere poetry in video form—my use of the term here draws upon Konyves’ conception of it as video performance where text, audio, verbal, sonic, and visual properties are democratically harnessed together to relate a holistic experience, without one component superimposed over others. See Konyves for more on this division.



the premise of Alordiah's performative preoccupation with what it means to be a femme. The digital world she has fabricated is analogous to a training ground, an industrial space where procedures of disassembling, reconstructing, and rebranding of the self are initiated. Self-fashioning,<sup>12</sup> informed by learning and relearning the self, clear of the rote practices of self-knowing sanctioned by the community, is thus the desired end—one technology assists to methodically execute.

With the aid of computer technology, the said spaces are primed into virtual strongholds with a surfeit of counter-mechanisms: Alordiah's performances, for example, are suffused with a medley of media forms and overlapping cuts; the collage of still shots, visual arts, graphics, texts, soundtracks, gestures, and camera superimpositions not only reinforce the procedures of self-engagement but also ensure we receive these technologies (of self and machine) holistically. The combinatorial technique of alternating shots, camera movements, image overlaps, dissolves and superimpositions or fades, and condensation of several materials on screen at the same time is potent enough to offset dismissive receptions of each performance.

In "Dying to Live," the longest of the three videos at over 5 minutes, we are locked in Alordiah's world, pulled in first by the chaotic state of a sea forced into distress by a crashing tide. Instantly, the words "I am not happy" appear on the screen, disappearing concomitantly with a solemn utterance of the same words. A somber Alordiah appears on screen—her gaze averted to the side as if distraught by her own reflection—superimposed on the sea now reflecting through her as background, perhaps as a visual metaphor of depression, while the scripted lyrics slide across the screen. Even if a viewer dismisses Alordiah's utterances, he/she may find it hard to discount the shot of the crashing sea and its implications or the textures of the melancholic soundtrack lacing the motion-picture. Alordiah's side-stare and its connotations cannot be unseen in the context of its signification, alongside that of the sea which Alordiah's digitally faded body keeps in perspective. The entire first 9 seconds are tailored this way, with

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<sup>12</sup>Self-fashioning emphasizes the process of attaining or redefining the consciousness of selfhood. Selfhood can be constituted through Shirley Neuman's poetics of difference, which emphasizes the self as constituted by multiple differences within and from itself (Lovesey 36)—this relates to Klein's concept of the fragmentary body that achieves wholeness from the specular image and also the homuncular self identified by traditional philosophy as internal to self consciousness (Kirshner 157). It can also be attained by an awareness of the difference between the self and the existing other. Self-fashioning, as employed here, is a statement of identity construction or process of self-affirmation within a structure, what Neuman calls a space of representation (46) and Lovesey a frame (36), where the image of the self is dared by its other.

each new shot tied to the previous so that, although sequential, the shots are kept in remembrance. How possible is it then to deny, say, the effects of Alordiah's utterance on the public auditory sense when it is tethered to multiple visual and sonic realizations? The multi-layered and collaged cuts attack the human sensory system simultaneously and at several levels, in ways stage performances cannot. Alordiah's warfare against mental illness, a hushed up subject demonized by cultural intolerance that equates mental illness to witchcraft and wizardry, adopts a hydra shape; shutting out one form of representation empowers others as they become major sources of communication/transmission, bearing down on the senses with less competition for attention or concentration.

The entire performance adopts this methodical synthesis of various media so that the gist is never glossed over at any point. Whenever Alordiah talks of deep personal issues, there are rapid camera movements and extensive cuts. Her reference to having spent years molding an image that eventually subsumes her introduces a muted cut from one of her previous onstage performances: in it, she dances exuberantly, while fans raise cell phones to record or cheer her. Before this scene are moments of self-judgments where vocalizations of depression like "deep dark hole," "pain," and "despair" are accompanied by rapid shots of cinders coasting through a fiery night, a previously lit corridor going dark, silhouetted doors, and a blank screen with the words "self-inflicted depression" centralized. When she speaks of shutting herself in a self-made prison, a 2-dimensional image of a prisoner gripping the bars comes up, with the sound of bars slamming shut interjecting the tenor of the background track. When she laments her failure to value the splendor of existence, a clip of flowers pollinated by insects is accompanied with that of sunrise and sunset—an apt signification of an eclipsed soul augmented by digital juxtapositions. Her vocal and scripted reference to losing love is juxtaposed by a playback of her on stage and walking toward a man assumed to be her lover; this shot is sundered in half and digitally tossed off the screen before both parties could meet.

While Alordiah's words are suggestive of her struggles with a socio-culturally proscribed phenomenon, the visual and audio components reiterate this narrative, so that the full multi-sensorial experience is compact for consumption and self-therapy is achieved on both discrete and integrated levels. It would seem that one of Alordiah's principal statements is if women cannot discuss mental health issues in public, they can in a technologized room of their own. This stimulates the approval of Konyves' assertion that video performances like the SWV house perceptible synthesis of speech, text, soundtrack, images,

and gestures. The additions, to what otherwise would have been a lone performance, more than adumbrate the agency of technology in the assembling of templates upon which self-fashioning can effectively ferment. With the limitless poetic association of image, text, and sound, Alordiah successfully and privately threads experiential issues, precluding public disruption by devising procedures and marshalling facilities supplied by technology.

The suggestive power of the unusual associations of text, image, and sound in videopoetry provides Alordiah's performances simultaneous meanings. Konyves calls the montage association as products of syntactical decisions, where 'distant realities,' "the ambiguous or enigmatic relationship of a particular image to a portion of text, for example" (4) are deliberately engineered to induce the possibility of suggestive, surprising, and mysterious meanings. To Konyves, and as manifest in Alordiah's works, the distance does not cause incongruity within the work or disengagement with it by viewers, but promotes a synchronization and multimodal equilibrium between sound, text, and image capable of providing a new poetic experience (4), which new media technologies aid greatly. Hence, if marginalized categories like blacks in America, politically oppressed groups in Africa, and digital youths can turn to new media and its performative praxes to experience and convey independence or impair tyrannical social formulas of being, it is expected that women, as subaltern subjects, can turn to spoken word to achieve the same (Desai 8; de Hass 1–2; Samuels "Automodernity" 219).

The infrastructures of web-based, electronic, or mobile technologies through which spoken word performances are produced in the digital network afford unregulated communication. Not unlike Foucault's technologies of self, which are procedures of identity change, maintenance, or transformation extant in civilizations and thus provided or prescribed as requisite (Foucault 87), new media technologies also promote miscellaneous approaches to self-redefinition. However, in contrast with imposed or recommended methods to self-transformation provided by customary social forces that Foucault's position intimates, new media's automation advances a performer's control of said provisions. The performer retains power over what is expressed and the nuances of interaction. Alordiah's monopoly on dictating the conditions of interaction by setting the pace and proximity levels and by choosing the extent of habituation within the virtual public, which returns us to Samuels' privatization of the public and publicizing of the private (17), can hardly be gainsaid. Privatizing the public occurs in different ways, one of which is appropriating public information. Alordiah's visual images, even if technologically re-

programmed, are borrowed public information. In using smart devices, internet, and computer technology for image processing, recording, production, and cyber-storing of her multi-modal performances, she has privatized the public without absorbing it, mixing personal expressions with borrowed materials in what Samuels describes as appropriate endeavor.

At a point in “Dying to Live,” cuts of responses fill the screen to suggest the acceptability of (as well as aid) Alordiah’s cyber-self-therapy as they pop up simultaneously in form of viewers’ comments. To do this is to harness technology’s real time effect on communication and to privatize public interaction by performing what Samuels describes as appropriating open information for unpredictable personal purposes (*New Media* 18). Also, this reinforces automodernity’s paradoxical collapse of the self-other binary and public-private divide, for viewership validates self-engagement, referencing a pre-modern folkloric practice where audience engagement shapes performative direction and breeds effectual performance. Digital technology, by effectuating a performer’s control on expressivity, visibility, and interaction, empowers a performer like Alordiah to take on several issues—mental issues, depression, sex, weed, love, betrayal, fear, and self-will—while addressing herself, other women, and the femme image in general.

The three performances uniquely harness technology, although in diverse ways: the degree of Alordiah’s physical presence differs from one performance to another. “Dying to Live,” the longest of the three, has the least onscreen presence of Alordiah, with her sharing screen time with overlapping film clips and numerous still shots. Her presence dominates “Feed the Faith,” so that there is an adequate appreciation of the significance of onscreen corporal kinesis, gestural manipulations, and vocality in extracting meaning from the exhibition. Unlike “If They Broke You,” “Feed the Faith” boasts of an appreciable degree of camera movements that capture several performative positions which provide alternate meanings not dissociable from the performer’s fixations. Modulations in voicing to exactly correspond with physical directions during performances are tempered by vocal synthesizers and electronic technology so that there is apparent harmony between text (kinesis) and sound; and there are fewer overlays, cuts, or superimpositions as the camera stays fixed on Alordiah, capturing every detail and changes in tempo, texture, and tenor of performance enhanced by Alordiah’s close proximity to artificial light. “If They Broke You” lies between the two performances, with an equal footing of performer’s presence and a medley of visual representations charging the collage mentality peculiar to SWVs.

In each performance, Alordiah dictates the direction of communication without censorship, a function of new media in retaining individual agency from state regulation or male suppression. This echoes Samuels' assertion that "[t]he power of new media to cater to real and imagined feelings of self-direction threatens to hide and render invisible important social and public forces" (*New Media* 16). If Alordiah's thematic and performative expressions transgress the boundaries of what is tolerable for women, it is because new media has not only provided user-performers the power to express but has also created a space loaded with defense mechanics to engage subversive subjects, self-fashion a desired image, however transgressive, and contest with society. Technology, orality, performance, and visuality in such hands become innovative means of resisting and subverting social-cultural tyranny on a large scale.

The unfettered and individuating social-system of the cyberspace allows for inimitable expressions of individuality and modes of self-fashioning. This absence of regimentation can be inferred from the thematic concerns in Alordiah's presentations. By publicly engaging socially proscribed subjects from the sanctuary of her digital fortress, she deactivates her subaltern status as second sex, a condition brought about by the subordination of women to men that denies the former visibility and voice (Beauvoir 25). Her preoccupations and techniques of engagement propel her into the center where her visibility is incontrovertible. In "Dying to Live," Alordiah flexes the muscles of self-fashioning via provocative self-exhibition, relocating herself in transgressive ways: the 'transgressive acts' are mostly performed within enclosed spaces, shut out from public view, as seen in the performance. In making these acts public through the new media, she reasserts her power to self-define as well as re-invent her image. Where the transgressions are already public physically (previous on-stage performances), she extends her audience to the larger and expansive virtual world. In several cuts her head is cleanly shaved; in others she has a part of it closely cropped and the other half-woven; in another shot, she is sultrily postured against a man. Emphasis here is on the transformative power of self-engagement dissociated from socially accepted procedures. Neither a clean shaven head nor a half-braided one conforms to socially satisfactory demonstrations of femininity<sup>13</sup>; still, Alordiah unabashedly shows off these collages of different selves as moments of truth in her thirst for self-retrieval. The medley of play-

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<sup>13</sup>See Tabora A. Johnson, and Teiahsha Bankhead, "Examining the experiences of Black women with natural hair," *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 2, 2014, pp. 86–100; see also Tracy O Patton, "Hey girl, am I more than my hair? African American women and their struggles with beauty, body image and hair," *NWSA Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2006, pp. 24–51.

back cuts and still-shots or graphics art and Alordiah's voice-overs pool into a portal through which we relive the past with her—a transgressive past made present through meta-performance:

I made money, I lost money  
I got in debt, I got out of debt  
I fell in Love, and loved till I was pushed out  
I wanted sex, I wanted weed  
I wanted to eat / I wanted to sleep  
But most of all I just wanted to be me  
I had forgotten who I was,  
so I would look in the mirror and not know who stared back at  
me  
So I shaved my head, and lost a lot of weight  
I changed my name, then I changed it again... (Alordiah, "Dy-  
ing to Live" (00:01:31–47)

To an orthodox audience, these words are self-indicting, capable of inciting public uproar, reprimand, and charges of irresponsibility and waywardness. To Alordiah, they are stepping stones with which closure from depression can be achieved. The subject of sex being a 'social taboo' for women is not novel, having necessitated sexual revolution at different junctures in history under different banners (Glick 24). In Africa, it is a topic to be mumbled behind closed doors. Mcfadden, Hollibaugh, and Ampofo et al. report on the treatment of public discussion of sex by women as filthy and unbecoming; this censorious stance toward female sexuality is a corollary of repressive attempts that deny women the power derivable from sexual pleasure, eroticism, and desire in order to keep them acquiescent. Hushing sex-talk advances a culture of silence. But Alordiah never mumbles the subject. Although in her private world, she asserts her desire for sex as she does food and sleep—an unusual association through which sex is 'essentialized'—following in the path of second-wave feminists' advocacy for embracing female desires and body pleasures. The same applies to 'weed.' The technology-aided integration of playback videos, visual images, soundtracks, silence, and utterances in an automated sequence eliminates abstraction of reality that threatens to undermine oral performances.

Automation ensures that the viewer systematically feels the weight of Alordiah's reality in tandem with the performance's unfolding. When several playbacks of previous Alordiah's on-stage performances take up screen-time sequentially, as if naturally contiguous, the viewer not only feels as if he/she is part of the experience (in their original and separate forms and as a whole) but is also ushered on to

locate the underlying thematic thrust through her voice and the accompanying and synthesized images as the performance continues. Whether it is the scene where empty pages are flipped by wind after she tosses a book on the table or where she is scribbling frantically in her diary, narrating simultaneously her choice to call her diary “Notes on Tuesday” in order to talk to herself, the viewer relives these moments with her. Also, when she refers to the invisible audience, the other of the virtual world, images of comments float on screen as they occur in web spaces, heightening the effect of Alordiah’s communication with the viewer. Oral performance in Africa is never merely acted in pursuit of distraction, or as Furniss and Gunner claim, “folksy domestic entertainment,” but a space where individuals can perform political functions by “...comment[ing] on power relations in the society” (x). Alordiah’s digitally-mediated spoken word performance is anchored in this principle. Inasmuch as what is visually rendered are manifestations of self-conversation and techniques of closure through which self-therapy can be realized, they rupture cultural hold on what is communicable and/or utilizable in self-fashioning. This shredding reinforces individuality in remarkable ways: visibility to others complements the therapeutic process, as technology continues to induce formation of new modes of privatized social subjectivity—one virtual reliant.

If “Dying to Live” approaches the undermining of patriarchy’s expurgation of women’s communication as a means to an end, “If They Broke You” completes the campaign, eviscerating the bowdlerizing propensity within the male-dominated society where communication is regulated by patriarchal cultural codes: it centralizes the issue of sex. The subaltern female is thrust beyond the margins where she is encumbered by patriarchal yokes of expectation, conformity, and objectivization when Alordiah addresses her, the male figure, and herself. She initiates the conversation by addressing a frequent contemporary display of affection among women: “She says she has never hit it raw / but will give you a chance if You Promise to pull out” (00:00:01–04). Prominence on the two words with their initial letters capitalized—as offered in the accompanying text subtitles—is enhanced by a rise in vocality as Alordiah articulates, her head cocked sideways in defiance of an unseen male gaze as she stares at the camera, exposing male predatory sexual maneuvers. With the next few lines, Alordiah’s gestural expressions display increased intensity, alongside a backing melody that also adopts an urgent tone: “In her mind this is proof of her feelings and she’s calling it love / but that is far from what you are thinking about” (00:00:05–10).

The promise of security (social, economic, physical, or financial), even though ultimately quixotic, has been a device of female subjugation. Sex as a tool of submission promotes regnant philosophies that cast women as sexual minorities. Placing cultural embargo on female sexuality creates avenues for women to internalize sexist messages. Sexual dominance by men ensues, just as Mcfadden and Hollibaugh have averred, since females are taught to fear sexual desire, see it as social aberrance, and reject (unknowingly sometimes) the power that derives from it. The repressive frames that silence female desires are preserved by a culture of shame that promotes male ego, inadequacy, or sustain male dominance, precluding the illumination that stems from sexual volubility and freedom. The consequence perpetuates, endlessly, the equation of male dominance—female subordination, a condition pro-sex revolution quests to eclipse. Imbuing sexuality with the power of resistance is the coherent aftermath of centralizing sexual freedom in the struggle against female oppression (Glick 24). According to Glick, women’s sexual struggle takes central place within the feminist war against oppressive structures. Radicalizing the struggle for efficacy thus often involves weaponizing defining attributes of women shunted to the sidelines or censored by the state/culture. As a consequence, women accentuate their liberties to self-define and co-exist with men beyond objectifying practices by demonstrating and deploying their sexuality as they deem fit, especially in ways that reject stereotypes and male suppression. This way, sexuality is deployed as offensive or becomes an affront to oppression, which underscores its consequentiality in relation to the feminist struggle. To deny this is to consolidate the type of exploitation that ignorance births, which is Alordiah’s intention when her next line reveals the true intent of such predatory men: “You just want to get your dick in her thighs / and she wants to see some love in your eyes / when she holds on to you, she is hoping you keep her safe / but when you hold onto her, you hope she gives you a taste” (00:00:11–21). If sexual freedom culminates in offensive practices against socially adequate performance of sexuality (Ferguson 109), that is, if the liberty to own and perform one’s sexuality antagonizes normative sexual behaviors, tendering sex in exchange for male love preserves the social schema that commodifies the female body. Consequently, Alordiah canvasses for female self-love.

Without prescribing or prevaricating, she reinforces the need for women to guard against boys who love women less; this is achievable by rechanneling love to the self. She says, “the sweetest thing you can do is love yourself” and that predatory men cannot “...give you the love that you haven’t thought about giving yourself” (“If they Broke You” 00:00:27-38). All the while, the automated camera pans in and out, zooming in on select portions of those words penned down in



ink for visual reinforcement. The scenes after this mark a significant shift as Alordiah turns the metaphoric lens onto herself, as if to heed her own advice, setting herself in perspective without ignoring the larger femme subject of the public realm. She implores the audience to trust her, so that the focus is on her as she continues in the same self-therapeutic fashion found in “Dying to live.” Exploring her wants, desires, and thirst for more knowledge, she yells: “Trust me I’m learning, I’m still only learning / I’m still Daily tossing, in my bed and Yearning / For someone to hold me, kiss me in the morning / I might be alone, but I’m never lonely / I’m spending Time by myself now, I am getting to know me / I am understanding that the deeper I fall into my own self-love / the higher I can vibrate at the frequency of love that is best for me” (00:00:39-60). The last two lines are spread between various media: as subtitles during her physical presence on screen, as voice-over with a blank screen, and as a display of digitized scribbles, while the camera zooms in on “the deeper I fall into my own self-love.” In this scene, the efficacy as well as the structural and syntactical importance of the ‘distant realities’ is pronounced. This portion of the performance instructs on the measured balance and the suggestive weight that the layering of image to texts and sound can produce in SW as videopoetry performances. All through the visual transitions, her voice remains audible, pulsating in accord with the accompanying tune. When the camera refocuses on Alordiah, her own focus also returns to the generic female and with it her counsel for self-love. This self-fashioning leads to an assured Alordiah in “Feed the Faith”—defiant and self-aware, who takes on the subject of fear. With chest-thumping gestures, she announces her triumph over evil by “inclining [her] ears to wise words”—a triumph made possible through cybertherapy and digital technology.

Alordiah’s presence here differs from the other two performances. Her head, with a part closely cropped and the other weaved, is rebelliously cocked closed to her shoulders as she rests against polished plywood; her dress is pulled down her right shoulder. With facial muscles visibly contorting and relaxing, the words “I get up on my feet and stand” issue out with force. She says the same evil—metaphor for oppressive forces—no longer deters her as she is strong now. She demonstrates this with her entire being. Her hands shoot to her face in disgust when she says that social propaganda instills fear and lies. Her solution is to retreat within herself, a decision made with a bold face glaring at the camera, daring the social other, and her fingers poking at her chest. To her, “in there is all the strength that [she] needs” (“Feed the Faith” 00:00:37-38). The momentum gathers as she utters a deep growling guttural sound—this is a signifier of her bellicose posturing against fear, which she has exorcized. Fear of being unloved, ostra-

cized, or rejected is, although generic, unique to subaltern minorities and marginalized groups; fear detracts from the possibility of mounting an oppositional force. It becomes instrumental in the hands of the nation-state and its phallogocentric institutions, denying the realization of other unregulated systems capable of engendering agency. A phallogocentric reality is characterized by patriarchal hegemony over sexuality and state structures (Joodaki and Bakhshi 129); such societies situate the idea of the ‘phallus,’ a symbol of the superiority of masculinity, as the “signifying source of power” for individuals in search of meaning, relevance and stability (Childs and Fowler 171). Alordiah yells this without saying it directly, underscoring fear’s capacity to blind the femme against the truth. When she says “I know who I want to be” (“Feed the Faith” 00:00:50–51), she thumps her chest severally, equating her words to prophecies for their living and portentous quality. This performance is no longer the re-learning or medicating of the self typifying the previous videos. Her subjectivity is fully formed, with the virtual world re-shaped from a sanctuary into a battle ground. It would seem that the Alordiahs of the two previous performances have coalesced into one and that this performance is the natural coda to the other two, indicating a performative growth within a digital private precinct. At the end, leaning close to the camera, she reminds the femme that “in life there are two options; feed the faith [in one’s self] or feed the fear [of the adversarial forces]” (ibid 00:00:54–59).

Alordiah’s retooling of digital technologies and employment of the spoken word form in fashioning a democratic space for self-assessment, her aptitude in adapting the automaticity of computer programs, word processors, digital camera technologies, cyber-networks like YouTube, mobile technologies, and recording systems in generating a multi-media milieu and aestheticizing a multi-tier, multi-modal, and multi-sensory poetic performance defines her as the automodern femme. She relies on these contrivances to locate and relocate herself through salutary, subversive, and evocative performances. Technologically mediated performance forms like the spoken word and its video poetry realization are fulcrums resituating the femme from the position of a marginalized cultural subject or social minority to that of visibility. Through technological aptitude, the woman contrives spaces where her subjectivity is positively transformed, appropriating public information and choreographing multiple media for effective representation. With the visibility, privacy, and security from regulation that new media affords, she engages in performative practices that shunt her to the center as ‘uncaptured’ digital subject, while addressing her reality in ways outside the perimeters of existing modes of social communication. Technology and human agency thus lose any sign of mutual ex-

clusivity, particularly in relation to control and agency. Boundaries and borders are collapsed as private issues are publicly rendered for the public to privately relate with. In the privatization of the public and publicizing of the private, paradoxes are revealed as characterizing the digital age as automodern: they reveal the inherent contradictions shaping this cultural period, and how digitally mediated oral performative practices perpetuate such contradictions, aiding the leverage women hold over social, cultural, and institutional regulations. The automodern femme is the woman who has the skill to marshal technological structures and automation to co-shape her subjectivity and activate her agency through performance, in the way Eva Alordiah has done.



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## Your country behind the mountain, behind the year:

### Insistence of an Inaccessible Alterity in Paul Celan's Poetics

*Rosanne Ceuppens*

#### Abstract

Alterity is a key issue in modern literature and in related disciplines such as philosophy. In 'The Meridian' (1960) Paul Celan clearly foregrounds his poetics of otherness. He posits that "[f]or the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading." In this paper, Celan's conception of alterity will be examined with regard to Levinas's account of otherness in *Existence and Existents* (1947). Both men believed that poetry stands in a relation of proximity to the Other. This relationality means above all a listening to the Other, as poetry addresses the Other who made a claim on poetry. This paper seeks to underscore that Celan's poetics principally has an ethical dimension which shows affinities with Levinas's conception of the *il y a* or there is. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, key issues such as the interconnectedness between poetry, alterity, and Being will be clarified.

**Keywords:** *Poetics, Alterity, Paul Celan, The Meridian, Levinas, Existence and Existents, Ethics*

Rilke once wrote in 1923 "Gesang ist Dasein" which can be translated as: "song is being."<sup>1</sup> The world is grounded on the poetic word and can take on meaning and reality through poetry. But is poetry not a dangerous activity? After all, ancient medicine and philosophy attributed the poetic faculty to a psychic disorder. Plato banished the poets from his Republic because they were considered "[...] mere imitators and deceivers, and their art is concerned with the world of appearance, not with reality" (Green 1). However, the reason for his rejection of poetry comes out of his desire to master and control reality. This paper argues that poetry goes beyond a conceptual interpretation of reality and therefore it will always be more than what our conscious interpretation can offer. More precisely, language can be seen as a tool by which we can master reality conceptually. In modern poetry, on the contrary, language takes itself out of our hands. Gerald Bruns argues, "poetry is the withdrawal of language from the world or, more accurately, from our grasp of the world by means of concepts" ("The Remembrance of

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<sup>1</sup>My translation.

Language” 10). The following argument does not give an exhaustive definition of poetry. Instead, it discusses *how* poetic language manifests itself and *how* an experience with poetry relates to our approach of Being.

The relation between modern poetry and Being is far from clear since, in the course of history, poetry has been interpreted in many ways. Some turn to poetry for their amusement or distraction. Others, however, claim that poetry constitutes a necessity because it provides insights about our understanding of existence and, accordingly, poetry is to be considered as a revelation of meaning rather than a form of escapism. Sartre, for one, argues that the world can very well do without literature (229). Paul Celan, however, emphasizes that poetry speaks on its own behalf and is in search of a place (48). Why did Sartre believe that a society without literature could be possible, while the distinguished poet Paul Celan grants major importance to poetry? In order to provide an answer to this question, it is necessary to bear in mind that there are several possible relations between language and reality.

In modern poetry the traditional view of reality is challenged since we cannot rely on our conceptual knowledge in order to grasp reality. Truth, then, can no longer be derived from reason. Put differently, poetic truth does not depend on one’s ability to use language in the right way and as a result of this, we cannot be in charge of truth; poetry happens to us and truth happens through poetry. Bruns believes that “philosophers divide into those who see, and those who don’t see, that the language of literature is finally irreducible to its use as a form of mediation in the construction of meanings, concepts, propositions, narratives, and so on” (*Tragic Thoughts* 14). In this paper the attention has been turned to the poetic conceptions of Paul Celan and ideas of Emmanuel Levinas who think about a certain otherness of poetic language and oppose the general Cartesian belief that our interpretation of literature can guarantee certainty. More specifically, the critical reflections on the relation between poetry and otherness in Paul Celan’s in ‘The Meridian’ (1960) have been investigated after a clarification of Levinas’s philosophical arguments in *Existence and Existents* (1947). Celan and Levinas were familiar with each other’s ideas, and Hand argues that, for Levinas, Celan’s poetry causes a “[...] shift in attitude, away from the basic belief that it is prose and not poetry that remains the only appropriate means of communication in the ethical relation” (75). Celan, in turn, was aware of Levinas’s stance on ethics and believed that the ethical in language was related to poetry and art (Ziarek 161). Moreover, Levinas and Celan shared a concern for the other in their works which is not so astonishing, given that, as Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, the failure to acknowledge another human being was



a reminder of what happened during the Shoah. As such, the Other plays a prominent role in their post-war thinking.

After a general outline of Levinas's ethics various selections from *Existence and Existents* will be analysed in order to investigate the relation between ethics and art. The reasons for picking this work are twofold: firstly, in this book, Levinas clearly explains his understanding of Being and otherness. It is of primary importance to address these issues to shed light on his account of poetic language. The focus lies in particular on aspects such as the *il y a*, consciousness, materiality, and proximity. Secondly, *Existence and Existents* will help to clarify Paul Celan's account of alterity in 'The Meridian' (1960).<sup>2</sup> Many critical essays and studies have focused on this speech. Aris Fioretos, for instance, clarifies that it "[...] reflects on how language related to the necessity of referring to something other than itself, and thus on the indispensability of an aspect of it about which it cannot provide knowledge" (x). By the end of this paper's argument, Fioretos's statement will sound familiar with regard to Levinas's ethics. The course of this paper will be demonstrating throughout that one can relate to the *il y a* or Other through poetic language even though it will always exceed our knowledge.

In 1961, Levinas claimed he was developing the "first philosophy" which was a description of precognitive experience with the Other. A precognitive experience with the Other implies that the Other exists prior to the emergence of our consciousness. Levinas's conception of otherness, therefore, does not take place at the level of consciousness: his ethical relation is irreducible to comprehension. It is thereby important to note that his account of otherness is not similar to a person or physical substance. Alterity should rather be seen as the otherness of another person which will always escape one's understanding. In line with these reflections, Hand claims that Levinas's ethical vision "[...] is above all dramatically embodied by him in the *face* of the other [...] and our relation with the other which the face stands for, is one that begins, in Levinas's ethics, even before self-consciousness emerges" (36). This claim indicates that we are always already in an ethical relation before we can even realize what it means to stand in a relation with otherness. Hence, otherness must already be present before we come into existence. Nevertheless, its presence cannot be perceived or experienced by us. Libertson explained that "the Other is that which cannot be present or "here," and which cannot simply be "gone" (227). In terms of the notion of responsibility, Levinas's conception of the face is important because it is the face of

<sup>2</sup>"The Meridian" is Celan's speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg-Büchner Literature Prize in 1960.

the Other which appeals to us and this appeal concerns the very notion of our being-in-the-world. This is not to say that it interests us. Rudi Visker, for example, argued that it “[...] is in opposition to our very interest that we turn towards the Other” (29). Levinas’s ethical relation seems to imply that one is obliged to the Other since one cannot escape its appeal. The Levinassian understanding of responsibility, then, is not a free engagement. Instead, ethical responsibility is “an answer without a question” (Visker 91). More precisely, whether or not the Other is turned towards a person, that person is always turned to the Other. Hence, our relation to alterity is based on responsibility and this responsibility is a fundamental aspect of the ethical relation, because it is evoked by the constant appeal of the Other. Alterity thus manifests itself in a face and this face presents the inadequate manifestation of otherness. The adjective ‘inadequate’ is used because otherness will never completely be revealed to us. Alterity retains its alterity: the other is always already Other than any possible conceptualization.

*Existence and Existents*<sup>3</sup> was Levinas’s first book that he began writing in captivity during the war (Critchley xxii). In 1946 Levinas had already published a fragment of this book under the title “Il y a.” The concept of *il y a* (translated as ‘There is’) is crucial for understanding his notion of alterity. Furthermore, as Bruns claims in his essay “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings”: “[...] for Levinas the experience of poetry or art is continuous with the experience of the *il y a*” (213). In order to come to terms with this assertion, it is first necessary to distinguish between Levinas’s understanding of existence and existents and his account of the *il y a*. According to Alphonso Lingis, an existent refers to a term or a subject of existence (5). In *EE*, another term for ‘existent’ is ‘being,’ whereas ‘existence’ is designated as ‘Being’ where both these terms are not independent of each other. A being or existent cannot be isolated from Being since they stand in relation to each other. However, Levinas seeks to approach Being separately since he questions how Being can be understood. He provides an answer to his own speculations by claiming that “Being cannot be specified, and does not specify anything” (9). According to Levinas, “Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world” (10). So, it can be drawn that in Levinassian ethics we are always already in a relation with the Other, because the Other is there before our self-consciousness emerges. To return to Levinas’s statement, then, the Other can be understood as existence, but this existence is not identical to the world in which we find ourselves. More specifically, the world refers to that which comes into existence by our mind and, for this reason, it differs from Being since the latter cannot be a product of our

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<sup>3</sup>Hereafter referred to as *EE*.

cognition. Levinas argued in *EE* that “life in the world is consciousness inasmuch as it provides the possibility of existing in a withdrawal from existence” (25). Consciousness, for Levinas, thus implies a negation of existence. Nonetheless, the word ‘negation’ means that there is something which we can deny. And this ‘something’ is otherness or Being. In this sense, we can only become aware of Being when the world disappears. However, how can we experience a world which vanishes if our own existence is part of this world? It seems that we cannot speak of the disappearance of a world without making ourselves as existents disappear.

Levinas claimed that “existing involves a relationship by which the existent makes a contract with existence” (15). Since we are seized by existence without coming to terms with it, the contract is a commitment which is already there prior to awareness. One can wonder, however, how a contract can be made with something that is incomprehensible. The ethical relation, or a relation of an existent with its existence, does not consist of a one-to-one relation between our thoughts and the meaning of alterity. More precisely, we cannot think the Other, so its meaning is not a unity between our thought and the phenomenon that it corresponds to; the Other is an enigma and remains undetermined. Levinas argued the following:

What is Being? – has never been answered. There is no answer to Being. It is absolutely impossible to envisage the direction in which that answer would have to be sought. The question is itself a manifestation of the relationship with Being. Being is essentially alien and strikes us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. (11)

Levinas’s statement shows that our only relation to Being or existence is one of questioning and incomprehension. As such, the notion of Being will always be absent. According to Levinas, it “[...] is not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that there is” (11). Levinas refers to *il y a* as “being in general,” so it is implied that the *il y a* is not conditioned by the negative. This means that it should not be understood as non-being in the sense of emptiness, but rather as uncertainty. More precisely, the presence of the *il y a* includes absence since it cannot be constructed as a content of consciousness, and this absence leads to insecurity.

According to Levinas, the night is the experience of the presence of the *il y a* (33). At night, the mind finds itself no longer faced with material things and therefore the world disappears; nothing seems to be there. The nocturnal space, however, should not be seen as an empty space, because it is full of the nothingness of everything. ‘Nothing’ does not refer to ‘no thing’ but to a phenomenon which can be

encountered, and therefore it is seen as something which is there. More specifically, it is through darkness that the *il y a* becomes a presence. In addition, Hand states that the *il y a* “[...] is what does not and cannot disappear when everything else, including the I, has disappeared” (31). Due to the darkness, anything can count for anything else and it becomes impossible to maintain a perspective on the world. Levinas claims that the absence of perspective does not come forward out of the things of the day world which the night conceals, but “it is due to the fact that nothing approaches, that nothing comes” (34). Perhaps now it is understandable why Levinas refers to the *il y a* as that “which murmurs in the depths of nothingness” (33). More precisely, for Levinas, nothingness is not similar to non-existence: it rather stands for absence that is brought to presence through the darkness of the night. As Levinas puts it: “There is nothing, but there is being” (37). In nothingness, the subject is stripped of his subjectivity and he is depersonalized. Levinas states that “what we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it” (33). This depersonalization of the subject is a participation in the *il y a*. However, this can never be a conscious participation since Levinas explains that “to be conscious is to be torn away from the there is” (34). Nevertheless, this statement does not mean that an unconscious subject can experience the *il y a*. Instead, Levinas introduces a different understanding of consciousness.

In *EE* Levinas states that “Western philosophy does know of other forms of consciousness besides the intellect, but even in its least intellectual meanderings, the mind is taken to be what knows” (27). Knowing, in Levinas’s philosophy, however, is “[...] a way of relating to events while still being able to not be caught up in them” (28). In other words, our relation to existence consists of separateness so that we always remain outside of objects and history. Levinas explains that “The I is a being that is always outside of being” (28). Levinas’s understanding of consciousness, then, is not the reverse or negative of consciousness. It is rather a mode of being in the world which is prior to every relationship with things (Lingis 4). As such, it is fair to speak of a ‘pure’ relation that is not determined by the meaning of the other of the relation or the relatum. Alternately, Levinas’s account of consciousness includes an absence of the meaning of things to which it relates so that there is an infinite movement of comprehension possible.

Returning to Levinas’s connection between the night and the *il y a*: at night one is detached from any object and any content, therefore, the experience of the night can be seen as existence without existents. However, it would be wrong to assume that every form of relation disappears. Instead, the absence of existents should be interpreted

as an extraction from the world in which everything is deemed to be functional and subject to our intentions. Alterity is an objectless dimension in which objects or things cease to be regarded as tools. Another way to approach existence without existents, then, is by means of pre-objective relationships. However, as Critchley accurately wonders: “How can a relation with a being be other than comprehension?” (11). Levinas’s response would be that it cannot, insofar as he supports an alternative notion of comprehension and non-comprehension. Consequently, the ethical relation to the other is not a relation of knowledge and, as such, comprehension in Levinassian ethics has nothing to do with values or concepts. He posited the following in *EE*: “In our relationship with the world we are able to withdraw from the world (29).” More precisely, there is a possibility of detaching oneself from objects in the world and this detachment takes place through art. According to Levinas,

Art makes [objects of knowledge or use] stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject. The elementary function of art [...] is to furnish an image of an object in place of the object itself [...] This way of interposing an image of things between us and the things has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world. (29)

His assertion demonstrates that art dispossesses us from the things in our world. A book, painting, or sculpture are still objects of the world, but the things that are represented through them are extracted from our world because they are no longer subject to our intention or control. Levinas explained that “the intention gets lost in the sensation” (30). As such, in art the notion of sensation undermines subjectivity and makes way for the impersonality of objects. Consequently, objects of art cease to be familiar to us; they have a character of otherness. In view of the above, one can wonder whether it is right to equate art with the nocturnal experience: both reshape our perspective of the world and through both a form of being that precedes the world of our everyday life can become present.

It is important to note, though, that darkness does not coincide with the *il y a*. Levinas claims that, “darkness, as the presence of absence, is not a purely present content. There is not a “something” that remains. There is the atmosphere of presence” (37). Hence, we cannot experience alterity whenever the night appears: alterity itself will always remain inaccessible. We can only sense its nearness. The Other, then, has to be understood as an experience of proximity. Otherness is a pre-articulated region which language is incapable of expressing. It thus seems to be the case that the *il y a* exceeds any description. When

Levinas's ideas are recapitulated, then, the proximity of the *il y a* is present in a world that is devoid of subjectivity. Objects become impersonal and it could therefore be interesting to equate this with the depersonalization of language in modern poetry. That is to say that words become depersonalized when one realizes that they can no longer be applied. In addition, as Bruns posits, poetic language is no longer a form of mediation because it withdraws in its materiality ("The Concepts of Art and Poetry" 222). If poetry is no longer a form of mediation, then it alters our relation to language. Words become impersonal and they address us. Beginning of this paper underscored that language in modern poetry is no longer something which we can make conscious use of: a poem is thus not reducible to a specific meaning, concept, or expression. Firstly, the Other, like poetry, cannot be comprehended or mastered; secondly, the Other addresses us in the same way that poetry makes a claim on us; thirdly, the world or space in which the *il y a* manifests itself is an existence without existents. Nevertheless, what is the similarity between the third argument and the nature of poetry? In other words, the world of the *il y a* precedes our conscious existence, but poetry can only precede comprehension if it fulfills the following conditions: first, there is an ethical relation between poetry and an existent and, secondly, poetry is always already there so we have no control over its origin. However, the *il y a* does not begin with language since it is a nonlinguistic region. Critchley explains:

Although Levinas's choice of terminology suggests otherwise, the face-to-face relation with the other is not a relation of perception or vision, but is always linguistic. The face is not something I see, but something I speak to. Furthermore, in speaking or calling or listening to the other, I am not reflecting upon the other [...] I am not contemplating, I am conversing. (12)

This statement indicates that the approach to the Other is based on a conversation that is detached from any form of understanding. Here communication does not mean, as is the case in modern poetry, that one consciously makes use of words. More precisely, Levinas argues in *EE*: "Behind the signification of a poem which thought penetrates, thought also loses itself in the musicality of the poem" (30). In other words, the materiality of poetry precedes any form of meaning that we attach to the poem: it is liberated from our cognition. If meaning is anterior to language, it is implied that meaning does not belong to the same site as language. As Levinas puts it: "There is first the materiality of the sound [...] and a word detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible" (30). More specifically, the origin of language is wordless because the sound precedes

any conceptual understanding. This, however, does not mean that the word ceases to be a word. Instead, it means that the function of thought is set aside and that we are left with is the materiality of the word. Words in their materiality, therefore, should be understood as the absence of things.

Bruns states: “The poet is simply one who listens to the language of his or her environment and responds to it – doesn’t try to reduce it or objectify it” (The Remembrance of Language 4). Perhaps now it is easier to understand the statement: “the experience of poetry or art is continuous with the experience of the *il y a*” (“The Concept of Art and Poetry” 213). To be more specific, Levinas claims that “there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnamable and can only appear in poetry” (32). It thus seems to be the case that poetic language opens up a dimension of wordlessness or a world without things; or perhaps it is better to speak of things which are freed from the world. According to Wyschogrod, Levinas believes that “to speak is not the same as to see” (199). In other words, the language of poetry does not reveal or show something which can be perceived; rather, speech frees itself from visibility.

Consequently, words extend beyond the realm of our perception. Similarly, objects in the world are more than what our subjective perception reveals. After all, Hand argues that things are also there when we do not perceive them and, for this reason, they exist in themselves. In line with these reflections, Bruns states, “The idea is that in art our relation to things is no longer one of knowing and making visible. Art does not represent things, it materializes them; or, as Levinas would prefer, it presents things in their materiality and not as representations” (“The Concept of Art and Poetry” 211). Things in their materiality are thus to be distinguished from things that we perceive from a subjective point of view. To be involved in the moment when things are free from their conceptual grasp is, for Levinas, similar to being involved in an experience of poetry. The point is that the materiality of existence and the materiality of words provide an access to the nearness of the *il y a*. ‘Nearness’ is not the same as ‘presence’ because the other will always be inadequate to manifestation. As such, Bruns mentions that poetry is a relation of proximity (“The Concept of Art and Poetry” 224).

In Levinassian ethics, then, the argument is that the only form of communication with the Other is contingent on distance. Libertson posits that “its distance is a contact, its inaccessibility an involvement” (3). The involvement refers to the insistence of alterity with regard to the notion of responsibility. More accurately, it belongs to the very essence of alterity that it summons ‘me’ and that ‘I’ therefore must re-

spond to it. This response happens by means of poetry. Hand, for example, claimed that poetry and philosophy share the same “unrealizable ideal” by seeking for and by reaching out to the Other (76). In other words, the ethical and the poetic both stand in a relation of proximity with alterity, in contrast to the conceptual and propositional understanding of language or existence. Wyschogrod states that “For Levinas, Celan’s poetry is a speaking to the other that precedes thematization” (200). Levinas’s appreciation of Celan’s poetry can be seen in works such as his essay “Paul Celan: From Being to the Other” (1972), which is hardly surprising as, after all, the notion of proximity is an integral aspect of Celan’s works. Ziarek even argues that, “perhaps the single most characteristic feature of Paul Celan’s poetry is its concern with the other” (133).

After an analysis of Levinas’s conceptions of poetry and otherness, it is time to discuss the content of ‘The Meridian’ (1960) and clarify the relation between nearness, communication, and poetry from Celan’s point of view. This discussion will make clear why Ziarek claims that, “Celan’s poetics can be characterized as ethical in the Levinassian sense” (160). In the previous sections it already argued that existence or Being in the Levinassian sense can neither be reduced to a cognitive experience nor can it be explicitly expressed through language. Nevertheless, the world in which we conceptually make use of language cannot be extricated from the *Il y a* or existence, so there is always a relation between the expressible and inexpressible. The world in which one intentionally approaches language and the realm in which words are beyond intentional control are not different places, but are based on distinctive experiences of language. In our experience with poetry, we are thus withdrawn from the extra-poetic world. As a consequence, our relation to words alters because poetic language evades our attempts at mastery so that all we are left with is its materiality. The materiality of words is preconceptual and for this reason it is not explainable by the cognitive or conceptual experience which permeates our daily life. Bruns articulates this better by concluding that, “each man dwells in a reality of the mind, an incorporeal world, of which (paradoxically) the corporeal world is a dimension which he shares with other men” (*Modern Poetry* 220).

For Levinas, as mentioned above, we are detached from a conceptual grasp of words in an experience with modern poetry. While attention is drawn to the corporeal nature of poetry, otherness possibly becomes present in poetry because they share a similar ground. This means that an experience with the Other or with poetry precedes our comprehension, so that all we are left with is our relation to the materiality of things or words. Coming to terms with otherness via poetry is thus not possible because the Other goes beyond it; its meaning is elu-



sive, inaccessible, and excessive. In fact, otherness does not begin with poetry, it is already there. More specifically, these arguments have to be understood with regard to the *il y a* or existence which precedes existents. In this sense, poetry can be seen as an existent or being that stands in an ethical relation to existence or Being. This ‘ethical relation’ is mentioned since Celan claims in ‘The Meridian’ that “poetry rushes ahead” and is “responding” to something (45, 49). This sounds as if poetry takes up the ethical responsibility towards the Other by responding to it. In ‘The Meridian’ Celan speaks of language as a “speaking” and “[...] language actualized, set free under the radical sign of individuation” (49). It thus seems to be the case that language, for Celan, speaks on its own behalf and its meaning is therefore not determined solely by the subject. Language is set free from the individual and its material aspect is what Celan considers its “physical shape” (39). This physicality means that language is made of words instead of meanings or concepts: it is dissociated from things. That is, language no longer points away from itself to things in reality, but it points towards itself. According to Bruns, this is the very nature of language before it has been repressed or forgotten by semantic or propositional operations of the mind (*Modern Poetry* 5). Poetry, then, is a withdrawal from our grasp of the world by means of concepts. It is an unforgetting of language or the remembrance of a language that is not a formal system. Language thus means something in itself and it is not something which is only meaningful when we use it; it is a being that is. Following lines of Celan’s poetry concur with the same:

What is it called, your country  
 behind the mountain, behind the year?  
 I know what it is called.  
 [...]  
 it wanders off everywhere, like language  
 Throw it away, throw it away,  
 Then you’ll have it again, like that other thing  
 (qtd. in Thomas 152).

In these lines the elusive nature of language is associated with a nameless place. After all, if the physicality of language precedes meaning and words are dissociated from things, they no longer stand for something and become nameless. The repetition of “throw it away” can refer to a command to the subject to abandon language from a conceptual grasp, for it is only then that we will be faced with language in its original sense again. Language then itself becomes the subject of speech and man is no longer in control. Further, the “wandering off” of language implies a movement. Celan states in ‘The Meridian’: “The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes towards it, bespeaks it” (49). It is relevant, to emphasize

the verb ‘need’ in Celan’s quote, as this implies that poetry is apparently not that independent after all and its being is therefore dependent on something other. This ‘other,’ however, cannot be understood as a subject or physical person because, as mentioned before, in modern poetry the role of the subject is undermined, and the poem is autonomous enough to make a claim on the reader. As such, poetry can be a sort of strangeness to us because its language frees things from categories and meanings and therefore we cannot define poetry. Or, as Celan puts it: “This, ladies and gentlemen, has no definitive name, but I believe that this is... poetry” (40). Nevertheless, poetry also experiences a claim from the Other which is equally strange to poetry. More precisely, with regard to Celan’s claim that poetry “needs this other,” there must be something else which differs from the poetic realm and this other can make a claim on poetry—for this is perhaps the reason that poetry goes towards it.

Celan touches upon Büchner’s *Lenz* in his speech in order to indicate that art provokes a distance from the subject (‘I’). He states that, “The man whose eyes and mind are occupied with art – I am still with Lenz – forgets about himself. Art makes distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road” (44). In order to understand what Celan means by his reference, the paper will shed light upon Büchner’s *Lenz* (1935). This work covers a period in the life of the German poet Lenz who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The main events of *Lenz* can be summarized as follows: the poet Lenz is a young man who is drifting around in the woods and who is overcome by melancholy. He spends a few days with a pastor called Oberlin and his company makes Lenz less restless. A man called Kaufmann visits and they have a discussion about art in which Lenz disagrees with him because he does not support the view that art should represent a copy of reality. When Lenz is alone again, his mental condition deteriorates. At the end of the story, he isolates himself and heads off into nature. In this way, the work has a cyclic structure, because the beginning and end are characterized by the same miserable feelings of a lonely writer who is trying to get a grip on life. Ziarek claims that art “[...] opens a distance from the I, a distance that furnishes a direction, a road that art traverses. Celan’s own questioning continues precisely within this opening, in the direction suggested by Lenz” (138). To return to ‘The Meridian,’ then, during Lenz’s conversation about art, he is no longer conscious about himself and therefore Celan speculates that “Perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself” (44).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In view of this claim from ‘The Meridian,’ the following lines from Celan’s poem ‘Psalm’ dwell upon the inaccessible, strange Other by presenting it as a “no one”:  
“No one moulds us again out of earth and clay, / no one conjures our dust. / No one. /

In order to further understand Celan's assertions in his speech, it is helpful to go back to Levinas's ideas. Levinas believes that through poetry we can withdraw from the world because it extracts words from the belongingness to a subject (29). As such, the intentional consciousness is shattered and we are depersonalized from words. This depersonalization should not be interpreted negatively, because it is a crucial characteristic of the relation between poetry and the Other. Poetry moves away from the voice of the subject in order to respond on its own behalf to the appeal of the Other. In other words, the relation of proximity is independent of a subject and his/her conceptual mastery, so that poetry in its "physical shape" is exposed and receptive to the possible meaning of alterity. Levinas also explains that the artwork opens a new world which precedes everyday life. This can be understood as the *il y a* which is "essentially alien and it strikes us" (11). With regard to Celan's statement, then, it can be said that poetry moves toward the *il y a* or otherness which is, for Celan, "the uncanny and strange." He clarifies that the other is strange or uncanny precisely because it goes beyond what is human "[...] into a realm which is turned toward the human" but in which art "seems to be at home" (42).

For Levinas, an experience with the other is thus similar to being involved in an experience with poetry. Yet poetry, a physical shape which moves towards the other, cannot be equated with otherness. Bruns posits that the movement of poetry "[...] is not toward a point of being finished but a ceaseless, open-ended movement of indeterminacy toward what is always elsewhere" (*Modern Poetry* 19). Nevertheless, the very fact that poetry moves towards the other and bespeaks it means that it acknowledges alterity, in contrast with ordinary speech. Celan claims that: "the poem has always hoped [...] to speak also on behalf of the strange – no, I can no longer use this word here – on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other" (48). It is important to underscore that Celan's understanding of poetry and alterity consists of an ethical dimension with regard to another person.

In view of Levinas's ethics, otherness presents itself in the guise of another person. The Other appeals to us, hence we must take up the responsibility to respond to its claim. However, since the Other is not identical to a human being, we cannot simply communicate with it by means of dialogue. As a result, an alternative way to approach the Other consists of nearness or proximity. To return to Celan, then, otherness is not simply the otherness of another person, but rather the otherness of the other person's language. Fynsk explains that "the relation

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Praised be your name, no one. / For your sake / we shall flower / towards / You" (Hamburger 69). Moreover, the last lines of this poem indicate the direction of poetry towards a lyrical 'You.' This personal pronoun can be seen as the condition of dialogue which entails the movement away from the conscious self.

in question is a relation in and of language, for the relation to the other toward which the poem moves and which it seeks to bring to speech is given essentially in language” (175). This means that the ethical relation can only take place in language. Yet the possibility of a conversation is not possible either, since the Other is placed “[...] beyond the world, beyond the limits of what can be seen, and what can be named by language” (Ziarek 146). In its relation to the Other, poetry will always reach towards it, but speaking *towards* the Other is a waiting for a response that will never come. The movement of poetry to the Other will thus result in silence. Bruns asserts that “Modern poetry is non-discourse: the modern poetic act is not intentional; it is a refusal to mean” (*Modern Poetry* 195). Though it is not clear what Bruns means by “non-discourse,” nevertheless, poetry is not a negation of meaning, but rather its meaning is just not a matter of corresponding to concepts. The meaning of poetry lies in its movement towards an inaccessible otherness which it tries to encounter. This movement does not result in a space where poetry and alterity meet, but one should rather consider poetry to be a perpetual relation towards the Other which is independent of our conceptual mastery. There is thus more than our conceptualization and this “more” cannot be reduced to a concept whereby the relation between poetry and alterity remains open.

In the previous section the notion of an ethical relation was touched upon when it was discussed that, for Celan, poetry is a movement and speaking to the Other. It is true that a conversation with the Other is not similar to a dialogue and perhaps some will for this reason claim that it is inaccurate to speak of a “conversation.” Yet, Celan posits that “the poem becomes conversation – often desperate conversation” (49). The conversation is desperate because there will not be any response; the Other maintains its alterity. According to Ziarek, the Other cannot be seen as a participant in a conversation “rather, the other must be seen as the very condition of dialogue” (148). This can be linked to the notion of ethical responsibility. More precisely, it is due to the existence of the Other that poetry experiences the need to reach it. As indicated earlier, in Levinas’s ethics the notion of responsibility does not mean that one can choose to turn towards the Other. Responsibility is part of the relation to alterity which means that one will always be turned towards the Other, whether one wants to or not. Likewise, poetry takes up the responsibility towards the Other by speaking and moving towards it. Or perhaps it is better to say that poetry speaks precisely because the existence of the Other. In line with these reflections, Fynsk states: “For the approach, Celan says, is in ‘dialogue’: the poem answers to what it approaches or it broaches a “conversation” (164). The movement of poetry towards otherness is a matter of nearness or proximity because language gives no words for the experience of alterity. As such, Celan argues in ‘The Meridian’ that

“the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence” (48). It is important to consider what it means to speak about a language that has no words for the Other with whom it stands in a relation. Silence does not indicate an inability to speak, instead, it should be understood in a philosophical sense which implies that it refers to a form of communication with Nothing.<sup>5</sup> The Other is not a phenomenon which can be conceptually understood or remain present, it is rather “No-thing.” The silence of language, from Celan’s point of view, then indicates that the voice of mastery and conceptualization is silenced in order to bring the materiality of words to the fore.<sup>6</sup> The materiality or “physical shape” is language in its purest, silent form and makes way for communication with the Other. In short, silence is a mode of discourse where conceptual voice is silenced to let language speak. Fynsk, for one, states that: “Despite its silence, and perhaps even through its silence [...] language gives itself as the persistence of the possibility of relation. A pure possibility, we might say, for in its silence it gives no relation other than a relation to itself as “reachable” (161).

With reference to this statement, it can be clearly understood that the relation with the Other can become possible through silence. It is in the unspoken condition of language, then, that things exist as beings and not as signifieds. That is, the silencing of language is not similar to an absence of words, but to an impossibility of poetry to speak or articulate an unspeakable alterity. As such, language simply *is* and it does not represent anything. Bruns speaks of “negative discourse” only because poetry cannot be used to signify or represent anything in our world (*Modern Poetry* 194). But this negativity, however, does not mean that poetry is meaningless. Instead, in modern poetry the belief that language is a system of signification is negated. To put it in a different manner, poetry, as an activity, reaches out towards the Other and in its approach to the Other, becomes silent and ceases to signify anything so that its material being or “physical shape” is brought to the fore. As Ziarek puts it: “Attempting to address otherness, to bespeak it, the poem already silences itself, refrains from words, from naming and compromising the other [...] the encounter becomes possible only in silence, yet in silence in a sense produced or induced by words” (140). Silence has thus nothing to do with the inadequacy of language but is rather a waiting for words, in their materiality, to encounter the Other.

<sup>5</sup>Nothing is deliberately capitalized in order to evoke the analogy with the Other.

<sup>6</sup>The first line from the poem ‘Radix, Matrix’ beautifully indicate this materiality and silence: “As one speaks to stone, like you” (Hamburger 139). The Other is conceived as a stone – an image which is often present in Celan’s poems – which could point to the materiality of its being. Furthermore, the idea of a conscious self is undermined which can be noticed in lines such as “At that time when I was not there, / at that time when you / paced the ploughed field, alone.” This absence of the I is clearly linked to a presence of the Other or “you.”

The absence of the propositional form of language seems to be a prerequisite for the silencing of language and for a possible encounter with otherness. Nevertheless, pure alterity or otherness will always remain unreachable, so silence can only be a relation of proximity. So far it is fair to assume that Celan's 'The Meridian' can be characterized as ethical in a Levinassian sense. Poetry stands in an ethical relation with the Other towards which it is heading and this Other is a form of meaning that goes beyond language and comprehension. In the same way, existents stand in a relation with existence or the *il y a* which is equally incomprehensible and cannot be grasped by means of ordinary speech. It is rather through the materiality of the word and the world that the nearness or proximity of otherness can be sensed. As such, the ethical relation is characterized by a distance because the poetic word can only come near the experience of otherness through silence, but it cannot express alterity.

However, it has been mentioned that poetry moves in a space towards somewhere else, but it is unclear so far whether it is possible to locate this space and whether an encounter with alterity can be realized. Celan asks himself the following question: "Can we perhaps now locate the strangeness [...], can we locate this place, this step?" (46). Fioretos explains that Celan's poetry seems to be moving towards an unlocated light (320). This light has been referred to by Celan as "a utopian light" (51). When we speak of words in their materiality and their withdrawal from our world, Celan argues, "[...] we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an 'open' question 'without resolution,' a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces – we have ventured far out. The poem also searches for this place" (50). This fragment of 'The Meridian' indicates that poetry is in search of a specific place in its movement towards the Other. However, at the end of his speech, Celan concedes the following: "None of these places can be found. They do not exist" (54). Consequently, it seems to be the case that the encounter with the Other—which poetry hopes for—cannot happen. After all, it might seem logical that poetry cannot reach something which is nowhere. Still, this sentence requires a reformulation since it is rather the case that poetry cannot reach Being instead of 'something.' This Being, existence or otherness is nowhere simply because it cannot be approached as a phenomenon which is part of the poetic realm.

In the essay "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other" Levinas states: "The movement thus described goes from place to non-place, from here to utopia" (42). This statement shows that poetry is directed towards a 'nowhere' which is seen as a utopia. Why, however, would one associate these terms? Usually 'utopia' is semantically linked with words such as 'paradise' or 'promised land.' A non-place, though, im-

plies ‘dislocatedness’ and ‘statelessness’ which does not sound like a promise. Nevertheless, utopia has to be understood as a non-place or a-topia that is meaningful precisely because it is nowhere. The Other is beyond comprehension or language, so any definition or description would incorrectly presume that an access to the meaning of otherness is possible. If one can grasp it, it would be fair to assume that one can convey it by means of language, that is, language which is made up of meanings and concepts. However, there is no single realm of signification because understanding otherness is impossible and, more importantly, language will always fall short in the face of the Other because otherness is located in a pre-syntactic realm.<sup>7</sup> It would be incorrect to assume that poetry, in its movement towards the Other, will at one point arrive at a place where the Other dwells. An arrival would imply that poetry has left its own place or poetic realm in order to enter the realm of the Other and the relation with the Other, as such, has come to an end. Nevertheless, this will not happen because the relation with the Other is always there and poetry cannot escape it. Instead of a relationship that is closed, then, poetry cannot reach otherness so there is an open-ended movement towards somewhere else. In this sense, Celan states that “[...] the absolute poem – no, it certainly does not, cannot exist” (51).

The fact that Celan’s poems are on their way to a non-place should not be interpreted as something hopeless or pessimistic. His view rather requires a reconsideration of truth. To be more specific, in Celan’s poetics, meaning is to be found in the nomadic movement of poetry. Bruns calls Celan’s language “a “nomad” language whose words leave behind the space of their meanings” (*Anarchy of Poetry* 20). This nomadism refers to language’s internal movement to the Other which can be frequently noticed in Celan’s poems in which there is often an “I” going or speaking to a “you.” In addition, Levinas believes that “the absolute poem does not say the meaning of being [...] it speaks the defection of all dimension; it goes toward utopia” (46). This “speaking of the defection of all dimension” can be linked to the silencing of language. Poetic language cannot articulate the in-

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<sup>7</sup>The utopic character of the other is referred to as a “forevered Nowhere” in the following lines from the poem ‘What’s written’: “What’s written goes hollow, what’s / spoken, seagreen, / burns in the bays, / dolphins race / through / liquefied names, / here in forevered Nowhere, / in a memory of out- / crying belles in – but where? / Who / in this / shadow quadrant / is grasping, who / underneath / glimmers up, glimmers up, glimmers up? (Felstiner 127). The repetition of “who” and the question at the end of the poem support the enigmatic meaning of the Other. From the first lines onwards, it becomes clear that the meaning of what is written is not similar to the one that the author has in mind because it “goes hollow” and what is spoken becomes “seagreen.” The adjective “hollow,” then, can imply the silent and preconceptual state of words in which there is an opening towards the Other and its possible meanings. Words are not fixed, but “liquefied names.”

expressible so its words become silent and nameless. This namelessness, though, implies an openness towards the meaning of the Other. In other words, if there are no words for alterity then every word can potentially relate to it and the relation is therefore based on infinite possibilities to approach the Other. By now it is perhaps easier to comprehend why an unreachable and unlocatable otherness is seen as a utopia or 'promised land.' To be precise, it depends on the notion of poetic truth. Fynsk states:

We may understand better now what it means to say that the poem is seeking its truth – its truth, in relation. Its truth is the opening of a possibility of relation realized in the movement of reaching poetically for an other. This is not its truth in the sense that this possibility would be something it brings to the other or institutes from itself. Rather, it would be something that come about or occurs as it proceeds [...] The poem seeks its truth in going to the other, it draws out a relation, a relation that is open-ended. (173)

The relation can only remain open-ended if otherness is a place that needs to be searched for. Truth is not to be located, for this would reduce the meaning of the ethical relation. Truth, then, lies with the impossibility of a possible place. Or, as Levinas puts it: "Outside all enrootedness and all dwelling: statelessness as authenticity" (44). In addition to the utopian character of alterity Celan claims in his speech that "[n]one of these places can be found. They do not exist." Nevertheless, he also expresses: "[...] I find something else. Ladies and gentlemen, I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road [...] I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters [...] I find... a meridian" (54–55). This statement leads us to the title of Celan's speech. According to Ziarek, the poetic meridian marks "the (im)possible encounter of language with the other" (161). It thus seems to be the case that the meridian is a curve which indicates the direction of poetry towards the other. It is a circular movement which does not end in a specific point. As such, this movement sustains the utopian character of the Other and, consequently, of truth.

In view of the above Celan's conceptions of the Other principally have an ethical dimension, which means that poetry experiences the responsibility to turn towards the call of the Other. This turn, though, will never be reciprocated because if it would, the infinite waiting for the presence of alterity will be brought to an end. Although the presence of the Other is impossible in Celan's poetics, as is the case in Levinas's ethics, it is precisely this impossibility that respects the excess of meaning that is inherent in the Other. Reaching the realm



of alterity would reduce the openness and continuous interpretations that poetry's relation to alterity can offer. An arrival cannot take place for the Other is a utopia or non-place: a realm which is undetermined and endless. Accordingly, poetry offers a turn towards the Other that is beyond comprehension and language.<sup>8</sup> To conclude, the poem 'To Stand' from Celan's poetry volume *Atemwende* (1967) illustrates the core of the relation between his poetry and alterity:

To stand, in the shadow  
of the scar up in the air.  
To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.  
Unrecognized,  
for you  
alone.

With all there is room for in that,  
even without  
language

(qtd. in Hamburger 82).



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<sup>8</sup>The larger point one could retrieve from these pages is that the movement of poetry towards an inaccessible Other is not just an interesting, abstract curiosity. In fact, Levinas's and Celan's take on alterity remains relevant today for it shows that poetry goes beyond the limits of our knowledge and consequently no act of interpretation can be definitive. Though literature occurs by means of signs, it is thus not restricted to it.

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# Indigeneity as Alive: Tommy Orange's Framework for a Present Tense People in *There There*

Greg Riggio

## Abstract

This paper explores the postmodern framework Tommy Orange crafts in *There There* to challenge hegemonic conceptions of indigeneity. These monolithic representations set limits on Indigenous peoples' ability to see themselves represented in the present tense real-world, thus, limiting their ability to see themselves as present tense peoples. As Orange's narrator-character states, "We've been fighting for decades to be recognized as present-tense peoples, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers." This usage of feathers is a reference to the process of being made into a relic in the American marketplace and historical narrative. Another of Orange's characters repeats this idea by referring to it as a photocopy of a copy of the image of an "Indian" in a textbook. This paper analyzes the postmodern literary techniques Orange uses to indigenize sources of power in the contemporary world in order to create strategies for Indigenous peoples living today to be modern, relevant, and alive.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous peoples in literature, Representations of indigeneity, Present tense people, Postmodernism, Social media, Authenticity, Tommy Orange*

"I feel we are failing when we allow the majority culture to burden us with its binaries: left behind or assimilated, saints or heathens, savages or healers, warriors or drunks. I don't know what to do with my definition of tragedy in the face of theirs. But I think the answer is always story."

—Terese Marie Mailhot, "Native American Lives Are Tragic..."

Beginning perhaps with the first reports back to Europe, settler-colonialism continues today with the appropriation of war bonnets at Coachella, Indigenous iconography in popular culture, racist sports team mascots, the criminalization of a political activist in Washington DC in favor of a wealthy white student, and a cigar store "Indian" standing at the entrance to Main Street in Disneyland. These examples are all alike in that they reveal the extent to which monolithic repre-

sentations continue to ignore the humanity and dignity of Indigenous peoples. To be monolithic is to be defined, often stereotypically, as a homogenous, characterless body without exception or consideration for individuality or truth. To essayist Terese Mailhot, this notion of being monolithic means being forced to identify with the many binaries imposed onto Indigenous peoples: left behind or assimilated, saint or heathen, savage or healer, warrior or drunk (“Native American Lives”). The definitions listed by Mailhot are static and fixed, and have been invented and reinforced to define Indigenous peoples and their culture. According to Blythe Tellefsen, such monolithic images still exist because Native history has primarily been recorded, fictionalized, and reproduced by those who own the means of production and the means of representation, too—white, non-natives (127). Gerald Vizenor refers to these types of representations as “manifest manners,” scriptural simulations that impose an invented “Indian” identity through a canonized body of literature that he describes as “the literature of dominance” (172). According to this thinking, the act of making or even thinking of Indigenous peoples monolithically is an active gesture of dominance, erasure, and genocide.

Because of these narratives, Mailhot states in her memoir *Heart Berries* that being Indigenous can also feel “false and contrived” and “[an identity] put upon us because they want us to stay relics” (134). This feeling stems from the fact that these narratives compress the temporality of Indigenous cultural history into the past tense, and the majority culture represents this compression through static objects that symbolically represent all Indigenous peoples like wooden cigar store advertising figures or red-skinned football mascots. While protest against these representations have always existed, the obstinacy of hegemonic representations has never been uprooted. As Tellefsen implies, this may be because racism and white supremacy are deeply rooted in the literary marketplace as much as it is part of the cultural frameworks of the US and North America. Nevertheless, authors, artists, filmmakers, and activists have never resisted the literature of dominance. As Mailhot also states in her memoir, the tool Indigenous peoples have always had to resist being made into a relic is storytelling and a body of authors she refers to as a “continuum against erasure” (112). Her notion of a continuum is described by Kenneth Roemer as a body of marginalized writers, artists, and activists who use their platform to question, revise, and replace their image as they are defined by non-Natives who controlled and still control the means of representation (Roemer 586).

Tommy Orange, author of the 2018 novel *There There*, is one of many participants in this continuum. In the writing of his 2018 nov-

el, Orange states that he wanted *There There* to be a polyphonic, multigenerational novel that would build a complex human identity for Indigenous peoples to replace the monolithic images described above (Beckerman). *There There* counters such erasures by resisting the mainstream inclination to universalize Native culture as existing only in the past tense. To accomplish this, Orange tasks himself with creating a present tense. Using the novel, Orange attempts to explicitly satisfy two goals in order to create this new temporality: to represent Native Americans as human beings living right now and to imbue twenty-first-century post-reservation “urban Indians” with new ways of remaining “Indian” without falling back on tropes and tired stereotypes (Gates). This goal pointedly counters the mainstream image of an “Indian” wearing a headdress and looking off into the distance, which one of Orange’s characters Dene states is a reproduction based on a copy of a copy of the image of an “Indian” from a textbook (Orange 40). Orange deconstructs such monolithic identities through a postmodern play with hegemonic “centers,” or notions of identity that ground peoples into fixed definitions. For Orange, these definitions are problematic in that they rely on stereotypes like “Indians” in headdresses, but more importantly, they ground Indigenous peoples in the past tense.

To deconstruct the monolithic, Orange refuses to ground his characters in any one definition or identity. Orange’s novel contains fifteen “urban Indian” characters represented across twelve narratives that intertwine when the characters coalesce at The Big Oakland Powwow<sup>1</sup> in Oakland, California. His cast includes Opal Viola Bear Shield, Orvil Red Feather, Jacquie Red Feather, Edwin Black, Thomas Frank, Tony Loneman, Dene Oxende, Bill Davis, Calvin Johnson, Octavio Gomez, Daniel Gonzalez, Blue, and Loother and Lony (Orvil’s brothers). Many of these characters are half-white, but several are ambiguously non-white or multiethnic. Furthermore, the novel defines several characters as Cheyenne, while others are never labeled. According to Ron Charles’ review for *The Washington Post*, *There There*’s characters replicate a diversity of “a group of peoples too often lumped together under a wooden stereotype [who hope] to perceive something beyond the image of uselessness and irrelevance that a racist nation insists upon.”

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<sup>1</sup>Powwow is an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to come together to maintain cultural identity and traditions through dance and ceremony. Along with social dancing, nearly all powwows have dance competitions, which awards dancers for their style and skill in their performance. Singers and drummers are integral in the dancing, and they may also win prizes. Along with honoring the rich heritage and living history of Indigenous peoples, powwows are also an opportunity to socialize, sell goods, and exhibit art.

Along with representing racial diversity, though, Orange's ensemble is more significantly diverse in how they intend to use the powwow that is the culminating event in the novel's timeline. Some members of Orange's ensemble, like Orvil and Edwin, use the powwow to discover their relations to a larger collective. Others use the powwow to create art, like Thomas, who drums for the dancers and Dene, who hopes to use attendees to record stories. However, characters like these are contrasted sharply to the group of characters containing Octavio, Tony, Calvin, Charles, and Carlos who see the powwow as the perfect opportunity to pull off a heist. Using plastic guns that were 3D printed by Daniel, the five characters attempt to steal the prize money for the powwow dance competition but their failure erupts in a confusing mess of violence when Carlos turns his gun on Octavio and the five men begin shooting at each other. The shooting results in all of the actors of the robbery getting shot, along with the characters Orvil, Thomas, Bill, and an unknown number of other powwow attendees who all get hit by stray bullets. Other than producing a dozen Indigenous perspectives, Orange uses this ensemble and the plotlines of their narratives to specifically contrast strategies for being present tense while still adopting Native tradition, culture, and history in the contemporary world. Here, this paper argues that it is best to read Orange's novel in relation to literary postmodernism and his Native postmodern forbearers like Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie, and Leslie Mormon Silko whose works question what best represents Indigenous expression, history, and tradition. Reading *There There* in relation to its postmodern forebearers is necessary because of Orange's shared effort to revise and replace historical narratives, highlighting a shift in Indigenous representation in print culture through the subversion of western power structures that support hegemonic conceptions of Indigenous experience, culture, and history. As Nancy Peterson cautions, though, this effort is not meant to be used to doubt the truth about history or an expression,<sup>2</sup> but it requires the acceptance of a belief that history is a text composed of competing and conflicting representations and meanings. Using Linda Hutcheon's theory of historicity, Peterson argues that Erdrich's novel *Tracks* conceived of a new way to make history to write against the lack of representation and misrepresentation. Erdrich's *Tracks*, therefore, works toward a new historicity (Peterson 984).

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<sup>2</sup>Here, Peterson cites Hutcheon's distinction between ontology (event) and history (narrative). Poststructuralism does not reject an event like the Holocaust or Wounded Knee but does reject the idea that an individual does not author history. She states that to use poststructuralism to question the occurrence of such horrific events is to inflict further violence on the victims and survivors (Peterson 984).

In crafting a new historicity, Orange's goal is to similarly deconstruct confining models of indigeneity in order to create a new space for his historiography of present tense Indigenous peoples. By raising the issue of historical representation and authenticity, Orange aligns his novel with a postmodernist understanding of history that Hutcheon refers to as "historiographic metafiction." In combining the words historiographic (study of historical methodology) and metafiction (a fictional work that examines fiction itself), Hutcheon conceives of a theoretical framework for a postmodernist trend in literature that is intensely self-reflexive and contains overtly parodic intertextuality. Historiographic metafiction, she states, gives a work of literature "worldly" grounding while at the same time allows for the questioning of the basis of authenticity of that grounding. She goes on to quote David Lodge, who states that postmodernism short-circuits the gap between text and the world (Hutcheon 3, 5). In the production of a metafictional text a work therefore creates a counter to "...an elitist isolationism that separates art from the world and literature from history" (28). Historiographic metafiction, in other words, creates a contact zone between art and the world and opens up a tension point between recorded history and fictive experience, leaving the reader to reconcile a new defamiliarized sense of history.

By opening such a rift in *There There*, Orange counters a "...textbook image that's remembered and spoken of in the past tense" (Petersen). His novel makes it impossible for readers to identify this past tense narrative as accurate, or a satisfactory way of representing the present. Not interested in merely teaching readers a new historical narrative, Orange tasks himself with reconciling a new defamiliarized sense of history in order to create and demonstrate the purpose of a new historical narrative. In his writing of the novel, Orange, therefore, participates in the contemporary project of a continuum against erasure to craft a new framework for a revised historicity, capable of defining living and present tense Indigenous peoples while also deconstructing the past-tense archetype embedded in the framework of "America." The most direct way in which Orange develops this framework is by presenting contrasting characters who have comfortable access to tradition, history, and ceremony with others who must rely on the Internet. For example, while his character Thomas Frank grew up with his father who is described as a "one thousand percent Indian" medicine man and spent his whole life as a powwow drummer, Orange's "full-blood character" Orvil Red Feather can only learn to powwow dance from watching videos on YouTube. The character Edwin Black similarly lacks access, as portrayed through his discovering that he is Cheyenne by randomly finding his father on Facebook, a social media platform where he also learns to call himself "Native" because that is



what everyone else does on the site. As we see in these three examples, Orange's characterization of indigeneity avoids familiar tropes and stereotypes that presume all Indigenous peoples have individual, spiritual connections to themselves and their past. Nevertheless, many of Orange's characters want that access, participate in ceremonies to look for it, and even wear feathered headdresses and regalia. Using an ensemble cast, Orange gives these types of expressions space while also looking for new ways to represent indigeneity. As he states in an interview with Marlena Gates, he wanted to conceive of new ways for twenty-first-century post-reservation Indians to remain Indian without falling back on tropes and tired stereotypes. For Orange, conceiving of new ways to represent indigeneity means his characters use the Internet, social media, modern dance, and hip-hop along with traditional powwow music and dancing, and are given space within his novel to do so.

In particular, *There There* is interested in questioning and replacing the hegemonic tradition of living on the reservation as a requirement for indigenous authenticity. The significance of the reservation, as engendered by writers like Sherman Alexie, is especially ill-fitting for members of *There There*'s ensemble who are multiracial or ineligible for, or disinterested in, tribal enrollment simply because they do not know to which tribe they might belong. Even Orange's characters who do not fit this description are caught in a paradox because they are all "displaced" in Oakland and disconnected from the power of the reservation to localize a tribe into one community. Orange's ensemble, therefore, represents 75% of the Indigenous population who now reside in cities and might feel disconnected from the epistemology of Alexie that deemed a relationship with the reservation essential for authentic indigeneity. The character Edwin best helps critique this reservation-based epistemology, as he does not know who his father is, and thus he does not have knowledge of what tribe he belongs to or what reservation he should visit. The only connection Edwin has to a general peoplehood is, again, on Facebook. It is because of input from his Native American Facebook friends on the platform that Edwin decides to use the label "Native" to describe himself. His mother, however, uses "Native American Indian," a term Edwin states is a "...weird politically correct catchall you only hear from white peoples who have never known a real native person" (Orange 69). The fact that Edwin uses "Native" and not this phrase suggests that his contact with Native peoples online makes him a non-white person despite his lack of access to a more specific tribal identity.

Along with Facebook, Edwin also engages in the virtual world through an online game, *Second Life*, to craft an identity that is a more

idealized Native version of himself. When readers first meet Edwin, he cannot leave the toilet due to a crippling bout of constipation, which along with the missing information about his father, makes it impossible for him to go to a reservation, let alone go in search of his father and discover which reservation he should visit. As a result, Edwin relies on *Second Life* to engage in and explore the world in which he lives, but more importantly, he relies on the virtual world for a traditional performance of indigeneity. Even though the virtual world of *Second Life* allows users free reign to create entirely original characters, Edwin creates an avatar that he defines as being “raised on the reservation with his dad.” This detail is essential because, given a chance to author himself, Edwin makes himself more distinctly Native American. Rather than turning towards the white world of his mother or any other original invention, he chooses to know his dad, tribe, reservation, and peoples (although neither his tribe nor reservation receive a name). Even though Edwin in the real world of the novel is overweight, unemployed, and disconnected from his indigeneity, Edwin states that “the Edwin Black of my *Second Life* was proud. He had hope” (63).

The Internet in the novel subsequently serves as an access point to indigeneity that, while mediated, provides a sense of cultural inheritance that earlier works like *Ceremony* seemed to take for granted. Whereas Tayo in Silko’s *Ceremony* found a center through Betonie’s teaching him about performing ceremony, such connections are conceivable for some characters in *There There* primarily through the virtual network of the Internet. Despite seeming to locate a “center,” however, these characters still fail to feel situated in the world as authentic Native Americans because of it. Orange’s character Opal, for example, has decided not to “force” these traditions and cultural practices onto his brothers Orvil, Loother, and Lony. Therefore, even though Orvil wants to participate in these practices, he must rely on YouTube videos of powwow dance to learn the same. While enabling access to ceremony and tradition, YouTube does not imbue Orvil with the same sense of legitimacy that the social media network of Facebook gave to Edwin—and certainly not what Tayo gets from Betonie in *Ceremony*. As a result, the Internet spurs an existential crisis for Orvil about how he fits into his peoplehood, making him feel like a fraud and like he is “acting Indian” because he is not really powwow dancing. Using Google, Orvil asks, “What does it mean to be a real Indian?” and discovers the term “pretendian” on [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com),<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Some entries that Orange’s character might have seen include: “Person who falsely claims Native American heritage, lineage, Indian hoaxers”; “A wannabe American Indian”; “Every white person in America that claims to be ‘part’ Native American.”

which reinforces a notion of self that makes Orvil feel like he is dressed “like an Indian” (121). Moving from dancing in front of his mirror to dancing at the Big Oakland Powwow allows Orvil to see that all the powwow dancers are “Indians dressed as Indians.” When he discovers his connection to these men, his feelings of being a fraud dissipate, leading him to see himself as an equal to them. Although a meaningful connection only happens when he joins an IRL network, the Internet was nevertheless essential for Orvil because Opal refused to pass on cultural inheritance, and thus Orvil needed to author these relations himself. As Orange shows through these examples, there is a need for new models to compensate for changing attitudes, and in the twenty-first-century, that tool can be the ubiquitous Internet. Highlighting this tool in his novel is essential as it reflects a current trend in online activism undertaken by contemporary writers, artists, politicians, and activists who are attempting to reclaim Indigenous representation and resist invisibility in what is being regarded by some as a new wave “renaissance.”<sup>4</sup> Besides Mailhot and Orange, other well-reviewed contemporary writers of this movement include Natalie Diaz, Tommy Pico, Layli Long Soldier, Joshua Whitehead, and b: william bearheart (sic).

A boisterous population on the Internet also accompanies this recent boom in publishing. Instagram and Twitter particularly seem to be giving Indigenous peoples a wealth of self-generated, representative images and stories, accessible on an endless scroll with the hashtag: “#WeAreStillHere.” This hashtag is on almost all of the Instagram feed of the Apsáalooke<sup>5</sup> photojournalist, Adam Sings in the Timber, especially in photographs that make up his “Indigenizing Colonized Spaces” series. In this series, Adam Sings in the Timber posts photographs of Indigenous models occupying spaces like the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, where the university built its Bascom Hall over a Ho-Chunk burial mound in 1857. In the photo “Indigenizing Colonized Spaces with Starla No. 8,” photographed in the Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois, Sings in the Timber’s model Starla stands in vibrantly colored Anishinaabe regalia, posed next to mannequins encased in glass and dressed in drably colored regalia. This image presents a visual juxtaposition that challenges a viewer’s ability to define the traditional dress as an artifact because Starla, in her brightly

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<sup>4</sup>Mailhot states in *Heart Berries* that Alexie told her that he came up with this phrase when trying to conceptualize a program for Native Writers at the Institute of American Indian Arts. According to Mailhot, Alexie said it would be a “renaissance” (Mailhot Heart 58).

<sup>5</sup>Also known as the Crow or Absaroka, the Apsáalooke are a Plains tribe. Crow is the English name, which originated as a mistranslation of Apsáalooke by French interpreters, who mistranslated “people of the crow” from “people of the large-beaked bird” (Sturvtvant 714).

colored Anishinaabe regalia, is undoubtedly alive. However, the museum's display suggests a sense of history that bolsters a settler-colonial narrative that Native Americans are extinct both because these emblems of nativeness are displayed as if they are relics and because museums place these items alongside ancient Egyptian artifacts and dinosaur bones.

While museums are vital in preserving history and protecting cultural artifacts, the juxtaposition between historical artifacts and cultural emblems in museums, no doubt, underscores the anxiety of reflecting an extinct or ancient identity. This feeling is neatly epitomized in Natalie Diaz's poem "American Arithmetic" where she notes that while living as a Native woman in the US, she is doing her best not to become a "museum version of herself." Rather than reducing this excerpt to a representation of an individual self-consciousness, though, it should instead represent an invisibility that results from a lack of representation in contemporary domains of American life. Somah Haaland (daughter of Congresswoman Debra Haaland, one of the first two Indigenous women elected to the House of Representatives) similarly evokes this idea in a recent essay written for *Teen Vogue* magazine. Reflecting on the visibility she and her family experienced as they made their way onto the House floor dressed in their Pueblo regalia, Haaland states:

So much of America still sees us as savages in glass cases and our traditional dress as costumes to be worn. My mother, standing on the floor of the U.S. Congress in moccasins and turquoise jewelry, is a tangible symbol that we have survived... this could have been the first time peoples on Capitol Hill had really seen that we are still here.

Haaland's point, similar to that of Sings in the Timber, is to force us to consider the ways in which historical and official narratives fail to tell the whole story of Native history and the living present.

As concluded in the article "'Frozen in Time': The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding," such underrepresentation and false representation in the media leads to a deprivation of messages or strategies "for how to be a person." Instead, Native Americans, more than any other group, are seen and learn to see themselves through the lens of negative stereotypes (Leavitt et al. 40). For instance, the authors of this paper note that the majority of representations of Indigenous peoples are as sports team mascots, Hollywood film characters, and eighteenth and nineteenth-century figures, and almost 100% of search engine results for the keywords "Native American" and "American Indian" return results

that are historical representations (43). As their research showcases, stereotypes and false representations that make up the public perception of indigeneity directly lead to low self-esteem and self-consciousness and the feeling of invisibility among Indigenous peoples. It is this conclusion in particular that lead photographer and teacher Matika Wilbur to begin “Project 562.” After realizing that her students on her reservation had only “insipid and one-dimensional” Native role models to choose from, she embarked on a project to develop a body of imagery and cultural representations that create positive role models while also depicting the richness and diversity of lived experiences in Indian country (Lippit).<sup>6</sup>

The work undertaken by Matika Wilbur and Adam Sings in the *Timber*, as well as in the article “Frozen In Time,” encourages consideration for the role storytelling can take to counter invisibility, especially when it is self-generated and easily distributed using the Internet and social media. For Orange, this thinking manifests in *There There* in two ways: metafictional storytelling and, of course, the creation of a present tense peoplehood. What best defines Orange’s metafictional approach is the character Dene’s StoryCorps-style project to capture a wealth of contemporary Native American stories. Like the non-profit StoryCorps, which sets up storytelling booths in order to record, collect, and share the stories of everyday Americans, Dene sets up a booth to record, collect, and share the stories of his Native American community. Indeed, this project directly mirrors the undertaking Orange takes on with the writing of his novel.

While StoryCorps tries to preserve “humanity’s stories,” Dene’s desire to collect stories stems from a claim in the novel’s prologue that the mainstream image of Native American life is a copy of a copy of the image of an “Indian” from a textbook. Because of these images, Dene claims that the only stories he has about himself are pathetic visions of the Native experience he has seen on screen (Orange 7, 40). Dene is no doubt referring to a list of films mentioned in the novel’s prologue that reinforce these textbook images: *Apocalypto* (2006), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975). This likely also includes the Google search results mentioned by Leavitt et al. What these representations lead to, Dene states, is the invisibility of actual Indigenous peoples in general and “urban Indians” more specifically. To counter invisibility and erasure, Dene sets up a booth and films peoples who are willing to tell their stories so that he can record a history that will replace the current, tragic, and

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<sup>6</sup>Wilbur also co-hosts a podcast with writer Adrienne Keene called *All My Relations*. Together they explore different topics facing Indigenous peoples today such as mascots, blood quantum, fashion/appropriation, sexuality, and food sovereignty.

one-dimensional model.

However, the voices Orange records in his project do not find total satisfaction or empowerment from the Internet alone, thus, strengthening this paper's claim that he is not looking to disconnect from traditional centers of indigeneity completely. For example, Orvil still needs the powwow, and Edwin still wants to meet his real dad, in the novel. It is also worth noting that Edwin chooses the idealized version of himself to live on a reservation. Reservations are considered essential tools for maintaining and preserving what could be considered cultural heritage, or more broadly, sovereignty. Within the borders of the reservation exists the idea that there is safety from the dominant culture, enabling Native peoples to maintain control of traditional lifestyles, languages, and cultures. The reservation might, therefore, be seen as a physical access point—allowing Indigenous peoples to connect to a sense of indigeneity while also aiding in developing authenticity and pride, as is suggested in Edwin's crafting of himself in *Second Life*. While the Internet in *There There* destabilizes the concept that authentic indigeneity requires strict adherence to culture and tradition, Orange is still conscious of the significance of relations like the reservation to achieve present tense personhood.

Rather than furthering the hegemonic power of the reservation, Orange's novel focuses on developing the validity of having consciousness off the reservation in major urban centers in America where the majority of Native peoples now live. As Orange argues in his interview with Marlena Gates, "there's not going to be some massive move back to the reservations, so we have to forge a new identity that is related to the city in a way that we bring cultural values and ways with us." Although reservations were once the way to connect to the center of Native American identity, Orange states that they should no longer define lived experience for everyone. Thus, the center must be redefined or eliminated for Indigenous to be present tense in the contemporary world. While he partially develops a present in *There There* using the Internet, he is not moving beyond all traditions of indigeneity as demonstrated through the significance of powwow in the novel. As a result, Orange's novel looks for new ways for the 75% of Native Americans living in cities to identify as Indigenous without relying on stereotypes. To do so, he also modifies cultural signifiers that need to be present tense for twenty-first-century Native Americans to have present tense representation.

By destabilizing and replacing past tense signifiers, Orange gestures towards a postmodern philosophical approach to understand indigeneity. Similar to how his forbearers used literature to shape new representations to replace white hegemonic narratives, Orange's goal

for *There There* aligns itself with a discourse from the late twentieth century that no longer defines such frameworks as foundational or objective truths. Postmodernist thinking, for Orange, aids in the development of present tense Indigenous relationships because it subverts the notion of epistemic truths, reshaping long believed facts into products of a settler-colonial discourse that lead to the hegemonic simulation of the “Indian” mythology in the first place. As a result, postmodernism helps bring to light the fact that myths regarding the “Indian” are inaccurate and inauthentic, and are thus scripted by colonial discourse; what Gerald Vizenor refers to as “manifest manners.”

By creating an absence of truth, or “center,” Orange is therefore tasked with negotiating new ground—a space this essay defines as the present tense. This thinking most clearly originates with Gerald Vizenor, who challenged the universality of Western literary concepts in favor of a Native epistemology (Stratton 53). More specifically, he sought to decenter historical narratives echoed in the literary canon. For example, because history was written by colonizers, Vizenor indicates that Wounded Knee should be defined as “a massacre of tribal women and children,” as opposed to “the last major battle of the Indian Wars” (Vizenor 159). Fabrications such as these shape thinking and writing about Native peoples, maintaining mythologies that they are extinct or still primitive and thus existing only in the past tense. To decenter this thinking, Vizenor invented the term “postindian,” an ironic gesture that borrows language of Western epistemologies to subvert, resist, and repudiate the vocabulary of manifest manners with the term “Indian” (Laga 119).<sup>7</sup> Whereas “Indians” are the past, Vizenor conceives of the “post.”

Orange’s novel similarly doubts the universality of Western literary concepts but also draws into doubt the versatility of Native epistemologies, again, as they no longer account for actual Indigenous peoples living today. Unlike Vizenor, though, Orange’s characters should not be seen as ironic post-anythings, but reflective representations of present lived experiences. For Orange, there is no “center,” just as there is no “there,” a point drawn from Gertrude Stein’s quote about Oakland, a criticism that states there is no *there* there. Orange’s character Dene affirms Stein’s quote, stating that for Native peoples in

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<sup>7</sup>As quoted in a profile of Tommy Orange for the New York Times, poet Tommy Pico defines the term “Indian” as an identity imposed on a myriad of Indigenous peoples by the American government to rob them of their distinctions. As a result, he chooses to use the term “NDN,” which, by contrast, indigenizes the colonized power of language by creating a new identity (Alter). Teresa Mailhot, however, states that she chooses to use the word “Indian” in order to signify the politics embedded in the word and the bureaucracy of North America (Petersen).

the US and throughout the Americas, where everything has been built over ancestral land, making the memories covered and unreturnable, there never has been a “there there.”

As such, Orange’s novel attempts to do what Jacques Derrida called for in his essay *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* and encourage play, rather than promote the devotion to one structural center. For Derrida, the notion of play encouraged the deconstruction of the “center” that structuralists thought of as an anchor between sign and signifier, which stabilized meaning into unity or communicability. According to this thinking, a structure permits play only within its “total form,” but Derrida and postmodernism state, this “totality” is a fantasy meant to sell reality as a neat and communicable experience (Derrida 212, 220). Such play is essential to note in *There There*, as it allows Orange to refuse the notion of a “center” that keeps peoples grounded in false and harmful past-tense identities. Jean-François Lyotard’s 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition* demands that we wage war against the fascism of totality and do so in order to embrace discomfort and terror (82). Orange undoubtedly demands that his readers experience such discomfort and terror, seen through his embrace of instability as a way to deconstruct the notion of a “center” in the historical narrative of “the Indian.” In his usage of play, Orange is able to encourage hybridity and the mixing of genre, style, and tradition in order to create a new way of practicing indigeneity in the present tense. This idea most notably appears in his novel when his character Edwin spends almost an entire page reflecting on whether or not he should drink a Pepsi, a product Alexie frequently uses as a symbol of popular culture that defines the American identity (Tellefsen 126). Orange’s character Tony, also reads Erdrich’s work to his grandmother, Maxine—literature regarded by him as “Indian stuff” that he often does not understand.

Contrary to Tony’s notion of “Indian stuff,” Edwin admires group of First Nation DJs called A Tribe Called Red. This genre choice stands in contrast to Orvil, who exclusively listens to powwow music in order to feel that he is relating to something “specifically Indian” when he hears the energy of the booming drum and intensity of the singing (Orange 126). In a play with hybridization and an overt gesture towards postmodern philosophy, Edwin states that A Tribe Called Red is:

...the most modern, or more postmodern, form of Indigenous music I’ve heard that’s both traditional and new-sounding. The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it’s stuck in the past. The catch, or the double bind, about the whole thing is this: If it isn’t pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And



if it's stuck in the past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous peoples living now, how can it be modern? (77)

As his meditation on music suggests, Edwin needs more than the ritualistic, mystic, or ancient powwow music and so he listens to A Tribe Called Red, who sample traditional powwow drum beats and modernize them by mixing the beats with electronic dance music. As Edwin's analysis of A Tribe Called Red suggests, the relationship between this sign and signifier cannot be dependent upon the past alone because it is not always relevant to Indigenous peoples living now. As a result, what is modern can be appropriated within representation strategies to give Indigenous peoples examples of existing in the contemporary world, which also allows for present tense representations in the media.<sup>8</sup>

Another way the novel crafts this point is by connecting the image of powwow dancing to breakdancing, seen in Orvil's claim that the powwow dancer he watched on YouTube "...moved like gravity meant something different for him. It was like break dancing in a way... but both new—even cool—and ancient seeming" (121). Similar to A Tribe Called Red's unification of the "ancient" and "contemporary" by mixing powwow music with dance beats, the hybridization of dance that Orvil notes suggests a way to express indigeneity that is not solely rooted in arcane traditions. Providing a helpful frame to the concept of postmodern hybridity in indigeneity, and mirroring Orange's conception of powwow as a type of breakdance, is an exhibit that ran at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City titled *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound*. The exhibit, which ran between November 2017 and January 2019, was dedicated to depicting indigeneity in motion, not "frozen in amber as romantic depictions in popular culture would have you believe" (Galanin). In one multimedia piece titled "Tsu Heidei Shugaxutaan 1 and 2," Nicholas Galanin explored the connection between contemporary breakdancing and the traditional powwow. To produce this piece, Galanin filmed a Tlingit dancer and a non-Tlingit break dancer but swapped the dancers' musical tracks, so that the Tlingit dancer moves to an electronic track and the breakdancer moves to a traditional Tlingit song. This swap allows Galanin to highlight Tlingit song and dance as both "contemporary and relevant," showing "what is possible when culture is

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<sup>8</sup>Similar artists include Northern Cree, DJ Shub, Snotty Nose Rez Kids, Frank Waln, and CloZee. All these artists represent the idea of modern Indigenous expression in music differently, further offering diversity among the notion of play in present tense indigeneity. For example, Snotty Nose Rez Kids make trap music, while Northern Cree hardly features any "modern" musical elements whatsoever. Their song titles like "Facebook Drama," "Tribez," and "Hey B-)" nevertheless disrupt the notion that traditional music exists only in the past tense.

allowed to grow and expand to navigate new circumstances.”

Similarly expressed in *There There*, the text illustrates a desire for new forms of Indigenous expression, which can help Native peoples navigate through new circumstances in the contemporary world. This is an especially helpful tool for Orvil, who navigates indigeneity on his own, for being able to conceive powwow dancing in relation to a familiar non-Indigenous dance which allows him to make it intelligible. His experience with the YouTube dancer might be divorced from a specific cultural language, but he is still able to express an appreciation for the dancer’s ability to bypass limitations of gravity in the performance of ceremony. Thus, Orvil still recognizes the traditional importance of the dance but does not do so by depending solely on the idea of a mystic past. This mystic past seems to be a problem for Orange. It is something his novel features, but it is not something his novel embraces to a clear, rational end. The most notable occurrence of such mysticism in the novel is the spider legs that both Orvil and Opal pull off their legs. The discovery of spider legs is an important event for both of these characters: Opal believes as an adult that the spider legs she found when she was a teen somehow prove her existence as a Native woman. However, whether or not this is true is unclear as neither Orvil nor Opal understand what they represent, and readers never receive an explanation for the same in the diegesis of the novel. Instead, these symbols remain representative of “something NDN,”<sup>9</sup> as one of the characters puts it. This explanation comes from a diegetic text message from the character Jackie in which she vaguely states the kids interpreted them that way (Orange 101).

More important than the meaning of the mystic spider legs is that they suggest that the mere presence of “something ndn” does not make someone feel any more “ndn.” These vague signifiers, much like listening to powwow music or dressing in regalia, are perhaps acts of participation or symbolic traditions, but they do not define a person. Again, dressing in regalia makes Orvil feel like a “pretendian” as a reference to dressing “like an Indian” but not actually being “an Indian.” Orvil does not feel this sense of authenticity from the symbolic regalia until he is in a locker room at the Big Oakland Powwow, surrounded by other men also dressed as Indians that he sees as “Indians dressed as Indians.” His feelings of being a fraud might dissipate in the

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<sup>9</sup>NDN is the phonetic spelling of “Indian,” but rids the term of its derogatory, settler-colonial connotation. Poet Tommy Pico states that he uses ndn to reclaim his identity, as it subverts the colonial power of the word “Indian.” In contrast to “Indian,” “ndn” indigenizes the colonized power of language by creating a new identity (Alter). While some identify the term as a new creation originating in the era of texting and Internet shorthand, the phrase appears earlier than this. One such appearance is on a t-shirt that reads “ndn pride,” seen in the 1998 film *Smoke Signals*.

presence of traditional markers of Native American culture but, more importantly, they dissipate in the presence of his relations with other Indigenous.

Orange's multitude of Indigenous representations are authentic because of their open-ended approach to indigeneity. While Orvil does eventually develop feelings of authenticity when he is dressed in regalia and surrounded by other Indigenous peoples, Octavio cannot even fathom what regalia represents except "Indian shit." When planning for the powwow heist, Octavio uses this descriptor to Tony, but does not (or cannot) specify what he means. Lacking descriptive language, Octavio states in frustration to Tony: "I don't know, what they put on, feathers and shit" (Orange 25). Until Chapter 10, readers have very little evidence that Octavio is Indigenous at all, primarily because of his representation as an outsider through his usage of binaries, separating himself and the "they" who wear regalia and participate in powwow. However, Octavio is Indigenous and readers later see him helping his uncle make a medicine box, a container filled with items believed to protect or empower its owner with spiritual energy. Octavio, therefore, functions as a reminder to readers that monolithic markers of indigeneity like regalia, powwow, and medicine boxes do not define actual Indigenous peoples. Instead, Orange uses characters, like Octavio, who juxtapose traditions and stereotypes to validate such an existence for Indigenous peoples and to invent new ways to connect with a "center" at a time when traditions are no longer a unifying practice for all.

As Orange depicts throughout the development of his characters, subversion of stereotypes in *There There* does not come at the expense of re-mythologizing Indigenous characters with more monolithic identities. While some of Orange's characters are living with what might be stereotypical Indigenous signifiers of alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, fetal alcohol syndrome, feelings of inferiority, geographic displacement, and feelings of confusion that come from not knowing or not being able to relate to a peoplehood, he does not replicate these in his novel as signifiers of indigeneity. He instead treats these realities as consequences of contemporary Indigenous life. The tragic facts of disproportionate violence that Indigenous peoples face are subverted in *There There* in the text's merging of realities with historical violence against Indigenous peoples, thus evolving the image of Native Americans beyond past-tense, monolithic identities.

What *There There* seems to demonstrate most clearly is that, along with the destruction of monolithic models, there is also a need to deconstruct frameworks that define indigeneity as being one thing or the other. While the majority culture burdens Indigenous peoples with

its binaries, as Mailhot states, Orange might fear publishing a work that replicates the process of creating problematic monolithic relics, and it is likely for this reason Orange adopts an ensemble cast that resists the mainstream motive to universalize and build collectivity and community. This might be why Orange's novel plays a game with its readers regarding Indigenous identifiers. Along with these examples of postmodern play, Orange also notably directs the readers towards his postmodern forebearers by explicitly referencing and borrowing from Alexie, Silko, and Erdrich. Along with the novel's page long meditation on Pepsi, Orange also seems to draw influence from Erdrich and her novel, *Tracks*. Similar to this novel, *There There* forces readers to question historical representation and its relation to realism. By perceiving history as a text, it can then be thought of as revisable, leading to new perceptions of historicity, or historical actuality (as opposed to myth or fiction). Erdrich's novel highlights this concern through its examination of how official documentation determines hegemonic historical consciousness as opposed to oral history that foregrounds Indigenous historical narratives. In writing her Anishinaabe elder Nanapush's storytelling to his granddaughter Lulu, Erdrich shapes a new historicity by shifting the narrative voice of Nanapush from a "we" (representing the Anishinaabe peoples) to an "I" (representing a personal narrative as the only surviving witness). As Peterson states, this pronoun usage signifies an attempt to empower Lulu through a personal narrative that goes beyond the limits of documentary history and its politics (985).

In a key gesture to this examination of history, Orange's novel employs a narrator-character who speaks omnisciently using first-person plural pronouns "we" and "us" in the novel's essayistic prologue and interlude chapters. If Nanapush represents one surviving witness who is capable of empowering one individual, Orange's narrator-character is resolutely collective. He states:

We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians... Urban Indians and Indigenous Indians, Rez Indians... members of tribes and disenrolled members, ineligible members and tribal council members... full-blood, half-breed, quadron, eighths, sixteenths, sixty seconds. (Orange 136)

Not presenting the history of one tribe or one member, Orange's narrator-character uses a "we" to create a collective community. Regardless of tribal enrollment, enrollment status, or self-identifying (or imposed) labels, Orange's narrator-character includes everyone in the collective, and the narrator-character speaks on behalf of all, thus demonstrating unmediated access to the cultural inheritance

of all Native history. Additionally, Orange's narrator-character speaks with a closeness to Native history and tradition that his characters fail to hold on to or obtain. In imbuing his narrator-character with this extraordinary access, Orange de-historicizes the historical narratives and hegemonic models, in order to develop a new historicity based on the long living history of his characters and their culture.

Instead of giving readers clear answers, though, Orange's use of the narrator-character device disrupts readers' familiarity with monolithic Native history as it pertains to relationships to an Indigenous peoplehood and individual Indigenous identities. This narrative voice does not speak specifically about the novel's plot, nor is this voice the same speaker who narrates the novel's chapters written in third-person. Instead, this narrative voice works to defamiliarize the popular narrative of American history by establishing a critical framework for the historicity of *There There's* fictional world. This part of the text is likely frustrating for non-Native readers who are looking for the best, most appropriate catchall term to refer to all Indigenous peoples. In his intermission, Orange's narrator-character lists an extensive set of terms peoples use to refer to Native Americans but refuses to ever arrive at one definitive term. The only purpose of this list, and indeed much of Orange's work in *There There*, might be best described as a game Orange is playing with the role of fiction as a teaching tool—especially frustrating non-Native readers who might be inclined to Google “What should I call Indians?”

More important than simply frustrating white readers, though, Orange's novel is also deeply earnest. His mission, again, is not only to educate but to build a new framework; a new way of identifying and respecting diversity among Indigenous peoples. If underrepresentation and false representation prevent Indigenous individuals from learning how to be a person in the contemporary world, Orange's novel presents strategies for attaining present tense personhood: the internet, social media, popular music, modern dance, and of course, maintaining contact with tradition. Through these different ways of negotiating the contemporary world Orange thus presents pluralistic stories of Native peoples narrated by Native peoples—allowing Indigenous individuals to see themselves through their own lenses, instead of the stereotypes of others.

According to critic Julian Brave Noisecat, subversion of such stereotypes also must include deconstructing markers of indigeneity created by Native authors that have become mainstream but are similarly not accessible for all. Noisecat thus believes *There There* is literature worth celebrating because it “...elides the reservation dispatches that have dominated Native fiction over the decades” (Noisecat). The

dispatches he refers to most likely relate to the works of Alexie, who Orange feels is “very rez” and is an author he avoided reading while growing up because it made him feel like it was the only way for an Indian to write (Petersen). It is also because of the domination of such inaccessible narratives that Noisecat celebrated the fall of Alexie in 2018 when sexual assault allegations came out against him. To Noisecat, Alexie’s characters were far too exaggerated, corny, and read “...more like simulations of rez-y-ness than windows into what our relatives are actually going through” (Noisecat). Because Alexie was considered by the mainstream to be the spokesperson for Indigenous peoples in the US, his voice and thus his narratives received increased attention and credibility, maintaining legitimacy today as accurate portrayals of contemporary Indigenous life. With his fall, there is now a space open for new voices to dominate the space and perhaps a problematic new spokesperson to redefine the monolithic depiction of indigeneity.

The success of Orange’s novel justifies him as this voice, but the novel itself does not allow for a clear exegesis of what this voice is saying. Rather than serving as a voice for Indigenous peoples or a voice to teach non-Native peoples, Gates defines the social implications of *There There* as an effort for “urban Indians” living outside, and without, the reservation to receive representation, as they are notably absent in both the mainstream American imagination and in most Native narratives as well. By crafting this presence in his novel, Orange states that he hopes to “...resist the one idea of what being Native is supposed to look like,” allowing “urban Indians” in particular to be human beings living in the contemporary world (Beckerman). The point here is not to claim that Alexie fails to represent the contemporary Indigenous experience, but to understand the gap between the heyday of Native American literature and the founding of authentic Indigenous voices in literature and today’s “New Wave” renaissance where artists and critics are trying to find a present tense, again chiefly through the hashtag “#WeAreStillHere.” This movement is an essential context to this paper, as it informs the present situation for Orange and other contemporary Indigenous authors, and a public body deserving of representations that empower instead of perpetuating stereotypes. It is therefore vital to read *There There* as a response to narratives that exemplify Vizenor’s term of a “literature of dominance” that supports historical and one-dimensional images, even if Native authors consecrated them.

What is at stake in Orange’s revised model of historicity is making what is often invisible in the mainstream visible and recognizably a part of today’s world. We are trained and taught to think of

Indigenous peoples only in the past tense; our museums and popular culture further reinforce this narrative, making readers surprised when a major work like *There There* is released. That an epistemological shift needs to occur for non-Native readers when an often invisible peoplehood<sup>10</sup> is made visible only serves to highlight the importance of works like Orange's but also highlights the importance of the diffusion of Native voices throughout the mainstream. Hundreds of years of settler-colonial discourse cannot be subverted with one text and a dozen characters; this is because, on the one hand, no singular voice can displace a monolithic hegemony, and on the other, Orange does not come close to doing so either. Even though Orange wrote a polyphonic novel, there are an uncountable amount of intersectional voices he could represent from the real ensemble of North America's Indigenous peoples. Notably, Orange's novel is absent of a narrative representing politicians like Deb Haaland, queer poets like Tommy Pico, rappers like Frank Waln, or social media activists like Sings in the Timber.<sup>11</sup> However, Orange's framework does not exclude them. By providing a new critical framework for a present tense peoplehood, *There There* should instead be considered a new ground on which to build; new ground established in the deconstruction of historical frameworks that lead to the invisibility of Native Americans. On this new ground, Orange, as well as the continuum of authors writing today in what is being considered a "New Wave" Native Renaissance, can continue to build and develop a complex peoplehood for proper human identity.

Where these authors are likely to begin is at a place which shows peoples who are alive and who continue to challenge historical narratives depicting Native Americans as extinct as dinosaurs or as ancient as an Egyptian mummy in a sarcophagus. In their *Peoplehood Matrix*, Billy Stratton and Frances Washburn hoped they could create an outline for a consideration of goals that might be employed to ensure "that the peoples might live" (Stratton 70). While perhaps suggesting that "the peoples" will continue to live, by deconstructing a

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<sup>10</sup>Marlena Gates, for example, states that Orange's novel writes "urban Indians" into existence, allowing them to no longer live as ghosts. The Tribe Called Red song "We Are the Halluci Nation" similarly plays with this notion by describing an ambiguous group of invisible peoples living in "industrial reservations" as a tribe the white world cannot see, existing only as "hallucinations."

<sup>11</sup>Along with reclaiming his identity through the usage of this word and his usage of the term "Ndn" to subvert the colonial power of the word "Indian," Pico also refers to himself as a "weirdo ndn faggot" in his book *Nature Poem*. Pico uses these terms to define himself inasmuch as he is producing a counter-narrative of Native American men and giving voice to the intersectionality of LGBTQ+ Native American men. In the context of this paper's investigation of Indigenous authors working to counter invisibility, voices such as these are important in the creation of a present tense peoplehood.

historicism that transformed “the peoples” into signifiers of a static and dead past, Orange shows that the peoples do live. Contrary to any single counter-hegemonic depiction of indigeneity, *There There* re-frames Indigenous peoples as existing, heterogeneous, present-tense polyphonic alive and active in modern American society; not mere participants in America’s past who no longer exist.





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## The Supermarket: Consumerism, Simulation, and the Fear of Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Houda Hamdi

### Abstract

Through a study of Don DeLillo's metafictional novel, *White Noise*, this paper portrays the ways in which the novel reflects upon the postmodern American world of consumerism and simulation. The space of the supermarket reveals not only the postmodern subject's obsession with the erratic shopping mode of life, but also the detachment of the subject from the reality of the product he or she buys. Polyphony or the diversity of discourses, similar to the Bakhtin's theory of the marketplace in his definition of the novelistic genre, translates the invasion of media communications, advertising, TV commercials, and conversations in the daily life of the contemporary fictional characters. These discourses, in their polyphonic aspect, function as mediated representations which obstructs the subject's relationship with reality. This paper demonstrates that, behind the surface, the supermarket, as both a space and a metaphor for the world of simulacra and consumerism, hides another existentialist issue—man's fear of death. The supermarket is, therefore, not only interpreted as a metaphor for the American simulacra and consumerism, but also as a self-reflexive element which, in Bakhtinian terms, reflects the polyphonic nature of the fictional world of the novel. The paper discusses Gladney couple's defence mechanism strategies to defy or repress death, and the metafictional nature of 'white Noise' which fears its own hermeneutic closure, another name for death.

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Consumerism, Simulacra, Death, Metafiction, Polyphony, Hyperreality, De-Doxify/De-Doxification, Baudrillard.*

In theorizing postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues that this seemingly volatile trend is self-conscious, self-contradictory, and self-unsettling, struggling for commitment to duplicity as a strategic means of denaturalizing some of the conventional features of our way of life and of addressing the issue that what has been traditionally taken as natural is in fact a mere social construct (2). Relying on the Derridean poststructuralist technique of deconstruction, postmodernism subverts traditional literary patterns, especially the belief in objectivity, truth,

essence, substance, and innocent representations. Deconstruction is a form of cultural de-doxification, a rhetorical position which implies that we can only know the world through a network of socially established or fabricated meaning systems that constitute the discourse of our contemporary culture. Within the deconstructionist frame of postmodernism, objects, beliefs, and practices are discursively represented, reimagined, and performed in literary texts in an unpredictable manner owing to the ability of the contemporary writers to collect and shape the forces of their culture "...so that elements powerfully interact and have the potential to unsettle the boundaries of culture" (Jackson 174).

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* is a poignant novel that translates the postmodernist art of de-doxifying our conventional perception of reality and subjectivity. Taking as its main corpus the overriding presence of the supermarket in the narrative, the paper reflects upon the self-reflexive dimension of this fiction and the way in which it reveals how, within the postmodern era of simulation and consumption, all conventional beliefs in the immediacy of an authentic truth and subjectivity are disrupted. From a Baudrillardian perspective, the supermarket is read as a metaphor for the simulated and the consumerist postmodern world in the paper. From a Bakhtinian standpoint, the supermarket is related to the polyphonic dimension of *White Noise*, wherein fictional characters are invaded by various sources of discourses, such as television, media communications, and news which mediate their vision of reality. The supermarket, as both a space and a metaphor, reveals not only the mediated and dialogical nature of the novel and the outside world that the narrative reflects upon but also a deeper existentialist dimension: man's fear of death. The paper studies Bakhtin's polyphony of discourses in relation to man's need for language, beneath which hides his constant awareness of ultimate death. In so doing, the last section of this paper is devoted to exploring the strategies of defence mechanisms that the fictional characters use to repress and defy death. The fear of death is then translated in the structure of the open text of *White Noise*, which invites the active involvement of the reader to reproduce it and avoid an interpretative closure.

As a part of postmodern culture, invaded by the spirit of commodification and consumption, *White Noise* comes to illustrate the formation of the postmodern subject within American materialist society. In the novel, the activity of shopping consumes a surprisingly large portion of the narrative itself, with entire chapters spent cruising the aisles of supermarkets, peering curiously into shopping carts, soaking up the atmosphere at check-out counters, and roaming aimlessly through malls (Lindner 154). These shopping trips are central to Don DeLillo's representation of the postmodern consumer world showcas-

ing the effects these spaces have on everyday consumer practice, experience, and behaviour.

*White Noise* centers around the Gladney family, which is presented as a prototype of the American consumerist family unit that is immersed in the shopping spirit. Shopping, for them, is a ritual. In the supermarket, Jack Gladney, the father, does not care what he buys. He has no vision or plan. He shops randomly, impulsively, frantically, and restlessly. Jack contends that he shops for the sake of shopping. He enjoys looking, touching, and inspecting the merchandise without any intention to buy. However, he ends up buying because the mass and variety of his purchases provide him with the illusion of “self-replenishment,” “well-being,” “security,” and “contentment” (84). Impulsive shopping provides the Gladneys with the feeling that they have achieved a fullness of being, unknown to those who need or buy less and plan their lives around solitary evening walks. The clear suggestion of this compulsive consumption implies that the Gladney family seeks comfort in ...”the spending of money, not the actual acquisition of goods” (Ferraro 21). Jack confirms as much when he talks about the rush he gets from spending money. He argues that the more money he spends on shopping, the less important it seems. “I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain” (163), he says. “These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existentialist credit” (163).

DeLillo’s focus on the overriding presence of shopping spaces illustrates that the mantra of consumerism, in late twentieth century America, had sunk so deeply into the collective social consciousness that it operated at unconscious level as well (Lindner 137). As an instance, Steffie, Jack Gladney’s daughter, murmured two clearly audible and familiar words in her sleep, Toyota Celica, the brand name of a car. This unconscious internalization of the consumerist environment reveals the way “Steffie’s nocturnal chants” dramatize ... “the colonization of the unconscious by the commodity structure” (Baker 95). Throughout the novel, Jack Gladney describes a world bombarded with subliminal advertising and flooded with commercial jingles. Even this activity of just looking at commodities becomes, in Rachel Bowlby’s phrase, “...an experience that is itself consumed and a source of pleasure and gratification” (3). Jack’s exhaustive description of objects shows that *White Noise* belongs to a world dominated by the culture of commodities, congested by their presence, and glutted by their consumption, a commodified world wherein consumer objects hijack and colonize the thoughts, imagination, practices, and desires of its mesmerized subjects (Lindner 138). In DeLillo’s view, identity is constituted and created around goods, and commodity itself has be-

come representative of an entire lifestyle, which therefore functions as an emblem of nationhood and whose effect on people is a sense of belonging derived from a shared pattern of consumption (Lindner 140). Co-opted by the culture of commodity, Americans have become a mere "... collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation" of goods and surfaces (*WN* 4).

The shopping obsessed atmosphere reveals not only people's immersion in the culture of consumption but also DeLillo's critique of the postmodern era, which stands, in Fredric Jameson's view, as "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (60). The supermarkets and the malls are described as "...warehouses of the generic signs which represent not so much the products themselves, but a whole system of relations of exchange: texture, code, tacit links with something more mysterious and pervasive" (51). What can be known about such coded messages, according to one character, Murray Jay Siskind, is that one must learn "how to look and how to open oneself to data that welcomes customers into the grid" (*WN* 50). Hegemonized by the superficiality of the consumerist world, Murray's basket holds generic food, drink, and non-brand items in plain white packaging with simple labelling, which testifies to his lack of quality because "flavourless" packaging appeals to him and he feels that he is not only saving money but contributing to some kind of "spiritual consensus" (18). Murray approximates his superficial taste to World War II: everything is white<sup>42</sup> (18). In this context, the supermarket is not only a space dominated by a play of surfaces, but these surfaces also blur the presence of the real. Visually assaulted by the shocking white austerity of the generic packaging, Murray loses sight of the actual products inside them. The real is displaced by its representational display, which creates an overwhelming sense of dislocation from reality, a sense of a new artificially constructed reality characterized by what Jameson terms "flatness."

DeLillo's location of most of the events in his narrative in the polyphonic atmosphere of the supermarket epitomizes, in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, a carnivalesque and dialogic space that fuses different stratas of voices and discourses. In studying Rabelais's narratives, Bakhtin associates the dialogic novel with the subversive instance of the carnivalesque, which he defines as a moment of equality, wherein traditional rank, dichotomy, and hierarchal precedence are obfuscated. The carnivalesque is associated with the marketplace wherein "a spe-

<sup>42</sup>"they'll take our bright colors and use them in the war effort [...] Most of all I like the packages [...] This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock" (18-19).

cial form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (Bakhtin 199). As opposed to the conventional “monological” genre, Bakhtin perceives that the novel, in its deconstruction of the traditional hierarchy, led to the emergence of special forms of marketplace speech, which is “...frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (200).

In *Metafiction*, Patricia Waugh defines introspective fiction in terms of its instability in that it is constructed through a constant assimilation of daily historical forms of communication (43). In the reflexive novel, there is no privileged language. As a democratic space, it combines the language of memoirs, journals, diaries, and documentary which interact among each other for the sake of relativization (43). Waugh associates this process of relativization to Bakhtin’s definition of the dialogic novel. As she puts it, “Bakhtin defines as overtly ‘dialogic’ those novels that introduce a ‘semantic direction into the word which is diametrically opposed to its original direction [...] the word becomes the arena of conflict between two voices” (43). In fact, given its close relation to everyday forms of discourse, the language of fiction is dialogic since it assimilates a diversity of discourses that always interrogate and to some extent relativize each other’s authority. In contrast to a realistic novel, which subordinates itself to the dominant voice of the omniscient author, dialogic narratives resist such a resolution. Likewise, metafictional narratives rejoice in the impossibility of such a resolution (43).

As a metafictional narrative, *White Noise* follows the same patterns as the marketplace novel. It is laden with diverse voices and discourses of media communication such as TV, radio, journals, and cybernetic systems that disrupt the monolithic order of discourse and, in the process, translate the contemporary world of mediation. *White Noise*’s characters are prototypes of the postmodern subjects whose knowledge and perception of the world is mediated. In this context, the supermarket becomes a self-reflexive element that both reflects upon the polyphonic aspect of the novel and reveals the role of media in simulating the American culture. As Christoph Lindner suggests, *White Noise* contains a vision of the postmodern world as conceptualized by Baudrillard (143). Baudrillard’s writings portray a vision of contemporary consumerist societies in which reality itself is in crisis. His conception of postmodernity embarks on the notion that in today’s mass consumerist world, owing largely to advanced innovations in information technology and electronic media, the real, however, has been so far displaced by its own simulations (replicas) that simula-



tions, in turn, have become the new reality. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard contends that in a world dominated by simulations, “signs will exchange among themselves exclusively without interacting with the real” (125). In Baudrillard’s vision of the world of “screen and network,” the surface and simulation, “the sign no longer means nor refers. It no longer designates beyond or outside its seamless exchange and solipsistic play with other signs” (125). Undoubtedly, capitalism is “the villain of the situation” because it multiplies desires by endlessly multiplying signs (Lindner 144). The result, as Baudrillard points out is that “it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality” but instead a question of “...concealing the fact that the real is no longer real” (“Simulacre and Simulations” 127). In view of this, culture has become ...”the collective sharing of simulacra as opposed to the compulsory sharing of the real and of meaning” (“Fatal Strategies” 50).

According to Baudrillard, the excessive consumerist society juxtaposed with the rise of communication technology in the postmodern America creates a world characterized by an utter loss of the real in “...the black hole of simulation and the play and exchange of signs” (Wilcox 346). In *White Noise*, the mediated world finds its expression in the opening of the novel with the depiction of the most photographed barn in America, an opening which imparts a clear convergence between Don DeLillo’s fictional world and Baudrillard’s critique of postmodernity as a moment of simulation. In describing the American barn, Murray argues that no one can eventually see it: “Once you have seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see them [...] We are not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura [...] They are taking pictures of taking pictures” (WN 12). Put differently, those who are taking the picture of the barn are not copying the original of the picture itself, but the copy of another copy. Here, the presence of the real is short-circuited and is literally replicated by signs, which, in turn, become the basis for the real itself. They ensure that the tourist of this barn only see it through its hyper-real existence as mass-mediated image without origin or reality (WN 147). The barn’s photographic aura can be understood in Boorstin’s terms as the haunting presence of the image that has replaced reality or in Baudrillard’s view “the spectre raised by simulation” (“Simulacre and Simulation” 168), a flash of hyperreality.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo foregrounds representation as a problem, as an area for inquiry that serves as demystification, at least in part because our culture is immersed in televised or videoed images, an immersion that has the effect of precluding what can be authentically experienced or so known (Jackson 150). Television, which in Jack

Gladney's view is America's "demonic seduction," "a narcotic undertow," and an "eerie diseased brain-sucking power" (WN 16), is represented as a perfect medium that disseminates the world of simulacra in which meaning, truth, and reality are mostly lost in the mere play of surface. For Murray, the world of television, with its "insipid jingles," "slice-of-life commercials," futile advertising slogans, and floating images of fetishized commodity objects, becomes more real than the real itself, an object of "nocturnal worship" and a source of "spiritual elation" (WN 50). In his account, watching television approximates a religious experience wherein coded messages and innumerable repetitions of commercials perform the ceremonial role of chants, mantras, and sacred formulas (ibid). Their effect on the individual subject, trapped in this space of simulation, produces a dizzying experience in which meaning and reality per se become lost in the interplay of surfaces (ibid).

Despite the relativistic function of the supermarket and the polyphony of the mediated discourses it metaphorically suggests, Don DeLillo's focus on this shopping space reveals a deeper psychological dimension: man's existentialist fear of death. As the title suggests, the expression of the term 'white noise' implies that language, in all its multi-layered forms, functions, first and foremost, as an expression of mortality. Put differently, language in all its discursive forms, whether media, literature, science, and so on, is a smokescreen underneath which lies man's fear of death. In *Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker contends that the idea of death and the fear of it has always haunted the human consciousness. "It is a mainspring of human activity- activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (11). *White Noise* shows that the fear of death lurks within us from birth, and that all human projects, especially the language we use to help us construct our belief systems, are designed to evade or deny or conquer the fear of death (Bonca 163). In DeLillo's words, language stems from a determinable but unusual source, "the human's intense terror of death, whatever it denotes, utters under its breath, I speak to bridge the lonely distances created by our mortality" (*The Names* 308). All discourses are in fact the language of the denial of death, as the avoidance of what cannot be avoided (Bonca 163). "Pain, death, reality," Murray Jay Siskind argues, "we can't bear these things as they are. We know too much. So we resort to repression, compromise, and disguise. This is how we survive in the universe. This is the natural language of the species" (WN 289).

In this novel, the Gladney family finds not only pleasure within the consumerist atmosphere of the supermarket but also a momentary

relief from the fear of death. Throughout the novel, Jack and his wife, Babette, are described as being constantly obsessed with the question, "Who will die first?" Because of their fear of death, the couple seeks the means to overcome their existentialist anxiety. Jack sees the supermarket as a collective place of motion and sounds that prevents his mind from thinking of death. Within this polyphonic milieu,

[he] was suddenly aware of the dense environmental texture. The automatic doors opened and closed, breathing abruptly. Colors and odors seemed sharper. The sound of gliding feet emerged from a dozen other noises, from the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems, from the rustle of newsprint as shoppers scanned their horoscopes ... from the whispers of the elderly women with talcumed faces, from the steady rattle of cars going over a loose manhole cover just outside the entrance. Gliding feet [...] a sad numb shuffle in every aisle. (168–169)

"Breathing," "Colors," "odors," "sound," "noises," "rustle," "whispers," "rattle," and "shuffle," are all terms that prefigure Jack's experience inside the shopping malls, terms that connote movement, sight, and sound; hence, the language of life.

In order to repress his fear of death, Jack becomes the founder and the chairman of Hitler studies. He believes that Hitler is "fine, solid, dependable" (89) and "larger than death" (98). Subsequently, he becomes the disembodied character who internalizes this personage because Hitler epitomizes authority and power. Attempting to grow into the role, Jack changes his name, gains weight, and wears glasses and a Hitler-like black robe. As a result, he becomes ... "the character that follows the name around" (17). In embodying the persona of Hitler, Jack becomes a postmodern subject ... "without center or core; multiply written, absorbed or displaced" (Jackson 160). Not only does he corporeally internalize Hitler's identity, but he also indulges in all things Nazi. He carries *Mein Kampf* as if it were a mascot. He goes even further as to name his own son Heinrich and secretly takes German lessons. Feeling the power of that language, Jack contends that he wanted to speak it fluently and use it as "a charm...a protective device" (WN 31). In his well-attended lectures on the crowd psychology of the Nazis, Jack believes that crowds constitute a shield against "their own dying": joining a crowd implies avoiding death and breaking away from the crowd is "...to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone" (73).

Babette, his wife, finds comfort in giving free lectures to the Treadwell family because in doing so, she unites with other people to form a collective readerly spirit as an escape from loneliness, another

name for death. For Babette, loneliness implies her social isolation from the crowd, which nurtures her with stories, facts, and fictions. She equates loneliness with the death of noise, and language as something through which she can, at least momentarily, forget about her own mortality. Despite the couple's unstable family unit, since both have serial marriages, Babette and Jack find this one-yet-many family structure a comfort because the children remain dependent on their parents. To Babette, they are a guarantee of the couple's relative victory against death, which she compares to "the emptiness, the cosmic darkness" (100). She thinks that, as long as the children are around, Jack and she are safe. But once the children grow older and scatter, she wants to be the first to die as being left alone frightens her.

Both Babette and Jack are reassured by Wilder, their youngest son, not only because he remains caught in the parental web but also because his youth makes him unaware of his mortality. This unawareness comforts them. When Wilder cries, Jack feels a soothing comfort while listening to his "uniform lament" (78). He perceives that the sound is an "ancient dirge" that is impressive for its "resolute monotony. Ululation." (78). It is "so large and pure" and "...touches [him] with its depth and richness" (78). Jack listens to his son, but he does not wish to stop him because he wants to let the inconsolable crying wash over him "like rain in sheets" (78). In this moment, Jack begins to think that he and Babette have disappeared inside "this wailing noise" and that if they could join Wilder in "his lost and suspended place," they might together perform some "reckless wonder of intelligibility" (78).

Fearing death after the airborne toxic event, Jack becomes obsessed with the diverse versions that people have of the traumatic event, which releases a spirit of deep imagination. The event encourages individuals to spin and invent tales while others listen spellbound to the most chilling tales. There is growing respect for the vivid rumor, which makes all those involved in this traumatic event ..."no closer to believing or disbelieving a given story" (153). Some find a greater appreciation in listening to the tales around the event, while others "...began to marvel at [their] own ability to manufacture awe" (153). Jack is aware of the healing power of language which provokes a ..."sense of an eerie separation between your condition and yourself" (142). He notices that when "the crash landing" or "the landing crash" of the plane takes place, people find psychological satisfaction when a man who acts as a storyteller tells their story. He notices that passengers coming from the tunnel begin to gather around and no one speaks

or dares interrupt the account.<sup>43</sup> Instead, they come back to listen. They do not want to disperse because they want to linger with their terror and "...keep it separate and intact for just a while longer" (*WN* 91). In listening to the mediated story, the crowds show interest in what the storyteller says, even curiousness to some extent. They trust him to tell them what they had actually said and felt (91).

After the airborne toxic event, Jack becomes more aware of his mortality. He believes that the little breath of Nyodene "...has planted a death in his body" (150). Subsequently, he becomes ready to search for any hint of comfort. He grows more concerned with the theatricality of death scenes because not only do the deadly events create a collective consciousness among people to share their common universal fear of death, but also because, in Jack's mind, witnessing the simulated death is a therapeutic and an anaesthetizing moment which immunizes him from death anxiety. In so doing, Jack becomes intrigued by the catastrophe and by the effect of televised death because he thinks that a mediated confrontation with reality is in fact a strategy of evading one's own mortality, thus, giving the viewer a temporary false sense of power (LeClair 397). "There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes," says Jack. "We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly [...] Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (64). For Jack the ritual of death, like the funeral, is in fact a gathering moment in which crowds come to form a shield against their own death. In order to transcend the anxiety of death, people engage in "the evasive artifices and mastering devices that turn back upon themselves, bringing them closer to the death they fear, even inspiring a longing for disaster" (Brooks 5).

In *White Noise*, the Gladneys' intense fear of death, in the end, entailed their seclusion from the outside world. "The deeper we delve into the nature of things," Jack concludes, "the looser our structure may seem to become" (82). This "looseness," what the systems theorists would term "openness" or "equivocality" (LeClair 404), has become an intellectual disaster for Babette and Jack. Janet Savory, Jack's ex-wife, for instance, is a corporate character who is described as a "glocal" woman who threatens certainty and stability for Jack. He believes that she entangles and enmeshes him. She is trying to incorporate him into the world.<sup>44</sup> Using their children as a shield against their

<sup>43</sup>"They were content to let the capped and vested man speak on their behalf. No one disputed his account or tried to add individual testimony. It was as though they were being told of an event they hadn't personally been involved in" (91).

<sup>44</sup>Jack says, "We made vast sums. I was entangled, enmeshed. She was always manoeuvring. My security was threatened. My sense of long and uneventful life. She

own dying, Babette and Jack are ironically informed by them and often receive fragmented information from the outside world which penetrates their ignorance (404). The knowledge that others impose on the Gladneys is stripped off its scientific context and transmitted in its nomenclature and frequently "...requires the Gladneys to deny the obvious, accept the improbable, and believe in the invisible" (404), because in Murray Jay Siskind's view, human beings know too much and as a defensive regression, they hanker after reversing the flow of experience (*WN* 289). This knowledge, in Babette's view, stigmatizes a strange and complicated world of shifting facts and attitudes, something that antagonizes her ordered and dichotomized vision of the world. Gladneys's fear of death suggests their rejection of uncertainty. Their strategies to evade uncertainty "...overlap with their defences against mortality, closed spatial, psychological, and social systems" (LeClair 405). The destructive consequences of their intellectual implosion are Don DeLillo's "...photo-negative methods for pointing to his system-based conception of nature, mind, and mortality" (405). Because nature, whether strictly defined as living systems or more widely defined as the world in its totality, is, like the marketplace, a complex of multiple, overlapping systems, many of which are open, reciprocal, and eventually equifinal (405). In other words, life, as a form of social interaction, is a heterogeneous system of overlapping discourses that go beyond the conventional paradigms of hierarchies and established dichotomies. The coherence of either/or logic, a major basis for delusions about certainty, should not, suggests DeLillo, be expected to apply to the simultaneous, both/and nature of phenomena (405).

Babette's ultimate fear of death leads her to trade sexual favours with Doctor Gray for Dylar, a substance that provokes memory lapses. Jack is induced by Murray Jay Siskind to kill Doctor Gray in order to perform the role of the victimizer and to simulate the death scene as an anaesthetizing moment of self-empowerment. For Jack, death, which is "the vast scene and terrible depth," the inexhaustibility, "the whole huge nameless thing," "the massive darkness," and "the whole terrible endless hugeness," is a realm that must be repressed (*WN* 287). Yet when his embodiment of Hitler's personae becomes defensively inappropriate, he incorporates Murray's discourse as the only alternative left to survive an assassination attempt.<sup>45</sup> Murray's

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wanted to incorporate us. We got phone calls from Leitinstein, the Hebrides. Fictional places, plot devices" (87–88).

<sup>45</sup>Jack Gladney assumes that, "Nothingness is staring you in the face. Utter and permanent oblivion. You will cease to be, Jack. The dier accepts this and dies. The kill-

motto, “Kill to live,” pushes Jack into his failed assassination attempt (291). At the end of the novel, Jack Gladney is portrayed in his moment of elaborating a death plot. He repeats at least three times how he will carry out the doctor’s assassination.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Jack’s perception that “all plots tend to move deathwards” (26) is inconclusive because, as he puts it, “one cannot advance the action according to a plan” (98). What Jack implies is that one should not determine his actions in advance. One must expect the unexpected and avoid certainty and premeditated plans. Instead of killing Gray, Jack’s humanity awakens. He finds himself driving the doctor to the hospital in a moment of pity, compassion, and self-redemption. This failure to kill has a crucial function in that it symbolizes, in a self-reflexive way, the procrastination and the indeterminacy of the protagonist’s ultimate action and, therefore, the betrayal of the reader’s expectation of the doctor’s death. Instead of closing the text with an assassination plot, as presumably determined by Jack Gladney, DeLillo subverts the linearity and the deathward movement of the traditional text to give voice to openness, unexpectedness, and indeterminacy.

This resistance to finitude is translated in the complexity and the fragmentation of the open text of *White Noise*, which requires the active involvement of the reader in the reconstruction of the text. As Jacques Derrida points out, “only by repeating the book can we avoid its potential dead end” (294). The book should not enclose the reader. Instead, it must be remade and taken up again because in that “repetition,” that “bottomless of infinite redoubling” (296), what disappears is “the self-identity of the origin,” the center as “the abyss,” “the unnameable bottomless well,” “the absence of play and difference, another name for death” (297). As a retrospective novel, *White Noise*’s reference to the reader’s response is an indication that a novel is not simply a story of some sort but rather “a string of words” that directs the attention of the reader to the text as a text (Boyd 175). In this context, readers invariably find themselves constructing some sort of in-

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er, in theory, attempts to defeat his own death by killing others. He buys time, he buys life. Watch others squirm. See the blood trickle in the dust” (291).

<sup>46</sup> “[He will] drive past the scene several times, approach the motel on foot, swivel [his] head to look peripherally into rooms, locate Mr. Gray under his real name, enter unannounced, gain his confidence, advance gradually, reduce him to trembling, wait for an unguarded moment, take out the .25-caliber Zumwalt automatic, fire three bullets into his viscera for maximum slowness, depth and intensity of pain, wipe the weapon clear of prints, place the weapon in the victim’s hand to suggest the trite and predictable suicide of a motel recluse, smear crude words on the walls in the victim’s own blood as evidence of his final-related frenzy, take his supply of Dylar, slip back to the car, take the expressway to Blacksmith, leave Stover’s car in Treadwell’s garage, shut the garage door, walk home in the rain and the fog.” (311)

dex to the novel and therefore engage in the re-writing of the original text. This situation is what Roland Barthes calls “the writerly value” of the text wherein the aim of a given literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but an active producer of the text (5). *White Noise* requires this writerly value on the part of the readers who must engage in reconstructing the given text to avoid its closure through their multi-faceted interpretations. Reading, thus, becomes an invitation to another form of hermeneutic mediation, exactly like the mediated fictional world of the novel itself.

In conclusion, *White Noise* remains one of Don DeLillo’s most poignant novels in portraying the postmodern world of consumerism and simulation. The supermarket, as a space, is a perfect metaphor that reflects not only the hyperreality of consumerist American society but also unfolds the ways in which the postmodern subject is invaded by a network of discourses that shape, nurture, gratify, and influence one’s life and thoughts. The supermarket, from a Bakhtinian perspective, reflects the multiplicity of discourses, the polyphony of the novelistic genre, that self-reflexively characterize the theme and the structure of *White Noise*. However, taken from a more existentialist perspective, *White Noise* implies that people’s need for conversation, stories, voices, and language per se is but the outcome of man’s fear of death. In doing so, Don DeLillo captured the psychological dimension of language, which in this novel becomes the discursive noise that temporarily diverts man’s attention from his existentialist anxiety about death. Jack and Babette Gladney’s seclusion from the noise of the outside world makes them look for irrational and, to some extent, murderous means to defy their fear of death. DeLillo has aesthetically transposed this anxiety of death onto the open-ended dimension of the narrative itself.





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***The Archive Project: Archival Research in the Social Sciences*** by Niamh Moore, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, and Maria Tamboukou

Reviewed by *Wayne E. Arnold*



THE ARCHIVE PROJECT:  
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The relatively recent archival turn—the necessity to enter library archives for research—has resulted in an increased engagement with previously undiscovered materials throughout numerous fields. Emphasizing this turn, the four authors of *The Archive Project* lay out various intersecting theoretical and practical issues—specifically looking at epistemological, ontological, and methodological problems—to provide fellow researchers with a sense of logical and supportive approaches for a broad range of considerations concerning research in archives. The result of these scholars’ efforts is a fairly cohesive journey through the field of archival research over the last few decades. With the rapidly changing methods of digitizing archival materials, various debates about practical aspects of gathering, processing, storing, and incorporating material are examined across the six chapters of this collection. The first and the last chapter are written by the group, while the middle four chapters allow each author to present their views by discussing specific collections with which they have worked. The organizational structures of the chapters are focused around women’s studies and include archive collections from around the world.

*The Archives Project* arrives during a period of intensifying interest in the promotion and necessity for researchers to uncover new materials and provide subsequent additions to scholarly publications. Moore, Salter, Stanley, and Tamboukou intricately detail their individual approaches to equally diverse archival materials. To create cohesion across the material, the brief prologue and epilogue introduce and conclude why the authors have deemed it important to delineate their

“tracing” of uncovering, documenting, processing, and then producing applicable information from their corresponding archives. Additionally, the prologue and epilogue are used to directly engage the reader with the personal accounts of authors in each of the chapters as a retelling of lessons learned during their archival research. A significant objective has been to create a workbook through which new research scholars may be guided on how to best economize their time within an archive. The “trace” is a key aspect of the work—it means following a line of guiding principles—delineated in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 to help scholars retrieve the most pertinent information (through various methodologies) latent within the sometimes overwhelming amount of material in a collection. The importance of the archival turn demands groundbreaking scholarship to incorporate undocumented information. In this sense, *The Archive Project* is primarily geared for beginner scholars. The scholars have joined together in this project to reveal their insights gained from decades of experience within archives around the world and to provide a broader applicability of their knowledge. The book further intends to provide an “approach to methodology” (x) through which the four varying but integral styles outline more comprehensive procedures for material collection demonstrating how the archival turn has achieved importance via disseminating fresh material. The inclusion of these four archival scholars, with divergent research in areas of women’s studies, underscores how the archival turn continues to advance varying realms of gender studies.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical foundation surrounding the organization of material both by archivists and by researchers gathering new material. Specific library organizational procedures often depend on the content, encompassing time periods, and material types, all of which are becoming more complicated in the digital era. Walter Benjamin, “a master of assemblage” (5), and Michel Foucault (*The Order of Things*) are both esteemed forebearers of categorization, and *The Archive Project* is specifically indebted for its title to Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*. The first chapter is most widely applicable as the authors move through a range of theoretical approaches to archiving, discussing the processes of developing, organizing, and contextualizing archive libraries. Topics branch out from the archival turn to theoretical consideration of genealogy (Foucault), heterotopia (Foucault), rhythm analysis (Henri Lefebvre), the allure of the archive (Arlette Farge), and the significance of “dust” settling on these occasionally long-forgotten documents (Carolyn Steedman). There are epistemological, ontological, and methodological problematics within archival work that the authors believe will be elucidated and perhaps expunged through their individual chapters; the groundwork estab-

lished in the first chapter allows the following chapters to focus more specifically on what they term “a feminist archival sensibility” (ix).

The four central chapters complement each other in terms of authors’ positions and arguments. Chapter 2 is most suited for early career researchers as Liz Stanley offers suggestions for dealing with various issues that arise in the archives. Focusing on archival methodology, one of Stanley’s main discussion points is the importance of writing—from note taking and transcribing in the archive, to writing outside the archive, including everything from book reviews to conference presentations. Collections used to structure the chapter are the Olive Schreiner manuscripts and Whites Writing Whiteness, both located in South Africa. Overall, Stanley demonstrates how she attempted to “make sense” of “the stuff” found in the documents (36). The importance of maintaining organized records of uncovered research data is that there can be misleading or misplaced documents, an issue that can disrupt research progress. Much of this chapter relies heavily on a discussion concerning the archives mentioned above in order to demonstrate various strategies for archival manipulation, thereby achieving the most effective benefits while visiting a historical collection.

Maria Tamboukou incorporates her expertise with materials at the New York Public Library concerning the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Tamboukou describes the library visits that partly required working with microfilm as well as the advantages of being able to take photocopies of the material outside of the library. Time management is imperative for all researchers and Tamboukou gives detailed suggestions to handle both present time and the past in which the materials were originally created. Drawing from Henri Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis* (1992), Tamboukou explores the concept of “space/time/matter rhythms.” Under this notion, the archive can be “...conceived as an entanglement of space/time rhythms,” where “...the archive extends into the world, both in terms of its immediate locality as well as with reference to its global position” (79). The impact and implications of women trade unionists, Tamboukou argues, does not remain within the archives, but can be tangibly located on the streets of New York City in various aspects. This reality creates a “narrative phenomenon” where the researcher is entangled with the past and present (85). Tamboukou’s chapter deals with the narratives that researchers find within the archival material and how time (past and present) creates various archival rhythms that require the researcher to be aware of the present and the past.

Working with the Mass Observation Archive and the Olive Schreiner Letters Project (both projects are available for viewing online), Andrea Salter, in the fourth chapter, also focusses on the temporal by “reading time backwards.” The Mass Observation Project was a fifteen-year project conducted in Britain where ordinary people would record their everyday life and submit their writing to a depository. Salter uses her research with the letters and diaries in these collections to discuss the intricacy of chronology in the archive and the difficulty of dealing with large quantities of data that span long periods. The extensive collection of Schreiner letters (over 5000) and the diaries in the Mass Observation Project required Salter to determine the best place to begin reading. In the chapter, Salter provides an extensive argument for reading the materials in reverse chronology to help ascertain the impacts of particular events as well as hopefully fill in missing information when letters or diaries are conspicuously silent. Like Tamboukou, Salter urges researchers to be conscious of the importance of the past as well as the present, and provides suggestions for dealing with time in a large collection.

In the fifth chapter, Niamh Moore moves beyond the library by incorporating community archive research. Moore specifically discusses a project called Feminist Webs (see [feministwebs.com](http://feministwebs.com)), broadly defined as a variety of women engaged in “the process of creating an archive of feminist youth work (oral histories as well as materials from girls’ work groups from over the last 40–50 years) and (re)using this archive in multiple ways” (129). The chapter details the methods which have been used to establish the Feminist Webs and the process of determining what materials should be included and how these should be cataloged and stored. Feminist Webs, Moore explains, is intended to incorporate and engage people working with the archive collection in a manner that removes the rigidity of academia while also encouraging research and a hands-on method of archiving. The chapter is a useful biographical overview of how Feminist Webs was transformed into an organized archival collection.

The culminating sixth chapter connects the ideas articulated across the individual chapters while simultaneously highlighting varying approaches by celebrating the diversity within archives and the individuality of researchers. Both time and space (referencing Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis*) are crucial elements requiring attention when entering an archive library; however, “time becomes the central organizational axis” (157) through which the researcher must, in meaningful terms, encapsulate the data gathered. The chapter turns to a more holistic approach concerning the archivist and the researcher as

each serves in various faculties within Foucault's idea of "the author function" (160). The method by which archival material is organized and stored by the archivist becomes just as significant as the scholar combing through the material: both entities, the authors conclude, are manipulating the texts of time. Returning again to a more theoretical evaluation of archives, the authors expound on various perspectives of archives: as institutions, as projects, and as processes. They conclusively state that there is an ethical sensibility required for archivists and researchers to portray the past as accurately as possible; doing so requires archival procedures that ensure veracity in presenting materials within any archival collection.

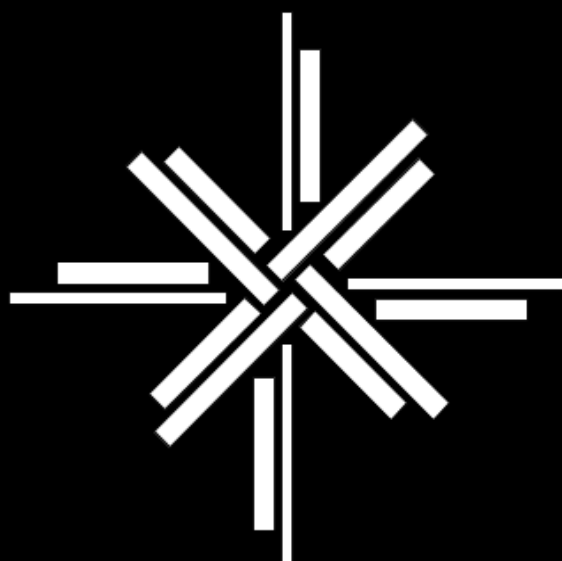
*The Archive Project* is intertwined with four mutually compatible opinions about how best to deal with data being sought as well as data acquired from a collection of material. Moore, Salter, Stanley, and Tamboukou are theoretical as well as practical minded researchers, intent on connecting various sides of the archival discussion. The first and last chapters are written in an academic vein, while each author's individual chapter assumes a personal and engaging approach. This publication is a useful guidebook filled with research wisdom from four scholars who have created impressive projects from diverse archives. The book is also a valuable incorporation and application of archival theory, ranging from Foucault's *The Order of Things* to Walter Benjamin's *The Arcade Projects*. Overall, the publication will prove more useful for people who are interested in the specific archives being discussed. It is safe to conclude that this work would benefit new researchers the most who will profit from the hands-on knowledge of these experienced scholars. There are numerous methods discussed and the smoothly-incorporated theoretical material and opinions integrate well with the extensive examination of these feminist archive materials. Regrettably, the price for the hardback book makes the purchase rather impractical for personal use; fortunately, the eBook is more reasonably priced. Routledge publications are of high quality, but the price and a limited applicability of the subject behooves some consideration before purchasing *The Archive Project*.



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