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Despite news from around the world that the spread of COVID-19 has ebbed and the mayhem may have receded to a certain extent, India struggles hard as the contagion continues to infect near and dear ones everywhere. With infected cases rising in thousands every day, and economy crashing to its deepest, the ‘norm’ in normal is yet to take its new definition. In the face of the uncertainty before pervasive death, educating ourselves by attempting to understand this dysfunctionality has been our persistent goal at *LLIDS*. With its limited number of members, boundations due to the current circumstances among other lacks, *LLIDS* has gone through a few bumps in the process of publication. But despite it, we hope to devote our continued efforts to research through the constant encouragement and support of our outreach community for which each and everyone of you has our heartfelt gratitude. Please stay safe and healthy!

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EDITORS' NOTE

Deeksha Suri & Md. Faizan Moquim

One of the things uncovered with the continued onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic is the inadequacy of our institutional achievements amidst tales of individual endurance and support for each other. The scale and severity of the virus's collision with our postmodern reality, threatening the collapse of existing social systems of our world, asks us to reassess the direction in which we, as a society, have been moving. The pandemic has revealed itself to be, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls, a "magnifying mirror" that provides our world an opportunity to re-cognize itself in its reflection. The present, patterned simultaneously around both the technological and the apocalyptic, however, has offered but slight modifications in existing interpretive paradigms. The fear of an imminent apocalyptic change, on the level of instinct at least, has wedged us between two conceptions of world: one on the verge of end, and the other too defeatist in its conception. This instinctual realization of an abyssal crisis of thought makes it difficult to imagine a secure future for human subject who shows an increasing disconnect between itself and its world.

Centrality of rational subject, within the Enlightenment thought—the ground of modernity—had imagined a world governed by the ideals of progress through 'human liberation,' consequent to man's control over nature, whereby human subject was conceived to be independent of all contingents. The idea of progress within this model, connecting it to the imaginary of utopia, was pegged upon the symbiotic relationship between man and machine to project possibilities of revolutionizing human world through the beneficial impact of technology. Even at the fag-end of twentieth century, these optimistic projections remained bound to the progressive structures of Enlightenment thought while attempting to restore a sense of a better future derived logically from the present communicative relationship between the individual and larger community (Habermas).

Against this long investment in rational thought, ensuring control over mass social energy, manifested another train of thought that Isaiah Berlin calls Counter-Enlightenment which culminated in the Romantic movements of both Europe and England. This model rejected the central operative tenet of Enlightenment progress through rationality, objectivity, and universality, and delivered different versions of utopia by including the supernatural, the fantastic, the oneiric, and/or the uncanny to represent a world of beauty and perfection. Even in the last century as well as in our present one, the influence of this alternate historical moment of Romanticism keeps on generating suspicions against Enlightenment's faith in teleological history of progress, along with its utopian models, to shape various dystopic premises. With the dreams of creating a global village—interdependent politico-economic-social structures—gone sour in the second decade of this century, our collective imagination latches onto dystopic visions to underscore the "problematic features of society's vision of the ideal" (Booker). Such dystopic turn in meaning and subjectivity counter positivist utopias as alternate spheres of thought, and challenge the 'grand narratives of modernity' by puncturing faith in any futuristic possibility. Satirising existent systems of acceleration and proliferation

of means as well as ends, these narratives point to the problematics of systemic progress leaving the ethics of greater good in jeopardy.

In fact, the postmodern dystopic imagination questions 'systems' of any kind with the force of a scepticism that blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, construction and de-construction, order and dis-order. Within the scope of this sceptic thought however accretion of disorderly systems, where contingency piles upon contingency, itself takes the shape of a system of sorts. Faith in the concept of any such system, though an anathema to the postmodern thought, is perhaps an attempt to recognize our readiness to rethink the monochromatic anthropocentric progress as simultaneous narratives of destruction and restoration. The waves of cultural and counter-cultural narratives within this system-of-sorts, therefore, testifies towards a need to evolve more refined mechanics of analysis by changing the lens that looks at the need for utopia or dystopia and its ramification like apocalyptic catastrophe.

The present scenario of COVID-19, as near to dystopic catastrophe as we could have imagined, unmasks the politico-economical hollowness of the age while unveiling the fault lines of the very conceptualisation and foundation of progress and welfare of society. With ever more forms of surveillance, the otherwise dysfunctional states wield ever more power at the expense of the individual, resulting in disenfranchisement of grounds that sustain the possibility of ethical governance. Girded by the entwining of the ethical with the economic, our existential reality in the face of COVID-19 grapples with the problematic of action in the network of life-world. The fundamental question that we ultimately face as individuals, organizations, and nations is then as much existential as it is ethical. The ensuing "*chaosmos*," (to use James Joyce's term) which has become pervasive in our society and consciousness offers us a chance to reject our monochromatic interpretations and evolve new modes of analysis through self-reflection; ponder upon the foundations of our social relations as well as our individual selves rather than keep on accruing disorderly systems of thought in the name of progress.

The question that confronts us however is whether such modes of analysis are even available to us. Any attempt to delineate alternate visions of both present and future, either as Enlightenment's utopias or Modern apocalyptic dystopias, is laudable for showcasing the changing consciousness and patterns of perception about existing systems within our world. Such imaginings though generally entail accelerating technological revolutions, intensification of systems at every stage, rational response based upon co-ordinated social life, as well as capitalist structures of production, consumption, and distribution. That is why, the new mechanics within our contemporary worldview may still bearing the pockmarks of interpretations which are equivalent of a necessarily humanist understanding of the world.

Even the dystopian impulse in the modern and postmodern literature hinges itself upon a structural brace whose influence gets amplified only by a subterranean organizing ethos that may, while leading to a depiction of a world which may appear to be at loggerheads with the existing one, actually finds itself to be in sync with it. In an attempt to understand the nature of advancement despite the apocalyptic dystopia, the papers in the Issue discuss its flip side which underpins the anxieties surrounding it. Employing the Greek myth of the Labyrinth of Crete, Loraine Heywood deals with the layered

representation of dystopia in the film, *Joker*. The entropic scenario depicted in the film conjoins the individual and the city as suffering beneath the dominant neoliberal Western capitalist forces. In the next paper of the Issue, taking Shakespeare's vision of humanity in *King Lear* to be the cornerstone of our understanding of modernity, James Baumlin shows that Shakespeare couldn't anticipate the wave of boundless technocultural developments towards posthumanism, as witnessed in the epochal analysis developed vis-à-vis Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. Discussing the catastrophic aspects of reality in tandem with the need to comprehend and name the post-Shakespearean turn of events, the paper argues for the narrative of hope amidst the shifts in lifeworld. In the Special Submissions category, Danielle Agyemang brings to light unresolved problematics of the practice of Trokosi in West Africa with a focus on Ghana. Deploying the methodology of interview with the natives, the paper navigates through the conflicting issues of cultural relativism and universalism, with a view to problematize the assumptions operative in the rescue-educate-integrate approach adopted by the reformists.

This Issue marks the beginning of our fourth volume and we celebrate the occasion with a whole new journal design, for which we owe a lot to our Editorial Assistant, Ritupma Shekhawat. The team of *LLIDS* would like to express gratitude to the scholars associated with the journal as authors and peer reviewers who, despite these trying circumstances, have worked with us to bring together this Issue. We extend support and solidarity to all our readers for their constant support and encouragement in these fraught times.

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Navigating the Labyrinth of Chaos: Metaphor and Myth in *Joker's* Dystopian Dream

Loraine Haywood | University of Newcastle
http://ellids.com/archives/2020/10/4.1-Haywood.pdf

Abstract | Navigating the chaos of labyrinthine spaces, the film *Joker* (Phillips 2019) reverses notions of wholeness in the image of the human subject. The opening scene depicts a dual representation of Arthur and Joker as the film constructs a dystopian dream by merging the labyrinth of the city and the labyrinth of the mind. This duality extends to the smearing of Gotham City's saviour, Batman, who is the moral opponent of Joker as the villain. This is no longer the story we know. *Joker* is operating in the labyrinth as both metaphor and myth. At the climax of this journey, Arthur embraces his Joker persona as the film intersects with the standard Batman narrative. By accompanying Arthur, as he embraces his mirror image of Joker, the audience attempts to navigate chaos—a dystopian dream, mediated in the film, mirroring the life world. The film is an intense political statement about the perverse nature of neoliberal Western democracy. The formulas in the capitalist dream of "success" and "happiness," in this society, are characterised by obscene wealth living alongside abject poverty. The labyrinth of the city space, as the epitome of civilisation, creates monsters which are of its own making. Likewise, we are navigating the labyrinthine chaos of capitalism that results in our displacement and delirium.

Keywords | Dystopia, Capitalism, Joker, Batman, Labyrinth, Chaos, Carnival, Žižek, Freud, Lacan

The film, *Joker*, treads a controversial path through civilisation: real and imaginary. It begins with a news broadcast that heightens a sense of disorder in the city as garbage is piling up on the streets hindering commerce and resulting in an infestation of rats. As Arthur (Joaquin Phoenix) sits at a make-up table, he gazes into a mirror and distorts his clown face. In this liminal space the boundaries are becoming blurred between the subject's real and imaginary worlds. The scene is metaphorically "opening the soul to an invasion of chaos" (Anderson 11). As he moves through the city's maze, he encounters barriers and missteps that ultimately lead to an oppressive climb up a high set of stairs. The audience joins this long journey home to what is considered a family centre, an apartment shared with his mother. Further in the film, this mother/child identity is shattered and ultimately what follows is Arthur's transformation because of failed attempts at stability within the socio-symbolic order. The order of the city is dominated by capitalist preoccupations in mantras of health and wealth. Arthur as Joker manifests the internal journey from passive victim to active disruptor in the realisation that he has no worth in his society; as he says to Murray (Robert De Niro), "I've got nothin' left to lose" (01:42:00). The stigma of being mentally ill and poor acts against society's self-image of health, wealth, order, and justice. As he is dislodged from all the threads that held him in a symbolic reality, he disrupts the society that casts him away.

The film is Arthur/Joker's dystopian dream where the audience does not know what is real. The audience moves through the dystopian labyrinth in Joker's delirium of human reality that explodes the Western utopian dream of capitalism. Capitalism wants to view itself as the ideal model that delivers the modern equivalent of Eden. What emerges in the departure from the original Batman/Joker story is not a split between good and evil, or hero and villain, but between rich and poor. As Slavoj Žižek describes the film, it is a "social horror" exposing the real horror of living in the twenty-first century where the burden of life is reflected in the architecture of the city which is like a prison of capitalist constructions ("More on Joker"). Sigmund Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* reveals the trauma embedded in civilisation, mapped by the link between the city and the mind (8). Crucial to understanding the irrupting madness of the film *Joker* is the Greek myth of the Labyrinth of Crete, a prison. Analysing its relevance for psychoanalytic practice, Caroline Savitz reads this myth "as archetype and metaphor" (480). Supported by the works of Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Steve Pile, and Mark Fisher, *Joker's* chaotic dystopia will be critically analysed as a twenty-first century filmic labyrinth.

The labyrinth of Crete was built to hide the embodied fruits of illicit desires. When Minos received the Kingship of the island of Crete by the design of the gods, he was to sacrifice the white bull, which was a gift from Poseidon as part of his agreement but did not. Consequently, the angered Poseidon aroused unnatural desire for the bull in

Pasiphae, the wife of King Minos, which resulted in a "monstrous offspring, the Minotaur" (*Metamorphosis* 8.156). Minos asked Daedalus to construct a prison to hide the fruits of this transgressive desire. This prison was called the labyrinth and a yearly tribute of Athenian youths was sent to Crete. One of these youths was Theseus, the son of the King of Athens, Aegeus. The myth relates that the labyrinth was an architectural structure of disorientating paths, a doubling "filled with ambiguity" (Savitz 466). Ovid claims that "inside the twistings and turns of a dark, inextricable maze" Minos hid his disgrace (8.158). In Virgil's *The Aeneid,* Aeneas is faced with a representation of the labyrinth on the doors of Apollo's temple, described as "the inextricable labyrinth, the house of toil" (6.38–39). Theseus escaped the labyrinth through a thread given to him by Ariadne (*Metamorphosis* 8.172). This is considered the thread of love because she was in love with him (Apollodorus Epit. 1.9). Like the twists and turns of the Labyrinth of Crete, *Joker* too "pairs love and abandonment" and structures of confinement (Savitz 466). Savitz considers that engaging with "[t]he labyrinth is a more paradoxical image because it must allow for confusion, disorientation, and potential for entrapment; the centre contains devouring chaos instead of a deity" (478). After Theseus killed the Minotaur, he escaped with Ariadne. On the way home to Athens, at Delos, a dance was performed by Theseus and his companions "in honour of the victory in the labyrinth" (Savitz 465). G. S. Kirk notes that "monster slaying is a typical heroic activity" and heroes like Theseus and Bellerophon are supplied with "suitably horrible and anti-social routine victims" (204). Different ancient sources of the Cretan Labyrinth alter the roles of the gods, heroes, and mortals by changing their interactions. In Apollodorus, Theseus is a hero who has Ariadne stolen from him by Dionysus. In Catullus and Ovid, Theseus abandons Ariadne and is faithless, she is instead rescued by Bacchus (Dionysus). The forming and reforming of the myth is like the twists and turns of the structure itself and the illicit desires of the characters that alter the story.

In the film *Joker*, the same myth comes into play in the retelling of the story. The City of Gotham harbours the same layered structures in its architecture and the society has a labyrinthine form. For Arthur, the city harbours a dystopic core because "Over time, civilisation marks in the development of rules which organise relationships between individuals, families and the state" (Pile 107). Freud contends that the entry into civilisation requires that citizens sacrifice their instincts: "what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery" (23). Seen in the filmic image is Arthur's daily struggle in finding a path through this maze, trapped by mental illness and poverty. In a departure from the standard Batman story, the film asserts that Batman is a mythical resonance who is born from Joker's "internal labyrinth" (Savitz 462). This is clearly demonstrated when Joker is arrested for killing Murray, live on television. A group of rioters in clown masks plough into the police car. Joker is pulled from the car unconscious and placed on the bonnet. While he is in this unconscious state, the audience enters Joker's dystopian dream where the labyrinth of the city and the labyrinth of his mind are entwined. The audience sees Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen), his wife, Martha (Carrie Louise Putrello), and their son, Bruce (Dante Pereira-Olson), flee the theatre due to the rioting. As they escape down an alley a man in a clown mask follows them. The masked man murders Bruce's parents leaving him alone in the alley standing with their bodies as an orphan, and then Joker wakes up. Joker's cognitive map takes control of the world and makes it anew (Pile 247). The scene is shot in such a way that Batman emerges from the

unconscious mind of Joker. Concurring Penny Fleck's illusion that Arthur's father was Thomas Wayne, the film fabricates the illusion that Batman and Joker are in fact "dark brothers" (Hampden-Turner 46).

Batman and Joker endure embedded traumas that trap them in labyrinths. But as each scene unfolds, does the audience know whether they are in the labyrinth of the city or the labyrinth of Arthur's mind? Freud debates whether the "past of a city and the past of a mind" could be compared (8). The film takes this comparison further. The city becomes a metaphoric labyrinth that Arthur constructs for the projection of his dystopian dreams of violence and vengeance. During the riots, at the end of the film, he is the hero. However, in the beginning of the film, the social barriers he experiences in Gotham City become like the labyrinth of Crete, an inextricable maze in which he is trapped. An example of this state occurs early in the film in the difficulty experienced by Arthur as he ascends the stairs on his way home from work. The apartment building that he and his mother share is neglected, and things continually break down, like Arthur's mental state and the state apparatus. This scene metaphorically translates the social barriers into an architectural space of hardship and toil. Arthur's abject poverty situates him within the space allowed to him by the city. Pile proposes that the subject is provided with an image within a group and "marked as belonging to a particular place in society" (249). In setting aside public housing, the city creates a space to hide its illicit desires to be rid of what Thomas Wayne calls "those people." *Joker* navigates these spaces as a metaphoric transmission of the treading of the labyrinth, revealing the secret centre of the fruits of illicit desire. Arthur, for example, had been violently abused by Penny Fleck's boyfriend when he was young, causing mental trauma, brutally damaging the pathways in the labyrinth of his mind.

Mark Fisher considered that in the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir 1975), a calm delirium was required to navigate the labyrinthine geographical spaces of the Australian bush (123). *Joker* is a stark contrast to such calm delirium. Set in the labyrinthine spaces of Gotham City, a chaotic violent delirium irrupts through Arthur's persona as the rampaging clown. In *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980), the labyrinth and the maze are structures that amplify the filial transgressions of Jack Torrance and he is trapped as a monster at the centre. Jack views the model of the maze on display in the hotel, looking at the entire structure in miniature. But upon entering the full-scale maze, it becomes more like the Cretan labyrinth, he is disorientated by its blind turns, dead ends, and the desire to kill. Savitz considers that:

> The labyrinth itself provides us with a paradoxical image: it holds a tension between order and chaos, pattern and disarray, clarity and confusion, depending on the perspective of the viewer; how we experience the maze depends upon where we stand.
>
> From inside the maze, disorientation reigns […] the labyrinth can be viewed from within or without […]. (462)

The City of Gotham is like a labyrinth which is full of tension and challenge. When Arthur climbs the stairs in the beginning of the film, they are an added burden in his life's journey of toil. When he fully transforms into Joker, he dances down the same stairs imitating a victory dance that is reminiscent of the labyrinthine crane dance. This victory

dance performed by Arthur/Joker is the illusion of lucidity in his madness. The celebration is marred by his violent actions. Like the distortions in the mirror in the opening sequence, Joker displaces Arthur as he completely gives in to the twists and turns of his labyrinthine mind.

Unlike the human child that looks at itself in the mirror, recognising and identifying with its image as a subject, Arthur distorts his image revealing the double—Joker. In *Ecrits*, Jacques Lacan considers that "the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world […] if we observe the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearance of the double, in which psychical realities […] are manifested" (5). It can be argued that from the outset the audience can perceive the double, seeing Joker not as the reflection of Arthur in the looking glass, but his double. It disturbs the psychoanalytic model of the mirror stage[1] as the illusion of wholeness; instead it represents a type of exchange in the image of the subject, and in the filmic image. This asks the audience to question what really happened to Arthur and what he imagines or hallucinates in the film. The object of the mirror is a slip into a metaphoric transmission between his mind and the city, the chaos that the audience attempts to navigate. Arthur as Joker inspires a sense of abandonment of social rules and norms through murder without remorse and exposing Thomas Wayne's distain for the poor of Gotham. This causes some citizens to riot, murder, and set fire to the city and take over the streets while wearing clown masks. The only way to survive in the city and be able to walk its streets is to take on his image and become a copy of Arthur's aggressive mirror image as Joker, a clown. There is nothing ambiguous about the comparison between Arthur's mind and the City of Gotham. The film begins in the mirror stage of Arthur's life, his illusion of knowing who his mother is and why he has a mental illness. While the audience gazes at Arthur as he transforms into a clown, the news broadcast reports tensions in the city along with its simultaneous degradation as the streets are piled with garbage and infested with rats. The opening scene is overlaying these two disparate mediums of the mirror image and voice over the radio as separate narratives that will coalesce. The vermin that infest the streets, as reported on the radio broadcast, will be replaced by clowns who drive the tension into an irrupting chaos. The news broadcast is mirrored by Arthur's mind that is full of the garbage of the state lie (that governments care and provide for all their citizens) and the mother lie (Penny is his biological mother and that his illness is genetic).

Within the maze of the mental institution at Arkham Hospital is revealed the secret origin of Arthur's mental illness. Penny, like Pasiphae, harbours illicit desires. Her drug abuse and lust for violent bestial partners resulted in Arthur's abuse and brain damage. There is a shared responsibility for this neglect between his adoptive mother and the state. The state should not have allowed her to adopt Arthur, as Penny lives in illusions. As Arthur retraces the steps of his life the apartment that was once seen as the centre of something normal is revealed to be monstrous. Penny lives under the delusion that Thomas Wayne is the father of her child (the film suggests that there could have been a sexual relationship between them) and that because she used to work for him, he will look after them. This fits Wayne's political narrative of the caring and benevolent company and the CEO as the father figure. These lies have a direct correlation with the

[1]Lacan's mirror stage is the point at which the infant recognises itself in a mirror, seeing itself as an object that can be viewed outside of the self (Lacan 94).

neoliberal lies that showcase an aggressive focus on individual responsibility for poverty and mental illness, and the role of the company as provident provider. Arthur, in the early part of the film, is shown to be caught in the labyrinthine structure of government health funding that involves the twists and turns of the state apparatus. Opportunities and access have been denied to him because of his social status, mental state, and poverty.

We are complicit in a society that aggressively pursues "health" through neoliberal formulas that include, diet, exercise, getting a job, and taking your pills. This compliance is considered a resolution for everything, including those with a mental disability. Relevance, deference, and prestige is given to "the beautiful," "the healthy," and "the wealthy." Arthur should not have been placed in his adopted mother's care, and the state (the Other) is unfit and neglectful while expecting compliance, obedience, and deference to its political and social agenda. The duality of the Other/Mother shares the same function and failure in the narrative, the inability to nurture. The film uses Arthur/Joker's mental injury as a mirror for the psychological health of the state, and his mother as a metaphor for the state apparatus. The audience is confronted by a mirror that is held up to Western society's ideological lie of equality, justice, fairness, compassion, and caring. For instance, Arthur is treated like some kind of monster exemplified in the scene on the train. Three men in business suits (who Arthur in his interview sarcastically calls "Wall Street Guys") harass a female occupant. Arthur begins to laugh, as a stress response, and when the woman escapes, he becomes the target of their bullying. His abnormal responses in social settings, continually locate him in the gap within the symbolic order (the accepted social norms). This interrupts his, and its', perfect functioning. The normal functioning of the 'Big Other' of the state is constituted in the capitalist model of health and wealth. Falling outside of these norms, Arthur completely indulges in his "clown" status and highlights the tensions between rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy. The film engages in a social experiment as rats roaming on the streets are exchanged for clowns;[2] but is this all an illusion in Arthur's mind? This creates the instability in distinctions between the real and imagined. The garbage strike resulted in super rats, vermin that disrupt social order and society's functioning, but we never see them. We do, however, see a growing number of individuals in clown masks as the film progresses. This is how the film depicts the marginalised in Gotham City identifying with Arthur/Joker's experience—they swarm the streets. This leads some members of the audience to a sympathetic reading of the film as a dual recognition in a horrifying encounter with "an unbearable truth" (Žižek, *How to Read* 3).

When the illusions of wholeness in family life are broken down, through the revelations of Penny's neglect and her boyfriend's physical abuse, Arthur breaks away from the symbolic order established by the society. He descends into the chaos of his mental state. With the thread of love cut and the symbolic support of his life broken down Arthur changes into the image glimpsed in the opening scene. Arthur's reflection in the mirror as Joker comes to represent Lacan's constructions of the mirror stage. It signifies "a permanent structure of subjectivity […] in which the subject is permanently caught and captivated by its own image" (Evans 115). As Joker he makes Gotham City the mirror image of his psychological state. The social pathology of the city is likewise transformed.

[2]Just as the film invites comparisons between the mind and the city (Freud 8), a comparison can be drawn between the clowns and the rats.

The city streets as a labyrinthine map of Joker's mind correspondingly descend into madness and rage. Reflected in the mirror is capitalism's chaos in the duality of "the realist depiction of social misery and fantasized horror" (Žižek, "More on Joker"). This horror is extended to the creation of Batman as a monster, a half-human half-beast dwelling in the dark night/Knight, performing violence. The film returns to the scene of Bruce Wayne's birth as Batman, the dark avenger. This scene is shot in the familiar rendition of the alley outside the theatre in Gotham City. This is an eternal theme in remakes, reboots, and adaptations because it is the hero's story of an embedded trauma. In *Joker*, however, Arthur/Joker and Bruce/Batman both emerge from a dystopian dark fantasy world of Gotham City and its violent society, as mirror opposites of obscene wealth and abject poverty, both trapped in its labyrinth. In Gotham City, Joker and Batman are the twin realities that drive the capitalistic matrix of poverty and wealth. The trickle-down violence of the economy that transgresses human dignity is reversed, and sent upward as a message, as violence is enacted upon the city.

Gotham City's social divide is made palpable through the connection between Arthur and Bruce as dark "brothers." This link is explored through Penny Fleck's insistence that Thomas Wayne is Arthur's father. Arthur opens a letter intended for Thomas Wayne containing Penny's claims regarding her son, and he then goes in search of him. At the Wayne Mansion, Arthur meets Bruce who is in a decorative gazebo, a cage-like structure on the grounds of the mansion. Bruce is behind a large electric gate as Arthur performs a clown show. The fence is another capitalist barrier of wealth and security, set up to keep him out, but it also keeps Bruce in. Arthur does not believe in the information he is given by Alfred—that Thomas Wayne is not his father—and continues his search. Arthur winds his way through some protestors in clown masks and sneaks into a benefit where the wealthy ironically watch a screening of Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times* (1936). For Arthur there is no way to breach these walls; as more barriers appear to prevent his passage through life, he finds his own way out of the labour of the maze of state and social compliance, and into another one (Savitz 467). Arthur's life is a monstrous chaos created when a normal life is denied to him through neo-capitalist structures which fail to create equality and instead create a divide that he cannot navigate.

Arthur is appointed a health care worker who follows the ideologies of the state demanding compliance in the "pursuit of healthiness" (Ayo 100). He cannot breach "the wall of language" (Žižek, *How to Read* 40). He thinks that she does not listen to what he is trying to communicate. Both suffer from the state's focus on funding cuts as a path to economic morality, creating another dead end for Arthur. This further distances him from a society that does not care about him; his social worker states "They don't give a shit about you Arthur" (00:41:42). The medications come to represent what has been denied to him to function as a human being. His eventual rejection of the medications is a metaphoric rejection of the state apparatus of control (the symbolic order). Once he stops taking them, he feels much better. This re-forms his identity, as what was once disability is now a celebration of what he can do. Dragged from a police car during the riots, the scene is reminiscent of "Carnival". The celebration suspends all everyday rules and norms of the community, offering temporary permission to engage in an irrupting madness. This break from society's rules and norms is the continuation of resistance

against the symbolic order, represented by the police, Thomas Wayne, and Murray who can no longer contain him. Arthur as Joker mirrors Western society's fixation on the injunction to "enjoy" (Healy 184–185). When Arthur/Joker is arrested, he is freed by the mob of clowns; he is the centre and the cause of chaos, and freely enjoys the irrupting madness. As the true clown he is the centre of the carnival. Carnival had also been Arthur's clown name before Murray had sarcastically called him "Joker."

Žižek claims that Arthur/Joker's laughter is "maternal superego" ("More on Joker"); he explains, the command to smile and put on a happy face (Penny calls him happy (00:10:41)) came from his mother ("More on Joker"). This association is strengthened by Arthur's performance of a routine at the comedy club. He does an impersonation of his mother that sounds like the mother in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). In Penny's function as a metaphor for the state, his laughter becomes ambiguous. In Arthur/Joker's attempts to be accepted by society, could his laughter be an externalisation of his vain attempts to at first suppress dissent? What triggers his laughter to the point of gagging could also be considered as his attempts to stifle his own aggressive instincts (Freud 48–49). Arthur fails to be integrated into the symbolic order of his community because of misunderstanding and that no one is listening to him. The clowns, the interview with the clown boss, the mother on the bus, the three men on the train—all trigger his laughter response. On the train Arthur/Joker murders three men who he later refers to as "Those Wall Street Guys" (01:41:30). When he sees, on television and in newspapers, mediated reports of the event, they are capitalist constructions of respectability. It is reported in the media that the men on the train are outstanding citizens because they work for Thomas Wayne, they have respectability and standing in the community. Arthur/Joker's laughter, in these social situations, is confused with neoliberal injunctions to enjoy. The men on the train think they are being laughed at, which causes conflict. However, in the course of the film, Joker's laughter develops into, and begins to function as, the symptom of an enjoyment of his illicit desires through murder and the silencing of voices.

Thomas Wayne asserts that the city is full of clowns and "those people" deserve their lowly status because he has worked hard, making something of himself, and they allegedly had not. He represents the hedonistic consciousness in "the thrall of the discourse of capitalism" (Healy 185). Wayne promises to do something for the people if he is elected as Mayor. But he is portrayed as a shallow political figure reflecting the empty promises of the capitalist ideology in its narrative of prosperity, selling the "rags to riches" dreams of the West. Joker is the symbolic representative that holds a mirror up to capitalism's ideological lie that has a focus on aggressive and violent health requirements of the state. Joker transforms the hedonistic consciousness from the models of capitalist success, measured as wealth and 'happiness,' into an excess of total enjoyment. He suspends all of society's rules in an irruption of chaos. This dark labyrinth of Gotham City confronts the audience with what Žižek considers as "the zero point of a minimal frame of protest […] the self-destructive abyss" ("More on Joker"). The momentary sense of transcendence through the labyrinth of the city, such as the clowns running amok or Joker's momentary victory or escape from the police, "gives way to loss and suffering" (Savitz 476). In *The Shining*, Dany exchanges his place as the intended victim by retracing his footsteps in the snow to trap his father, Jack Torrance, in the maze.

At the end of *Joker*, this strange ritual is performed again, now trapping Bruce in the centre. This duality of suffering experienced by both Arthur and Bruce is central to our understanding the revelation of Batman. He is constructed by Joker's dystopian dreams of chaos.

The film ushers audiences into the mind of Joker through his looking glass portraying his misery while navigating his labyrinth of chaos. His desperate misery and the embedded trauma are mapped onto the city of Gotham, as his cognitive map overlays the structure of the city. As Arthur unlocks the lies that collapse his symbolic identity, he unlocks the secrets of the labyrinth in the state lie and the mother lie. Once the thread of love is cut, for Arthur and Bruce, the irrupting chaos traps them in labyrinths transforming them into monstrous figures. However, it is Bruce Wayne who becomes most like the minotaur. Like the Cretan labyrinth, the City of Gotham harbours the secret identity of Batman. In Joker's labyrinth of the mind and the city, Batman is forever trapped as "a fake-moral opponent" (Žižek, "More on Joker"). They are both trapped in the dystopian capitalism through their respective realities of obscene wealth and abject poverty. Pile suggests that, "[t]he streets become a map of visible and invisible relations of meaning, identity and power into which the subject is placed and has to find their way around – and possibly, one day to escape" (245).

In *Joker*, "the past of a city and the past of a mind" are visually interpreted onscreen and represented simultaneously (Freud 8). Right from the opening scene the film suggests that we are in a dual realm signified by the mirror. It gives the audience some clues to this in-between-ness through the character of Sophie (Zazie Beetz). In flashback, the audience sees that she is not at the comedy club when Arthur does his routine, she does not walk down the street with him to the newspaper stand, and she is not at the hospital with him when he visits his mother. In this question of real and imaginary, in an interesting turn Arthur/Joker calls the men he murdered on the train, "Wall Street guys." This is a direct reference to our reality. As for the rest of the film, we will have to retrace our steps and make our way through the filmic labyrinth as a dystopian dream.

At the conclusion of the film, Arthur/Joker returns to Arkham State hospital (did he ever leave?), an asylum representing an institutional maze. After his interview with his therapist, he murders her off-screen and then walks down a white hallway (like the white of snow in *The Shining*) leaving bloody footprints. The asylum is an attempt by the capitalist authority to hide and contain Joker by labelling him as a monster while it attempts to re-establish order following the eruption of chaos. In the labyrinth of Crete, Theseus retraces his steps using the thread of love and leaves the maze (*Metamorphosis* 8:167). But Joker continually retraces his steps into a torturous maze—a returning chaos that cuts the ties to state order that requires reformation and rehabilitation as conditions for release. He is retracing his steps by murdering his therapist and walking through another torturous, inextricable labyrinth, in the mental asylum. If he escapes Arkham Hospital "one labyrinth opens into another" (Savitz 476). He will be back in the city's labyrinth. What this scene clearly shows, as it flashes Bruce standing in the alleyway beside his dead parents, is that the archetype of the labyrinth is inextricable and harbours monsters. While Joker is in the maze of the asylum, Batman is left as the by-product of

the dystopian dream of Joker that undercuts capitalism in Gotham City's labyrinth. Batman is its monster, rather than its hero.

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King Lear, Mandel's *Station Eleven*, and the Shakespearean Apocalypse: Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism

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Abstract | From the end of World War II through the late 20th century, the Shakespearean vision of apocalypse—of *King Lear* as harbinger of the Holocaust—predominated in intellectual culture. Whereas postwar critics could speak of "Shakespeare our contemporary," the 21st century has carried us beyond the world depicted in his drama. Drawing vocabulary from Marxist literary historian, Raymond Williams, this essay offers an epochal analysis of Shakespeare's early modernism, drawing contrasts with Emily St. John Mandel's postmodernism. Shakespeare's *Lear* and Mandel's *Station Eleven* both depict world-shattering catastrophe, though through different literary-cultural lenses. Writing as an early-modernist, Shakespeare continues to mirror aspects of our current lifeworld. But he could not anticipate the technocultural developments that have reinvented the structures and machinery of capitalism, communication, transportation, information, and energy supply, and how these have reshaped and enhanced the embodied human subject. For late 20th century readers, Shakespeare's *Lear* prefigures the terrors of Auschwitz and nuclear Armageddon. But the play fails to envision the biological and technoscientific forces that have transformed us in the 21st century, carrying our species into realms of the posthuman. As cyborg assemblages, our lives are electrified and "plugged in" to a global energy grid. And, as a biological corollary to the cyborg, the human body has been reconceived as an "interspecies" organism, "a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (Braidotti 193). Hence, *King Lear* fails to anticipate our current lifeworld in its advanced technologies, bodily enhancements, and emerging crises. A viral pandemic—Mandel's fictive version as well as our own COVID-19—gives the proof.

Keywords | Apocalyptic Literature, Pandemic, Dystopian Literature, Epochal Analysis, Postmodernism, Posthumanism, Technoculture

> It may be that, after more than 300 years, the novel is finally starting to exhaust Shakespeare's potential. […] As the canon of literature written in English continues to branch out into competing traditions […] the role of Shakespeare seems likely to diminish further. But this possibility does not deny the extraordinary resource that the Shakespearean canon has offered to narrative fiction. Nor should we underestimate the importance of the agon between Shakespeare and the novel in the latter's development as an innovative, politically engaged, and culturally inclusive literary form.
>
> Marianne Novy, "Shakespeare and the Novel" (294)

> The Symphony performed music—classical, jazz, orchestral arrangements of pre-collapse pop songs—and Shakespeare. They'd performed more modern plays sometimes in the first few years, but […] audiences seemed to prefer Shakespeare to their other theatrical offerings.
>
> "People want what was best about the world," Dieter said. He himself found it difficult to live in the present […].
>
> Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (37)

Emily St. John Mandel's novel, *Station Eleven*, presages ruin at the hands of a virus: the Georgia flu, one far more devastating than the COVID-19 Coronavirus we live with in the year 2020, though it may well prove a warning blast for the future. The novel opens with a stage performance of *King Lear*, in which Arthur Leander (the actor playing Lear) dies in earnest onstage—of a heart attack, not the virus—though the viral pandemic strikes that same evening. In mere weeks, it wipes out 99% of the human populace worldwide. Thrown into a near-feral existence, Mandel's survivors are left to rebuild civil society.

The subtitle, "Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism," gives the occasion for this essay. Over the past several months, our lifeworld has changed, though the extent of that change is yet to register. Much like the London theaters of Shakespeare's plague years, my own nation's theaters and arenas—and universities—have closed. I began writing in mid-March, not at school but while "sheltering at home." On that day, the U.S. president declared federal disasters in the states of Washington and New York. If schools were in session, I'd have taught the first act of *King Lear* in an undergraduate Shakespeare survey; I'd have shown students the opening scene of Peter Brooks's nihilist masterpiece, his 1971 film adaptation of *Lear*. But, instead of classroom prepping, I started writing.

Following Jan Kott (among other mid-20th century critics), I used to speak of "Shakespeare our contemporary." As Marjorie Garber has noted, "it is one of the fascinating effects of Shakespeare's plays that they have almost always seemed to coincide with the times in which they are read, published, produced, and discussed" (xiii). This has been especially true of *King Lear*, whose "'meaning' […] began to change in response to cataclysmic world events like the exploding of the hydrogen bomb, political turmoil in Eastern Europe and Cuba […] and the start of the Vietnam War" (Garber 231). The play then becomes "Shakespeare's bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied" (231). Alongside the Book of Job, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Mandel's *Station Eleven*, I have included Shakespeare in coursework on Literature and Apocalypse, teaching *Lear* as a harbinger of the Holocaust. World war, the Nazi death camps, and Hiroshima: these remain the great crises of mid-20th century modernism, to which Shakespeare would lend his voice and tragic vision.

But crises pile on crises. In 1993, Brian Massumi writes, "what society looks toward is no longer a return to the promised land but a general disaster that is already upon us, woven into the fabric of day-to-day life" (11). He adds,

> The content of the disaster is unimportant. Its particulars are annulled by its plurality of possible agents and times: here and to come. What registers is its magnitude. In its most compelling and characteristic incarnations, the now unspecified enemy is infinite. Infinitely small or infinitely large: viral or environmental. (11)

His words have proved prophetic. And now, two decades deep into the 21st century, we are left to ask: How much of our current lifeworld is mirrored in *Lear*? "New problems indeed arise," notes Peter Erickson, "but they are not Shakespeare's problems, nor does his work contain the materials for all the possible options" (144). We do need Shakespeare's insights into human suffering; yet our epoch has entered a phase that we don't yet comprehend, one that needs desperately to be questioned. It is not Shakespeare, really, nor Mandel, nor the literature of apocalypse that this essay is trying to come to terms with. The aim of this essay, ultimately, is to find a name for the world that has come upon us, surprising us by its force. In epochal terms, I'll call it posthumanist; in literary-cultural terms, I'll call it post-Shakespearean.

Drawing vocabulary from Raymond Williams, this essay offers an epochal analysis of Shakespeare's early modernism, drawing points of comparison/contrast with Mandel's postmodernism. Both offer representations of world-shattering catastrophe, though through different literary-cultural lenses.[1] This essay then turns to explore Mandel's appropriation of Shakespeare, which, as I read it, is in turn celebratory, nostalgic, and critical. In *Station Eleven*, the Traveling Symphony—a ragged troupe of

[1]As a precursor to the following, Mark West reads *Station Eleven* through the experimental genre of salvagepunk, "in which salvage is the work of uncovering apocalyptic revelations hidden in the rubble of catastrophe in order to make a new world" (2). While my own analysis focuses on the failure of "expert systems" in technoculture, West reads Mandel as the collapse of "global capitalism" (20). Also, what I describe as a four-century transit through the "stages of modernism" is, in West's broader terms, both beginning and end of "the age of the Anthropocene" (22). One further point separates West's analysis from my own: In the world in which I'm writing, pandemic is not a trope merely. And, as we're beginning to see, the threats to "global capitalism" have become far more than the stuff of fiction.

actors and musicians who move from settlement to settlement across the U.S. Great Lakes region, entertaining survivors—includes Shakespeare in its repertoire. A member of the troupe, Kirsten Raymonde, had played Lear's stage-daughter on the night of the pandemic. Some twenty years later, we're told, "She'd been thinking lately about writing her own play. […] She wanted to write something modern, *something that addressed this age in which they'd somehow landed*" (288; emphasis added). Mandel's narrative continues:

> Survival might be insufficient, she'd told Dieter in late-night arguments, but on the other hand, so was Shakespeare. He'd trotted out his usual arguments, about how Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did the Traveling Symphony. But look, she'd told him, the difference was that they'd seen electricity, they'd seen everything, they'd watched a civilization collapse, and Shakespeare hadn't. In Shakespeare's time the wonders of technology were still ahead, not behind them, and far less had been lost. "If you think you can do better," he'd said, "why don't you write a play and show it to Gil?"
>
> "I don't think I can do better," she'd told him. "I'm not saying that. I'm just saying the repertoire's inadequate." (288)

"[T]he repertoire's inadequate": with these words Mandel declares Shakespeare's distance from our own pandemic-riven 21st century. For postwar critics like Jan Kott, Maynard Mack, and R. A. Foakes, Shakespeare's *Lear* prefigures the terrors of Auschwitz and the atom bomb. But it fails to envision the technocultural innovations that transform us into cyborgs, carrying the human species into realms of the posthuman. Such is the thesis of this present essay.

***

> The postmodern is […] the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed "residual" and "emergent" forms of cultural production—must make their way.
>
> Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (6)

At any moment within any given epoch, the dominant culture authorizes, institutionalizes, and polices norms and practices. But, despite its powers and authority, the dominant culture contains within itself alternative (or oppositional) norms and practices lingering on from previous ages; these "residual beliefs" (122), as Williams terms them, remain viable culturally (and esthetically), though embraced by a minority. At the same time, some practices will be "emergent," showing where culture is heading; and many in the dominant culture will embrace these emergent beliefs, trends, and technologies, even as others will resist them. Within late 20th century Western culture, Williams lists organized religion, "the idea of rural community," and monarchy as "predominantly residual" (122). In contrast to these concrete examples, his discussion of emergence rests—necessarily, perhaps—in generalizations:

> By "emergent" I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created. But it is

> exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture […] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it: emergent in the strict sense, rather than merely novel. (Williams 123)

Though residues of the medieval remain in *King Lear*, the play still strikes as modern in questioning the feudal order, cosmic hierarchy, and divine justice. These it invokes, as if putting them on trial.

More germane to this essay is "the problem of emergence" (124), that is, of the extent to which Shakespeare anticipates us in our own belated lifeworld. "Shakespeare is out ahead of us," writes Harold Bloom in 1998, he "enables us to see realities that may already have been there but that we would not find possible to see without him" (487). Laying aside the critical controversies surrounding *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), we can make use of Bloom.[2] Though not "the human" *per se*, it's the 'ethos of modernity' that Shakespeare "invents."[3] As for the limitations within Shakespeare's understanding of our humanness—particularly as the "category of the human" continues to evolve through the 21st century—these limitations can be glimpsed in our technocultural transit through postmodernism to posthumanism, wherein "genetically recombined […] animals and vegetables proliferate alongside computer and other viruses, while unmanned flying and ground armed vehicles confront us with new ways of dying" (Braidotti 187). As Rosi Braidotti notes, within these emergent forms of biotechnology, "humanity is re-created as a negative category, held together by shared vulnerability and the spectre of extinction, but also struck down by new and old epidemics, in endless 'new' wars, detention camps and refugee exodus" (187).

Though Williams's Marxist analysis of dominant-residual-emergent practices takes class-consciousness as its focus, the focus of this present essay rests in postmodern technoculture, with its "breaching of the distinction between technology and nature" (Mansfield ch. 11). Writing in the mid-1970s, Williams could not have envisioned the full impact of the then-nascent technologies that would reinvent the structures and machinery of capitalism, communication, transportation, information, energy supply, and even the embodied human subject. As Nick Mansfield puts it, the cyborg (part cybernetic machine, part living organism) has become "commonplace in postmodern life, and must be recognized as one of the products of multinational, militaristic capitalism—a result of the inventions and strategies developed to fight the Cold War" (ch. 11). In her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), Donna Haraway writes: "by the late twentieth century […] we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (190).[4]

[2]For the critical response to Bloom, see Desmet and Sawyer.

[3]"The plays," Bloom writes, "remain the outward limit of human achievement; aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually. They abide beyond the end of the mind's reach; we cannot catch up to them. Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us" (pp. xvii–xviii). For a balanced discussion of Bloom's thesis, see Mustapha Fahmi, "Shakespeare: The Orientation of the Human."

[4]Mansfield elaborates: "It is only from where we are now, cyborgs in a technologised world, that our politics can begin, not from reference to some distant dream of our eternal nature that we imagine will save us from the debased present" (ch. 11).

Williams could not have known how technology would restructure the 21st century lifeworld, including the very category of the human; and neither could Shakespeare. And the Georgia flu, as described in Mandel's *Station Eleven*, shows us what a post-pandemic, post-Shakespearean world might look like. In appropriating Shakespeare, Mandel picks up where the bard leaves off: Shakespeare's ending is Mandel's beginning. But, before exploring their competing versions of catastrophe, we must situate Shakespeare in his time.

***

> He was not of an age but for all time!
>
> Ben Jonson, "To the Memory of … Mr. William Shakespeare" (line 43)

> But to the cold war generation and the postwar art world, [*King Lear*] seemed like a prescient vision of the present moment. […] [I]t was not so much because of the pathos of its title character […] but because of the worldview the play seemed to body forth—a bleak, bombed-out landscape of nihilism.
>
> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (241)

In declaring him "for all time," fellow playwright Ben Jonson expressed sentiments that linger residually to this day: that Shakespeare's art is universal and transcendent, loosed from time, place, and epoch; that he captures the unchanging, essential spirit of human nature; that he reaches the highest aesthetic while sounding both the warning voice of conscience and a clarion call to our noblest nature. In the 18th century, the mantle of bardolatry fell to Samuel Johnson: Shakespeare's characters, writes Johnson, "are not modified by the customs of particular places" or "by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions" (11). Rather, "they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply and observation will always find" (11–12).

By the 19th century, the "Shakespeare industry" had gathered up its full cultural capital (Taylor 197); and while claims of universalism continued (these being useful in an age of colonialist expansion), claims of Shakespeare's cultural dominance began shifting from "timeless classic" to modernist.[5] In America, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who announced the new Shakespeare. "It was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now," declares Emerson in 1850, "Now, literature, philosophy, and thought, are Shakespearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see" (194–95). In sum, "he wrote the text of modern life" (201).

[5]The so-called "Shakespeare industry" is a complex web of performance and commodification promoting the cultural hero-worship of Shakespeare and his character-creations. As N. V. Zakharov and B. N. Gaydin describe it, the Shakespeare industry includes the dissemination and reappropriation of his works in "theatrical, cinematographic and TV stagings," as well as the "commercial exploitation of the playwright's image and those of [his] characters" in "gift production […] on T-shirts, cups, key rings, magnets, etc." ("Shakespeare industry"). It also includes the "intellectual tourism" of "places where the playwright lived and created his masterpieces [and] where his famous characters lived their lives (e.g., the actual house at Stratford-upon-Avon, or the fictitious balcony of Juliet's in Verona)" ("Shakespeare Industry").

Since Emerson's declaration of Shakespeare's modernity, it's more common to keep Shakespeare grounded in history, albeit in a "prescient" way, particularly in works like *King Lear*. With apologies to Ben Jonson, Shakespeare *is* "of an age," in that the epoch in which he wrote initiated our own—or, rather, our own *through the end of the 20th century*. His works carry us into the cultural, political, ethical, epistemological, psychological, and existential realities of "early modernism," in that the cultural energies unleashed in his plays were "emergent" in his time. Many of the same energies remain "dominant" in our own age, though some have become "predominantly residual." Four centuries have passed since the 1608 publication of *King Lear* in quarto. During those centuries, Western culture has transited through several stages of modernism, passing from theocracy to secularism, from religious certitude to epistemological skepticism, from feudalism to the nation-state, from horse-drawn wagons to jumbo jets, from wood-burning furnaces to steam engines to cyclotrons. (And, one might add, from wool to polyester.) If Shakespeare is early-modernist, then we can call Mandel postmodernist in the when and the how of her writing. Couched in these period terms, their works stand as bookends to the grand epoch of modernism.

In the aftermath of world war, Western artists and intellectuals were thrown into a crisis of self-reflection. And in that self-reflection, what did they come to acknowledge? That the old cosmic order (which kept God in command of created nature) could be replaced by a thoroughly human history. That experimental science could "master" and transform the material world. That, culturally, the landscape would evolve into the megalopolis cityscape, creating an urban ethos. And that politics (of a European stripe) would pursue nationhood as identity and destiny—ingredients, we know now, of racism and colonialism. *These are the works of modernism*, and they come to an exclamation point in an explosion over Hiroshima and an opening of the gates at Auschwitz and other death camps, out of which as many as 100,000 living skeletons stepped out, the bodies of some 6,000,000 others having been incinerated, their ashes scattered over fields nearby.

Such is the mid-20th century context in which *King Lear* came to be read: "After two world wars and Auschwitz," writes Maynard Mack in 1964, "our sensibility is significantly more in touch than our grandparents' was with the play's jagged violence, its sadism, madness, and processional of deaths, its wild blends of levity and horror, selfishness and self-lessness" (25). The technological, political, social, and psychological energies of modernism had gathered like storm clouds over Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Catastrophes such as these belonged to the generation of my parents, who lived through economic depression and world war; and in that generation's response to such catastrophes as these, the seeds of postmodernism were sown.

As a reader of *Lear*, I confess that I've identified with Edgar, son of the blinded Gloucester, whose last words seem to invoke my parents' generation and its hardships:

EDGAR
The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much nor live so long.

(*King Lear* 5.3.329-332)[6]

They—my parents—become "the oldest" of whom Edgar speaks; and I would never have presumed to "see so much" as they, in that the world during my lifetime could never come close to theirs in its share of suffering, anxiety, deprivation, and terror. Now, I'm not sure. And I'm left to ask: Can we still declare Shakespeare "our contemporary" if we've arrived somewhere else? How far into the 21st century can Shakespeare's *Lear* carry us, if its lifeworld stops at the gates of the Nazi death camps? The play bears witness to the howling of victims, but its ending gives no answer as to what comes after. It teaches us to rage and to mourn, but not how to move on, not how to survive.

Williams has warned us of "the problem of emergence" and the difficulties of naming. Emergent forces are transforming late 20th century postmodernism into something else: Call it digimodernism, metamodernism, post-millennialism, or post-postmodernism. Whatever you call it, it suggests that further change is upon us. Unsurprisingly, its points of transit lie in postindustrial capitalism and technoscience; its world organization is multicultural and multinational; its productions are not of glass and steel, but of electrons and photons. Ours has become an age, not of material production but of information: Silicon Valley has replaced Motor City and the Midwest industrial Rust Belt. Ours is an age of social media, whose living human face is replaced by an avatar. And ours is an age of black-boxing and "expert systems," of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, human prosthetics, and genetic engineering. And in this cyborg age, writes Haraway,

> "Integrity" and "sincerity" of the Western self gives way to decision procedures and expert systems…. No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language. (163)

So, to the post- in post-postmodern, shall we add post-Shakespearean? Having anticipated the answer to this question, we might observe more closely what Shakespeare taught postwar, post-Holocaust culture about catastrophe.

***

> And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels having the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God.
>
> Revelation 9.6 (KJV)

> KENT
> Is this the promised end?
> EDGAR
> Or image of that horror?
>
> William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (5.3.268–69)

Beyond *King Lear*, Shakespeare and Mandel share a second text in common, the Book of Revelation: a book of providential history, wherein the Christian God has written the final, as-yet-to-be-enacted chapter. Within this apocalyptic text, the world is destroyed

[6]I quote from Bevington's *Complete Works*.

and remade. And yet, despite its Scriptural invocations, *Lear* does something that few, if any, works in English dared do before: It pits raw nature against divine justice and asks, Where is God when the Holocaust comes? Literary medievalism (that is, most lifeworld representations before Shakespeare) affirms that evil, in the end, will be revealed and punished, and that the good, though they suffer, shall have their reward. Shakespeare's *Lear* destroys that pretty notion by creating characters whose innocent suffering mocks all claims of divine justice. Bloom is right: "For those who believe that divine justice somehow prevails in the world, *King Lear* ought to be offensive…. You have to be a very determined Christianizer of literature to take any comfort from this most tragic of tragedies" (493). In this specific sense, Shakespeare's *Lear* offers a rehearsal of Auschwitz:

> The death of Lear cannot be an atonement for us, any more than it serves as an atonement for Edgar, Kent, and Albany. For Edgar, it is the final catastrophe, his godfather and his father both are gone, and the contrite Albany (who has much to be contrite for) abdicates the crown to the hapless Edgar, Shakespeare's most reluctant royal successor. […] The remorseful Albany and aged Kent, soon to join his master Lear in death, do not represent the audience: Edgar the survivor does, and his despairing accents send us out of the theater unconsoled. (507)

In this play, "the gods" are not yet dead; what dies, rather, is the conviction that heaven has any interest in administering justice or mercy.[7] After *Lear*, humanity must take its case directly to nature: It is not as an immortal soul, made in God's image, but rather as a rational animal, that humanity must seek its identity and work out its salvation.

While rejecting the play's apparent nihilism, Mandel embraces its secularism. In *Station Eleven*, belief in a God-governed, providential universe is treated as a form of insanity. Tyler, son of Arthur and his second wife Elizabeth, reads from the Book of Revelation; his mother teaches him to do so. Of the survivors who seek refuge in the New Severn airport, they alone interpret the pandemic in apocalyptic terms:

> "Right now he's over by the quarantined plane," Clark said, "reading aloud to the dead from the Book of Revelation."
>
> "Oh." [Elizabeth] smiled, and resumed her knitting. "He's a very advanced reader."
>
> "I think maybe he's picked up some strange ideas about, well, about what happened." He still had no words for it, he realized. No one spoke of it directly. […]
>
> "He thinks the pandemic happened for a reason," Clark said. […]
>
> "Everything happens for a reason," she said. She didn't look at him. "It's not for us to know." (260–261)

Tyler has learned his mother's catechism well:

[7]Jacobean blasphemy laws denied Shakespeare the right to refer to the Judeo-Christian "God," so it's to pagan and presumably pre-Christian "gods" (4.1.41–42) that the characters in *Lear* make their complaints.

> "Everything happens for a reason," Tyler said. […] "That's what my mom said," he added when everyone stared at him.
>
> "Yeah, but that's because Elizabeth's a fucking lunatic," Garrett said. […]
>
> "In front of the kid?" Annette was twisting her Lufthansa neck scarf between her fingers. "That's his mother you're talking about." (253)

Years later, having established his doomsday cult at St. Deborah by the Water, Tyler preaches to the Traveling Symphony in similarly apocalyptic terms:

> "My people," the prophet said, "earlier in the day I was contemplating the flu, the great pandemic, and let me ask you this. Have you considered the perfection of the virus?" […]
>
> "There was the outbreak of 1918, my people, the timing obvious, divine punishment for the waste and slaughter of the First World War. But then, […] then came a virus like an avenging angel, unsurvivable, a microbe that reduced the population of the fallen world by, what? […] [S]hall we say ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent? […] I submit, my beloved people, that such a perfect agent of death could only be divine. For we have read of such a cleansing of the earth, have we not?" (59–60)

In his skewed reading of Revelation, Tyler sees himself as an agent of this "cleansing." Shaken by his sermon, the Symphony packs up and heads out, quickly.

Thoroughly and unambiguously, Mandel rejects divine agency as a cause of pandemic. And in her characters' response to human suffering, we note a further point of contrast between *King Lear* and *Station Eleven*. As I've suggested, the play teaches its audience to rage and to mourn, but not how to survive. And rage, or the lack thereof, separates Shakespeare's characters from Mandel's. Lear is driven by it: "Howl, howl, howl!" (5.3.262). No one in Mandel expresses anything approaching it. Their response to "the collapse" (145), as characters in *Station Eleven* come to call it, is fear, disbelief, confusion and, above all, sadness. A friend from Arthur's youth, Clark Thompson is among the survivors at New Severn. Turning seventy "in Year Nineteen," "he wasn't specifically sad anymore, but he was aware of death at all times" (276). Excepting those few crazed and patently evil cultists—followers of Tyler—who see "an avenging angel" in the virus, Mandel's characters learn to accept present conditions and resolve to live as best as they can, with art replacing religion as consolation for life's relentless suffering.

In bringing humankind to the brink of biological extinction, "the collapse" (145) marks the failure of postmodern technoculture, whose "expert systems" had carried humankind into realms of the posthuman. Mandel may be right in her prediction: The impending catastrophe of the 21st century may well come with the defeat of technology by an avenging nature. In *Station Eleven*, it begins with a strain of influenza. But it's not medical science alone that falls before the virus. A further catastrophe follows, and this second strikes at the heart of postmodern technoculture—the pulsing electronic body of the global energy grid. The Black Plague depopulated medieval Europe but did not

destroy its technologies, such as they were. In Mandel's world, it's the destruction of technoculture that throws humanity back into a Hobbesian "state of nature."[8]

Paradoxically, the viruses that kill us are not, themselves, alive. On their own, "they are inert strings of protein, incapable of any action whatsoever, including self-replication. Placed inside a living host, however, they spring into action and replicate" (Baumlin 16). What is a virus, if not a coded sequence of genetic information? And what is a computer virus, if not a coded digitized sequence of information? Haraway notes the homology between virtual and viral pandemic: "The diseases evoked by these clean machines are 'no more' than the minuscule coding changes of an antigen in the immune system, 'no more' than the experience of stress" (74). She goes further in describing the human cyborg—a biotechnic "assemblage" part cybernetic machine and part living organism—as a data-driven biotic system:

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what body in machines that resolve into coding practices. In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice […] we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (Haraway 82)

Of a sudden, we find ourselves peering beyond postmodernism, anticipating a lifeworld in which "the boundaries between living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, biological and engineered, have dissolved" (Baumlin 16).

If the pre-modern world is God-made, and the modern world is human-made or materially engineered, then the postmodern world is made of what? Streams of electrons? Strings of protein? And of the human being, what shall we say? Of what stuff are we made? More than structure or biotechnical assemblage, we are "a process *of becoming*" (30; emphasis added), as Pramod K. Nayar puts it, an aggregate of "connections and mergers between species, bodies, functions and technologies" (30-31).[9] Though the cyborg emerges in late 20th century discourse, its cultural presence remains largely unacknowledged (except in sci-fi films and college classrooms) and unseen. When the dominant culture comes at last to recognize our becoming-posthuman, we shall have peered beyond postmodernism itself. As a biological corollary to the cyborg, the posthuman body describes an "interspecies" organism (Braidotti 193), "a transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (193). Within posthuman theory, the body can no longer be conceived

[8]By no means am I preaching against postmodernism and its technological enablements; these, as Mansfield notes, offer "a new strength wrought by prosthetics or genetic avant gardism, a new reach of human movement produced by both long distance and cyber-transport, a new pleasure brought by infinitely proliferating entertainment technology and a new social life offered by more efficient management of resources and time" (ch. 11). Postmodernism offers these lifestyle enhancements, *but only so long as the power grid works*.

[9]In posthumanist theory, "two terms recur: 'assemblage' and 'becoming-'—the latter hyphenated, in that it rejects essentialist definitions while anticipating further evolution in bodies, lifeworlds, and lifestyles" (Baumlin 14).

as a single, unified organism living independently of other biological life; our physical being, rather, subsists within colonies of many millions of symbiotic/parasitic microbial "companion species" (Nayar 126), one of which, in Mandel's fictive lifeworld, is the Georgia flu virus.

Let us work our way back now, from computer viruses and the Coronavirus to Mandel's appropriation of Shakespeare.

***

Russian Hackers Attacking US Power Grid and Aviation, FBI Warns

Bloomberg News headline (15 March 2018)

Self-Driving Uber Car Kills Pedestrian in Arizona

New York Times headline (19 March 2018)

"God, why won't our phones work?"

Mandel, *Station Eleven* (242)

The complete social collapse that Mandel imagines is caused not simply by a natural disaster, a viral pandemic that carries off most of the global human population. It is caused, additionally, by the postmodernist division of information into "expert systems" that made human survivors incapable of repairing or restarting the black-boxed technologies upon which they relied. This is shown poignantly in the airport near the town of New Severn. At the onset of Georgia flu, when technicians left the airport for their homes, the travelers didn't know how to maintain the airport's emergency generators. The strength—as well as the Achilles' heel—of postmodernism lies in the increasing complexity of its technoculture. Cars nowadays can park themselves, though their human owners can't fix a dashboard light. Our information systems, which seem to need no human supervision, have become so sophisticated that expertise over them must be dispersed. *No one person possesses the information that can hold all these systems together*. It would take an almighty omniscient being to possess all the information and know how to use it, thus keeping technoculture "powered," in effect alive.

Following one of Bruno Latour's thought-experiments, I'd ask readers to glance around the room in which they might find themselves, noting the extent to which today's lifeworld has evolved into realms of the posthuman.[10] The information and expertise

[10]"Look around," writes Latour: "Consider how many black boxes there are in the room. Open the black boxes; examine the assemblies inside. Each of the parts inside the black box is itself a black box full of parts. If any part were to break, how many humans would immediately materialize…?" (162). The human embodiment of nonhuman technologies turns agents into "actants," as exemplified by an overhead projector:

> Take, for instance, an overhead projector. It is a point in a sequence of action (in a lecture, say), a silent and mute intermediary, taken for granted, completely determined by its function. Now suppose the projector breaks down. The crisis reminds us of the projector's existence. As the repairmen swarm around it, adjusting this lens, tightening that bulb, we remember that the projector is made of several parts, each with its role and function and its relatively independent goals. Whereas a moment before the projector scarcely existed, now even its parts have individual existence, each its own "black box." In an instant our "projector" grew from being composed of zero to one to many. How many actants are really there? (161)

upon which this world and its technologies are built (and that includes the word-processing computer used in composing this essay) lie outside of our powers. This world doesn't ask us to monitor or maintain its systems. But there's a twist. Mandel's novel does not depict the postmodern condition in its technoscientific completion or fulfillment; rather, it depicts the aftermath of its catastrophic failure. The virus is merely the first blow: The North American power grid fails because its "expert systems" still require a human interface. A fully postmodern world would serve its human inhabitants, but it should not need those human inhabitants in order to function. The automobile—the car-as-actant, to use Latour's phrasing—should drive itself. The lights should turn themselves on and off and on again as we move from room to room.

In a fully realized postmodern technoculture, shouldn't the power grid be capable of maintaining itself? Why should a self-regulating nuclear or hydroelectric power plant ever shut down? Again, the transit from medievalism to modernism to postmodernism is a transit from divine providence to human reason to artificial intelligence, the ultimate destination being a technology whose computational systems evolve independently of human consciousness and human agency. But Mandel's novel catches our species unprepared, while its AI technologies remain incomplete—a work-in-progress. Put baldly, the nonbiological constructs of cyborg technoculture still need human cultivation and oversight. And then there's the virus. Its effect in Mandel is to pull the surviving population back into a pre-modern state, where the technologies enabled by modernism are rendered inoperable.

> This was how [Clark] arrived in this airport: he'd boarded a machine that transported him at high speed a mile above the surface of the earth. This was how he'd told Miranda Carroll of her ex-husband's death: he'd pressed a series of buttons on a device that had connected him within seconds to an instrument on the other side of the world, and Miranda—barefoot on a white sand beach with a shipping fleet shining before her in the dark—had pressed a button that had connected her via satellite to New York. These [were the] taken-for-granted miracles that had persisted all around them. (233)

More than inoperable, these "taken-for-granted miracles" of technology *could no longer be understood*, since no single person ever understood them in their totality anyway. Beyond the technicians who programmed the computer or who ran the emergency generator, the objects of an electrified world become so many black boxes (Latour 161–62), "opaque" in their internal workings and, for that reason, incomprehensible. Which brings us back to the airport near New Severn and Clark's post-pandemic Museum of Civilization.

Once their "use" (or energy supply) is lost, the Museum of Civilization's pre-pandemic artifacts can be displayed as art—that is, as pure form lacking function:

> BY THE END OF Year Fifteen there were three hundred people in the airport, and the Museum of Civilization filled the Skymiles Lounge. In former times, when the airport had had fewer people, Clark had worked all day at the details of survival. […] But there were many more people now, and Clark was older, and no one seemed to mind if he cared for the Museum all day. There seemed to be a

For further discussion of Latour, see Baumlin (12–13).

> limitless number of objects in the world that had no practical use but that people wanted to preserve: cell phones with their delicate buttons, iPads, Tyler's Nintendo console, a selection of laptops. There were a number of impractical shoes, stilettos mostly, beautiful and strange. […] Traders brought things for Clark sometimes, objects of no real value that they knew he would like: magazines and newspapers, a stamp collection, coins. There were the passports or the driver's licenses or sometimes the credit cards of people who had lived at the airport and then died. Clark kept impeccable records. (258)

Having been thrown into a dark age worse than anything Shakespeare's plague-ridden world would have experienced or imagined, Mandel's survivors are left to recover the power supply necessary to rebuild their information systems and technologies.

Having described the technocultural contexts of postmodernism and the interspecies biology of posthumanism, we return to the theme of apocalypse. This next point is perhaps obvious, but it marks the chasm separating Mandel's novel from Shakespeare's play: *King Lear* ends in unmitigated catastrophe, whereas *Station Eleven* begins with it. Shakespeare offers death without consolation, whereas Mandel focuses on survival. Mandel's novel lacks the tragic-nihilistic vision that Kott, Mack, Foakes, and other postwar critics have found in *Lear*. And this contributes to the differences in their literary modes as well as their lifeworlds: Whereas *Lear* presents an early-modernist version of apocalypse, *Station Eleven* begins in crisis and works its way toward melodrama. As Mandel describes it, *Station Eleven* is neither sci-fi nor dystopian in genre. "Hopeful" is the word she has used to describe it, and her choice of ending reinforces this sentiment:[11]

> "I know you're tired," [Clark] said. "[But] there's something I think you'd like to see." […] [Kirsten] wasn't in the habit of following strangers, but he was elderly and moved slowly and she had three knives in her belt. "Where are we going?" "The air traffic control tower." […]
>
> On the ninth landing, Clark rapped a pattern with his cane on a door and they were admitted into an octagonal room. […] James, may we borrow the telescope?" James moved the tripod over and Clark peered through, the lens aimed just below the dim spot in the sky. […] "The telescope's focused," he said. "Don't move it, just look through." Kirsten looked, but at first she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. She stepped back. "It isn't possible," she said. "But there it is. Look again." In the distance, pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity. (311–12)

So the power comes back on, after all. Civilization is saved. And so the novel, *Station Eleven*, offers prospects for a happy ending to the three characters—Jeevan, Clark, and Kirsten—who bear most of the narrative.

I'd call attention to a further point of contrast between *Station Eleven* and *King Lear*, one pertaining to the relation between Kirsten, Arthur's stage-daughter, and Tyler,

[11]Mandel, "An Evening." Early reviewers agree, seeing hope in the novel (West; Barnett; Tripney).

Arthur's natural-born son. Tyler's cult has been chasing the Traveling Symphony ever since a young girl (chosen to be Tyler's fourth wife) escaped, stowing away with the Symphony as it passed through St. Deborah by the Water. So, some twenty years after the pandemic, Kirsten and Tyler meet at last. In a climactic scene, Arthur's stage-daughter kneels on the ground while the son stands over her, his rifle aimed at her head. Others from Tyler's cult, including a disaffected young boy, stand in the near distance, their weapons raised.

In Shakespeare, Gloucester's bastard son Edmund puts Lear's beloved Cordelia to death. In Mandel, it's the son who dies: An unnamed boy—a malcontent in Tyler's cult—kills Tyler and then himself. In committing suicide, the boy provides Mandel with her scapegoat. *He's* the one who carries out what Shakespeare's Gloucester had sought in attempting suicide: to be freed from seemingly meaningless violence and suffering. The novelist's decision as to "who lives, who dies" can be read without reference to any Shakespearean source or analogue. Still, whether ironically or unconsciously, Mandel diverges from Shakespeare in allowing the stage Lear's daughter to live, even as the actor's natural son dies. In the novel's first chapter, Kirsten is onstage, playing a phantasm—Lear's memory of his daughter as a child. In Shakespeare's play, the daughters, when grown up, all die: Cordelia by hanging, Regan by poisoning, Goneril by suicide.

Perhaps the greater irony lies in Shakespeare's own act of revision. As Samuel Johnson famously writes, "*Shakespeare* has suffered the virtue of *Cordelia* to perish in a just cause contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles" (161). Deeming it a play "in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry" (161), Johnson's sense of decorum led him to prefer Nahum Tate's 1681 adaptation over the 1608 original. Preserving the lives of Lear, Gloucester, and Cordelia—whom he marries off to Edgar—Tate's version dominated the Restoration and 18th century stage. In his "Epistle Dedicatory," Tate claims to have been "racked with no small fears for so bold a change, till I found it well-received by my audience" (Tate). And Johnson placed himself among that appreciative audience:

> In the present case the publick has decided. *Cordelia*, from the time of *Tate*, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add anything to the general suffrage, I might relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by *Cordelia's* death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor. (161–62)

In *Holinshed's Chronicles* (1586), Cordelia is reunited with her father, arrives with a force from France, defeats her wicked sisters, and restores Lear to the throne. The more literate of Shakespeare's audience would have known the story and its ending, *which he rewrites*. And Shakespeare's revision defies the moralizing tendencies of traditional, "exemplary" literature. A justice premised in *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye—presumes that when evil is manifest in the world, its measure will be taken and the price that it exacts will be nothing less, *nor should it be more*, than an equal measure of good. Unless and until the good pay that price, evil remains unchecked. In *King Lear*, the suffering of the good seems in excess of the evil unleashed by Goneril, Reagan, Cornwall, and Edmund. Far more than Mandel's novel, Shakespeare's play leaves one to meditate on unmitigated evil and the innocent suffering that follows.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, an apocalypse records both the destruction *and recreation* of the world. Apocalypse leads, paradoxically, to a happy ending, however terrifying the path toward that ending. As projected in Shakespeare—and illustrated in the mid-20th century by Hiroshima and Auschwitz—apocalypse reduces to destruction merely. Riven Barton distinguishes apocalyptic literature from literary dystopias, which "signify a continuation of life *after the apocalypse has already happened*" (6; emphasis added). For, "regardless of how horrible it may be, dystopia is not an end, but a struggle for continuation. They are shadow projections of current society, hyper-exemplifying problems and potential fears that already exist" (Barton 6). In contrast, Heather J. Hicks sees post-apocalyptic and dystopian as "essentially synonymous" terms:

> In some respects, dystopian content is symptomatic of the distinction between the Christian apocalyptic tradition, which culminates in the utopian New Jerusalem, and the secular post-apocalyptic genre, which, without fail, imagines the destruction of modernity as leading to a state of at least provisional suffering and oppression. (5)

Hicks's list of the conventions of "post-apocalyptic genre fiction" mirrors *Station Eleven*: "ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant longing for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence […] enacted by roving gangs of outlaws" (6; see also Heffernan). As Carmen M. Méndez-Garcia suggests, the term post-apocalyptic does seem to suit Mandel's novel:

> There is often, in the postapocalyptic genre […] a "promise of reconfiguration, of resetting and rebuilding a society unencumbered by the problems of the world that was destroyed" [Smith 291] that is certainly present in Mandel's text. *Station Eleven* is a fantasy mostly about goodness and decency in human nature, and the possibility of communal creation of little cells of camaraderie, a kind of preservation of the best of culture, society, and previous models of civilization. Even the mandatory evil cult leader, the Prophet, seems clichéd, in a move that I would argue does not only adhere to generic rules, but is also intentional as it emphasizes the optimism of the text. (113–14)

As this essay comes to a closure, it is noted that much remains unexplored in Mandel's appropriation of Shakespeare. I do not criticize Nahum Tate for revising Shakespeare's revision of the chronicle history; Tate was, after all, adapting an old play to new tastes and circumstances. In charting the interpretive history of *Lear*, it has been shown how the play came to mirror the crises of mid-20th century postwar, post-Holocaust intellectual culture, as well as how a contemporary novelist like Mandel questions the bard's continuing relevance into the 21st century. In Mandel's depiction of a postmodern, post-pandemic lifeworld, we're simply told that "the repertoire's inadequate" (288). Posthumanism reaches beyond Shakespeare: "His mind" is no longer "the horizon beyond which […] we do not see" (Emerson 195).

I do agree with Bloom: "Suffering," he writes, "receives its full reality of representation in *King Lear*, hope receives none. Hope is named Cordelia and she is hanged at Edmund's command; Edgar survives to battle wolves, and to endure a heroic

hopelessness. And that, rather than ripeness, is all" (Bloom 506). That's not Nahum Tate's message. And that's not the message of *Station Eleven*.

In the year 2020, in the midst of viral pandemic, for all our postmodern belatedness, we need still to bear witness to the truth of suffering; we need *King Lear*.

But hope, too, is needed at this time.

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Ghana's Trokosi Case: Contestations between Cultural Relativism and Universalism

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Abstract | The study herein sheds light on Trokosi, a traditional practice in Ghana and its surrounding countries in West Africa, which is widely believed to violate the rights of girls by condemning them to a life of servitude in fetish shrines to "atone for the sins of their family members" (International Needs UK 1). Though the practice and its impact are considered very important in addressing the rights of girls and women, they are under-researched. This paper presents key issues associated with the practice of Trokosi and analyzes the cultural relativism and universality debates, which posit that culture is fluid and ever evolving. It concludes that culture has the potential to adapt to new values and norms, including practices that safeguard the human rights of girls and women.

Keywords | Trokosi, Fetish Shrines, Ghana, Tradition, Education, Freedom, Religion, NGOs, Human Rights, Empowerment, Servitude, Slavery

> According to Dartey-Kumordzie, (Scholar of Ewe Philosophy and Religion), the ancestors of the Ewe people believed that society could only function well if it operates on a good moral foundation. To the ancestors, the creator of the universe is both male and female, but the female is the main creator of life. This creative function is embodied in a woman and her womb is the center of life. According to this line of reasoning, the woman was the most important factor in state building… To empower women to realize their special potential, special institutions of knowledge-the troxovi [trokosi] institutions-were created. (Ameh 61)

Trokosi, which means wife or slave to the gods (Equality Now 1) is a customary practice that still lurks in the shadows of Ghana. In this practice, girls as young as six years old are condemned to a life in a fetish shrine to "atone for the sins of their family members" (International Needs UK 1). Addressing the practice of Trokosi is complex because it is rooted in cultural norms and reinforced by the power of "the gods," who are presumed to have great powers and are greatly revered and feared. The priests, both males as well as females, selected or ascended through birth, are said to be the custodians and spokespersons of the gods. They may be considered as powerful as the gods themselves (Trokosi Dictionary 1).

The church and the state's attempts to challenge the power that the local priests wield in political and social life have often resulted in conflicts between customary/traditional institutions and the church and the state. Reactions to the Trokosi practice started as a "Christian crusade" which, according to Ameh, were met with hostility (Ameh 51). According to many cultural relativists, for centuries, Christianity, which many believe to be a relic of European slavery and colonialism, has "excluded, suppressed and demonized" African traditional or spiritual religions (De Witte 303). This tension emerged in public debates with the rising presence of the charismatic Pentecostal movement in Ghana. With their growing representation and influence in public spaces and decision making, traditionalists have also positioned themselves in the public arena as a counter-voice to what many believe is not only the Christian movement but a global agenda (303). Interventions by the government have failed to eradicate this practice, partially due to weak governance accountability measures, the fear and unwillingness to get involved in spiritual matters, and most notably, the enigmatic nature of the practice. International and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have responded to this practice with rescue missions, education, and reintegration strategies, but these efforts are widely believed to have fallen short because of the challenges in implementing universalist value systems in non-Western or socio-cultural contexts. This paper argues that the overcoming of these obstacles requires a change in the way we understand the

universality of human rights and the fluidity of culture. To do so, it presents key issues on the practice and analyzes cultural relativism and universality debates, and posits that culture is fluid and ever evolving. It has the potential to adapt to new values and norms, including practices that safeguard the rights of girls.

According to Global Policy Forum, "Universalism refers to the notion that human rights are universal and should apply to every human being. Cultural Relativists object, and argue that human rights are culturally dependent, and that no moral principles can be made to apply to all cultures" (1). In the case of Africa, the tension between these two ideologies and approaches is rooted in a problematic history of imperialism, colonialism, and European enslavement which stripped Africans of their socio-cultural, political, and economic power. For hundreds of years, Western colonizers not only subjected communities to violence but forcefully imposed their institutions of knowing and being over local customs and traditions (Kaya and Seleti 33). It is needless to say that although these are historical accounts, the consequences have had systemic and detrimental effects on the African continent: poverty, separation of families, and pillaging of natural resources are but a few lasting impacts. It is no wonder then that the fear of rising neo-imperialism and western imaginaries through the ushering of contemporary Western development and its perceived ideals of universal human rights are often met with skepticism, anxiety, and fear in Africa (Nyoni cited in Islamet al. 11).

Over the years, many Africans have been confronted with the unfortunate realization that for the greater good of their countries, they must reconcile abuses of the past with needs for the present and visions for the future. Although the formal articulation of the universality of human rights have origins in "Western" societies, it is important to note that many of the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be found in ancient cultures and traditional systems around the world that predate the development of this Western acclaim (Global Policy Forum 1). Though culture and traditions are central to the identities of Africans, it does not mean that African traditions and culture are fossilized or lack the ability to evolve (Nnaemeka 377). Many African societies have a long history and culture of negotiation and compromise, thus, underscoring the dynamism of culture (378).

The practice of Trokosi is a landscape on which this battle of narratives between cultural relativists and universalists is being fought in Ghana. Legitimate concerns about the backlash of the promotion of human rights in response to this practice present a compelling need to scrutinize such approaches and demand that proponents of human rights engage more meaningfully with the communities they seek to serve. With respect to the practice of Trokosi, such approaches have been seemingly blanketed and short sighted, leaving girls and women in compromising and disempowering positions. While traditionalist approaches, which seek to preserve the practice of Trokosi, subjugates women and girls, human rights approaches, which seek to eradicate this practice, are failing to meet the needs of those affected by it.

In order to collect relevant information for the study on Trokosi, as practiced in Ghana, two approaches were adopted. The first approach, meant to obtain a general or a broad view on the topic, involved discussions with groups deemed to be familiar with the topic, either through the communities where the practices occur or at policy levels where responses and interventions are planned. These informal discussions took place in Ghana

with persons associated with local and international NGOs, churches, local governments, etc. To gain more insights into the practice of Trokosi, the second approach focused on a few purposively selected individuals[1] from the Volta, Greater Accra, and Ashanti regions who have had firsthand experience with the practice or are knowledgeable about it. Among the most compelling interviews were, Afua, a 77-year-old woman, who claims that she was married to the gods in a practice similar to Trokosi; Yaw, a 38-year-old man who has strong faith in the power of the gods; Edem, a 30-year-old woman who is in law enforcement; and Kafui, a representative from International Needs Ghana (ING), an organization that has liberated thousands of girls from shrines through their 'Trokosi Modernisation Program.' For the latter individuals, their personal testimonies were written down, and key statements from the interviews are recalled in sections of this paper. Their extensive and in-depth interviews were considered as "case studies" and have been used to provide deeper understandings on the practice and contestation between universalism and cultural relativism.

The practice of Trokosi in Ghana started in the early 18th century and is still prevalent today despite the national laws that have been enshrined in the constitution, and the international conventions and instruments that have been signed to abolish this act and other acts of gender violence and servitude in Ghana (Arid 1). According to an article in the Independent UK, "The chosen ones: Slavery in the name of god,"

> Trokosi originates from the same belief system as voodoo. From the 1500s on, the Ewe were driven from the Niger River delta westwards. During this violent period their war-gods took on great importance and the fetish priests were more important than the chiefs, or traditional rulers. Before entering combat, warriors would visit religious shrines where they offered women to the war gods in exchange for victory and a safe homecoming. (Cited in Ireland Refugee Documentation Center Report-IRDCR 1)

The word Trokosi also known as '*Troxovi'* and '*Woryokwe*' "to the *Danbge* people literally means slave or wife to the gods" (Equality Now 1). "In traditional religion, *'Tro'* in the *Ewe* language refers to a spiritual force that transforms or acts for anyone who observes the proper rites and ceremonies of a cult and keeps within its rules. *'Kosi'* means slave. In the same manner, '*Won*' in *Adanbge or Ga* language means cult and '*Yokwe*' means slave" (Ababio 4). There are three forms of Trokosi: '*Dorfelviwo*': "those who were offered by their families to serve in the shrine as a sign of appreciation of the help of the gods in their conception and birth, '*Fiasidis*': who are given by their families, inducted by the deities, or voluntarily chose to serve in shrines" (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 25). Ameh also states that "these two forms of Trokosi, most notable amongst the *Anlo Ewes* are respected in the community and by the priests" (25). The third form of Trokosi, commonly referred to as simply Trokosi, is the main focus of this paper and is most prevalent with the "Tongu-Ewes and Dangmes" (25), which are located along the south eastern region of Ghana. This form involves family members sending young virgin girls in their families to fetish priests for the atonement of their families' crimes committed in the past (26).

[1]Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of interviewed subjects.

In this practice, girls are committed to the Trokosi institution at a very young age. "From ages 6 to 10 is when they begin their lives in the shrine and where an initiation ritual betrothing the girl to the gods is performed" (Eurtuk cited in IRDCR 3). The report states that fetish priests are entitled to consummate the marriage between the girl and the gods once she reaches puberty (3). According to Bastine, girls condemned to the shrine are at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), given that priests are known to have numerous sexual partners (83). Once girls come to the shrine, they are socialized to not refuse sexual advances from the priests. Ertuk's research further suggests that the daughters, who are born of the relations between the priest and the girls, also have "obligations" and responsibilities in the shrine (Eurtuk cited in IRDCR 3). Afua, a female farmer/petty trader, the 77-year-old interview subject, stated that the boys born within the shrine are raised to serve as protectors of the girls when crowds gather at the shrines to seek the gods (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods).[2] "[C]hildren of Trokosi are denied parental and emotional support, adequate nutrition and a healthy environment. Servitude restricts their access to social services such as formal education, and medical care (ante-natal, post-natal attention and immunization of their children)" (Yakin Ertuk cited in Bastine 83).

The 30-year-old female law enforcement officer, Edem, believes that Trokosi is a grave human rights violation and her account during the interview is consistent with the portrayal of Trokosi above. She stated that,

> Trokosi is a form of slavery. The families will commit a crime and agree to send a virgin but the shrine chooses the girl; often the prettiest one, and then they are forced to work. They go to the farm and work and will not get paid. They say it is the wife of the gods but really it is the wife of the priests. They marry the girls at very young ages and sleep with them. Some of them even have babies by them. These priests can have up to 60-80 wives all living together. (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement)[3]

To truly understand this practice and its impact on societal relations, one must recognize the perceived power of the gods. Interview subject, Yaw, the man with faith in the gods described how he understands and fears the practice of Trokosi:

> If somebody does something that is not fine, for example, stealing or fornication, like taking another man's wife, somebody can go to the shrine to report you. If the person that does something wrong does not confess, they will die in two or three hours' time. If you confess, they may not take you. After that person dies, another person in the family will die and the next person will fall ill. So when somebody falls ill, the family will take them [to the shrine]. The priest will let the family know that there is somebody in the family who has died but did not pass through the right channel to die. So the priest will offer to reverse the curse. The priest will tell the family that they need a small girl who is a virgin. (Interview 2012: Faith in the gods)[4]

[2]The interview was conducted in person on 29 July 2012 in Kumasi, Ashanti Region. The original language of the interview was Akan which was later translated in English by AK Davies.
[3]The interview was conducted in person on 8 July 2012 in Woe, Volta Region, Keta district.
[4]Interview with Yaw, a male driver, was held on 29 July 2012 in Tema, Greater Accra Region in person.

Yaw laments that the power of the gods is not to be underestimated because they can bring death upon your family: "If you refuse to give away your girl, the girl will die, the whole family will die. So you must send the girl because she will be alive and it will just be like she is living with another family" (Interview 2012: Faith in the gods). When asked if he would send his own daughter to the shrine if requested by the priests, he stated that he would do so without reservation. He further claimed that even though he is a Christian, he knows the gods are real because of the biblical references to other spirits and forces.

In an All Africa interview with Mercy, a liberated Trokosi, a clear characterization of the severity of this practice is articulated:

> At a tender age of eight, her parents condemned her to a Trokosi camp to atone for the sins of her aunt. On several occasions when she tried to escape, she was unsuccessful; in part because when she returned home her parents escorted her back to the shrine… Mercy began her condemned life as a Trokosi, where she woke at dawn and cleaned the shrine and worked on the farm. Worse, the priest sexually abused her, leaving her with four children to fend for. "The Trokosi system is not good," she told the gathering. "My generation and the generation before mine missed out in education." (All Africa 1)

Bastine's research indicates that this arrangement is systemic because even in cases where the Trokosi can leave after a five-year service to the shrine, the families of the Trokosi are often not in a position to fulfil the rituals and obligations demanded from the shrine. Consequently, the "girl may be confined to the shrine for life" (83).

The traditions associated with Trokosi are dynamic and play critical roles in the everyday lives of people and survival of societies from generation to generation (Nieto 130). In some parts of Ghana, and the African context in general, the existence of a supreme God is not questioned, but God must be approached only through lesser "gods" (Trokosi Dictionary 1). Afua, the 77-year-old interview subject, was a toddler when her mother started taking her to the shrine. She recalls,

> Growing up in the village at that time, there was no Christianity. There were only small gods. This was the only way we knew how to go through God. I am the eighth born. But my mother told me that the two before me died. One at four years old and the other at one week old. So when my mother lost the two kids, she went to the gods to tell her story and ask for help. So I am the one that was born. The priest told her that gods revealed to him that I was to be the wife of the gods. (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods)

Afua lived with her family at home but by the age of six, she was going to the shrine by herself every Friday to fetch water in service to the shrine (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods).

Article 26(2) of the Ghana constitution prohibits "customary practices which dehumanize or are injurious to the physical and mental wellbeing of all persons" (Ghana Constitution 1). Therefore, "[I]n 1998, the Government passed a law against ritual servitude (among other things), criminalizing the practice of Trokosi" (Ertuk cited in IRDCR 3). The Ghana Women's Manifesto was produced by an international NGO, ABANTU for Development in 2004. This manifesto was created to articulate the

demands of women concerning their social, cultural, political, and economic wellbeing. It explicitly addresses Trokosi, as well as other cultural practices that stand in the way of women accessing their rights and capabilities (Manifesto 46). The manifesto considers this practice as an "abuse" to Ghanaian culture and demands that ritual servitude be abolished (47). Most cited amongst the works related to this practice are the contributions by International Needs Ghana (ING), which "[…] garnered support from international media and NGOs in its campaign to end Trokosi (Interview 2012: ING representative).[5] Similarly, the Ghana Committee on Human and Peoples Rights, the Ghanaian Association for Women's Welfare, The Ghana National Commission on Children, and the Ghana International Federation of Women Lawyers all issued reports to condemn this practice as a human rights violation (Yates 1). Greene's analysis of the Trokosi system during the 90's conveys the practice as "a modern form of slavery" (960). Arid also deals with the conceptualization of Trokosi as a form of slavery in her work, highlighting Ghana's signatory status with the Slavery Convention and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery (1). Ghana has been the first of many African countries to ratify regional and international instruments, which are to enforce the protection of the rights of women and children such as the "UN Beijing Platform, Convention of the Rights of the Child, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and CEDAW" (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Government of Ghana Official Portal 1).

In spite of these interventions, there seems to be ongoing resistance by traditionalists. Those urging for the preservation of culture and tradition are not disconnected marginal groups secluded to remote corners of the country; they are leaders and people who have influence in the decision-making process in communities and at varying levels within societies (Shcwimmer 1). The Ghana constitution states that citizens have "the right to freedom of religion and cultural practice" (1). Priests are, therefore, covered by this 'right' and receive support from highly connected networks, such as the Afrikania Renaissance Mission, who argue that the practice of Trokosi is a "West African religious tradition that needs to be protected" (IRDCR 1). "High Priest of the *Afrikania* Mission, Osofo Azasu claimed that Trokosi is part of the African religious practice and so the attempt by the NGOs with support from Western countries was a means to destroy the enhancement of African spirituality" (IRDCR 1). According to Ghana News Association (GNA), traditionalists claim that under the Trokosi system, girls are undergoing a different form of education (1). They claim that Trokosi is much like taking on "apprenticeship" positions in the shrine (IDRCR 1). Bastine's research further states that according to the *Afrikania*,

> The Trokosi system (a) controls crime by training and teaching young women how to be good role models in their families and communities; (b) it is an honour bestowed on the girls, and should be considered as such… [Additionally, the shrines] serve as (a) hospitals, (b) healing centers, (c) pharmacies, (d) courts of last resort and justice, (e) places of worship and devotion, (f) sanctuaries for refugees, (g) schools, (h) conservatories of culture morality, and (i) lodges of esoteric knowledge. (Bastine 85)

[5]The telephonic interview with the project manager of ING was held on 1 August 2012 in Tema, Greater Accra Region.

Traditionalists deny that violence or abuse is practiced in the Trokosi system and claim that the build up around this practice is a propaganda to undermine cultural values. Azasu stated, "The NGOs who went to North America and Europe to portray that there was slavery in Ghana and needed funds to liberate them, were doing that for their own selfish benefits" (GNA 1). Others have expressed how this practice has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by the media and by local NGOs that are trying to capitalize from this (Amenyo 1). There are claims listed within a court case hearing and legislative report that raise speculation that local NGOs paid people to pretend that they were rescued Trokosi girls so as to attract international attention and funding. The legislative hearing alleged, "Six previous investigations since 2001[…] suggest that ING recruited 2,200 women, many of whom were not genuine Trokosis, to participate in mock liberations. Participants were offered $28 each and told they could attend ING's vocational training schools in exchange for their "liberation"" (Yates 1). Kafui, the representative from ING stated that he was aware of these allegations and that they have not affected the organization's ability to carry out their work (Interview 2012: ING representative).

The contestation between cultural relativism and human rights is fraught with many complexities. According to Ameh, this is "one of the major dilemmas and tensions surrounding the application of international human rights norms in other cultures" (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 26). The underlying notion underpinning the arguments held by cultural relativists or traditionalists is that they "be allowed to determine what is dehumanising within the context of their culture, and not within the context of alien universal human rights rules" (Abaobi 4). While traditionalists interpret this imposition as a form of cultural imperialism, Sen offers a counter argument that decries values of freedom and liberty as Western constructs or imperialism. Understanding the contentious nature of the application of human rights in non-Western societies, he states, "The notion of human rights builds on the idea of a shared humanity. These rights are not derived from citizenship of any country, or membership of any nation, but taken as entitlements of every human being. The concept of universal human rights is, in this sense, a uniting idea" (Sen 1). Ameh poses the question about whether or not non-Western countries possess the infrastructure to adopt international human right norms in their daily lives; specifically he questions whether these norms can be realized in countries where Trokosi is practiced, given its traditional and religious underpinnings, which are central to the identities of many Africans and Ghanaians, in particular (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29).

Empowerment is a concept that both universalists and traditionalists claim to believe in and reinforce in their approaches to the eradication and preservation of the Trokosi practice. While both lay claim to this concept as integral to their respective value systems, one must question which interpretation of empowerment best serves women and girls in the end. The World Bank (WB) defines empowerment as "life of dignity in accordance with one's values, capable of fighting for one's rights, independence […] being free, awakening, and capability" (WB 10). It is important to evaluate this idea of empowerment because it has both conceptual and practical applications within socio-cultural contexts. The common response to Trokosi upheld by universalists can be described as a rescue-educate-and-reintegrate model: the idea that once Trokosi are liberated, educated, and reintegrated into society, they can be empowered to exercise their

rights. However, this is seldom a straightforward realization. Haddad posits that empowerment is not transactional and it cannot be bestowed. Empowerment must be seen as a process or journey and not a destination (Haddad 1). This corroborates the notion that empowerment can be unique to individuals and is therefore "subjective and realized in different ways" (1).

Understanding how traditionalists and local communities perceive empowerment vis-à-vis the Trokosi practice sheds light on the subjective nature of what it means to be empowered. Traditionalists posit that a life in or connected to the shrine is in fact, empowering to women, girls, and their communities. Bastine's work, mentioned above, describes the widely accepted belief that Trokosis are bestowed with "honour" in the shrine. His research asserts that the shrines are perceived by traditionalists and community members as pillars of the community (Bastine 82). Greene also highlights this stance, stating that "[o]thers entered spiritual service voluntarily, or, if minors, with the consent of their parents, because of the prestige of the god and the perceived benefits associated with shrine affiliation" (Greene 960). The interview held with Afua affirms this notion of prestige. She reflects on her sense of esteem and power, while connected to the shrine:

> The shrine was in the village where I come from so I was seen as special. The gods were very protective over me. When people came to worship, the gods would be praising me and speaking about my beauty-saying look at her eyes, look at her neck…she is so pretty. So if the men in the shrine were to look at me, the gods wouldn't attend to them because they are looking at his wife. (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods)

Empowerment as a concept then assumes that there are different values regarding what is considered powerful or meaningful in people's lives (Haddad 1). Based on this concept of value and empowerment, society can perceive the Trokosi as empowered while they live in the shrines because of their connections to the spirits. However, when they are reintegrated into society, they can be perceived as disempowered since they are no longer associated with the protection and status of the shrines. Bastine's research describes how girls and women become stigmatized and struggle to keep jobs, stay in school, and/or get married after reintegration. Trokosi are often isolated and discriminated against because people fear that they have not served their full time in the shrines, as intended by the gods. They believe that would be displeasing the gods and that any association with reintegrated Trokosi will result in punishment by the gods (Bastine 86). Interview subject, Edem, corroborated this trend stating that in her experience she has seen communities totally isolate the reintegrated Trokosi (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement). If local communities equate isolation and discrimination (the unintended consequences but hard reality of implanting human rights in this context) with Western notions of "empowerment," they are likely to reject the merits of universalist principles in support of human rights.

Even though Ghana is signatory to several international human right instruments, which reinforce norms and values around the protection, freedom, and rights of women, the notion of human rights, much like empowerment is often subject to scrutiny for its transactional tendencies within socio-cultural contexts. In order for universalists to sell the idea of rights and freedoms within this context, freedom must not be seen as an issue

of physical liberation but it must be internalized (Soloveychik 1). Soloveychik differentiates the ideas of 'freedom from' and 'freedom for' by clarifying that 'freedom from' characterizes freedom from servitude or bondage (similar to how universalist approaches liberate Trokosi from shrines), whereas 'freedom for' deals with internal freedom as a process of self-realization (1). Some realizations that Soloveychik defines are "freedom from fear, stereotypical thinking, prejudice […]" (1). It is essential that rights and freedoms are internalized by former Trokosi as relevant and accessible within them. Freedom, in the form of physical liberation, can be given to someone as the 'freedom from' theory conveys. However, consciousness and peace, for example, are internal manifestations, which must be realized and cannot be bestowed (1).

A challenge that universalists face in implementing human rights in socio-cultural contexts is that traditional practices like Trokosi do not exist in a vacuum but are upheld by the community (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29). The oppressed may realize their rights and freedoms, but society may refuse to treat them accordingly. Rescued Trokosi often return to shrines because they feel less restrained there than in a society where they are isolated and mistreated (Arid 1). Interview with Edem points out that girls that have been subjected to psychological trauma can be emotionally bound to their lives in the shrines. They are often times attached to the familiarity of the environment, including the violence and deprivation that had become routine (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement). Ababio highlights another issue which may reflect the high recidivism rates for liberated Trokosi, "Organisations liberated Trokosi women and forgot about their children. The women were given their freedom whilst their children remained in the shrines. Since they could not bear the loss of their children and had no rights to them, they quickly went back to the shrines" (23). This logic is similar to the cycle of imprisonment that ex-offenders face after being freed from prison who deliberately return because of hardships or lack of access to resources in the 'real world' (Moak et al. 5) or because of social or familial ties on the 'inside.' This concept of recidivism is defined as psychiatric and "the chronic tendency toward repetition of criminal or antisocial behavior patterns" (dictionary.com). A study on the causes of recidivism states that, "the harder it is for someone who has lived a life a delinquency, the easier it is for them to give up and go back to what comes easy," which often is a life of crime (Moak et al. 5). Edem believes this to be the case with Trokosi. She states that what comes easier is a life within the shrine (Interview 2012: Law Enforcement).

It is important to briefly note that, according to Bastine's research, as part of rescue strategies, NGOs such as ING implemented the following, "Alternative remedies, such as acceptance of material things like alcohol and money in lieu of vestal girls for restitution. Following this, a community–wide agreement is signed to free [Trokosis] from a shrine. Next, the shrine is compensated for its future economic loses, for giving up its workers (Trokosis)" (Ben-Ari cited in Bastine 86). Although this may seem like an easy victory for universalists, it is short sighted in that it opens up avenues for priests to continue to manipulate and exploit poor families. They, in turn, are rewarded with the promise of labor, sex, and now additional compensation for returning girls. More problematic is reducing the worth of girls to the price of alcohol or other material things. This alternative remedy further objectifies girls and devalues them, which has repercussions for the way they are then reintegrated into the society.

Interview subject, Afua recounts her experience of leaving the shrine at age 15, when her husband proposed to her: "When my husband came to ask my father for his daughter's hand, he said no because she is married to the gods. So he had to go to the priests and pay and give rams, salt, chickens, bronze and traditional underwear. He also had to give things to my father. My husband did all of the necessary things so we could marry […]" (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods). She continues to describe how even after her liberation from the shrine, she was chastised by the gods:

> I started going to the Christian church and the gods became angry. They said if I don't stop going that they would kill me. Everyone was afraid for me. They even begged my mother to stop me from going so that I will not die but I continued to go. The gods cursed me and said that I would not be able to get pregnant so when I got pregnant, the gods were very angry and embarrassed. They said that I would die during childbirth. So when it was time for me to deliver, I had many problems. I was in labor for three days. People were very afraid for me because they thought that I would die. I went to different hospitals and finally a traditional midwife agreed to deliver my baby. (Interview 2012: Wife to the gods)

Afua's experience further illustrates how giving the priests material things in exchange for the freedom of girls may result in their physical liberation but does not result in internal freedom. Even after her service to the shrine concluded, she was cursed and threatened by the gods and had to deal with the fear and stigma that it entailed. Afua's experience conveys that human rights can often complicate matters for victims of this practice.

Traditionalists would explain these shortcomings by positing that human rights foster individualism, which is detrimental to the unity that human rights claim to offer. Rather, they would emphasize the need to prioritize the protection of the interests of the community over that of the individual. Thus, with respect to the Trokosi practice, it is believed that the "sacrifice" of a girl to the gods is beneficial to the wellbeing and preservation of the moral order of the whole community (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29). What universalists deem a sacrifice, the traditionalists claim is a form of duty and honor (29). While Edem, the law enforcement officer, interpreted this as an "unfair sacrifice," Yaw, the man with faith in the gods, believes it to be a matter of duty. Even among research participants from the same area, there is a lack of consensus. However, Ameh raises an important observation that undercuts the traditionalist claims of community wellbeing. He states that communal values in the African context seem to disproportionately affect females (29). Underscoring this trend, the Ghana Women's Manifesto states that "although culture belongs to the whole society, women are often held to a higher standard of culture compliance than men" (Manifesto 42). In addition to Trokosi, other examples of this phenomenon include: "bride price, marriage rites, inheritance practices, widow rights, circumcision and witch villages […]" (Ameh cited in Kalunta-Crumpton and Agozino 29).

Central to the universalists value system is the notion that women and girls must be protected from harmful practices. Therefore, universalists, specifically feminist community building proponents, seek to eradicate traditional practices that cause harm to women by advancing what they describe as "appropriate cultural values" (Ababio 90). However, in looking at the disadvantages for women in Ghanaian society, it is necessary

to question the idea of well-being and appropriateness within their cultural context. Advancing certain appropriate cultural values over others is complex and becomes an easy target for criticism by those who hope to defend this practice. Definitions of "appropriate" and whose values should be considered then become major points of dispute between those defending human rights and those defending traditional practices and customary rights.

Romanoff takes a culturist perspective in her analysis dealing with this issue of subjectivity and cultural relativity. She claims in her accounts with Trokosis that "the Fiasidis of Klikor [a type of Trokosi] are not slaves to the shrine as the abolitionist claim, they are the Queens of the community […] However, what I have seen in Klikor, if it is representative of all, then it [Trokosi] is the practice of humanity in its purist form." She concludes her essay by stating that "the real controversy over the anti-Trokosi campaign is about the imposition of one culture upon another […]" (Cited in Ameh 55). The argument underlying this 'controversy' of the imposition of one culture over the other is rooted in the belief that culture cannot be renegotiated, blended, or evolved. This ultimately suggests that there is a right and wrong way to practice culture and that there is no medium in the discussion of culture outside of its polarities. But this is a very narrow way of looking at culture because it assumes that culture is static, when in reality culture is very fluid (Nieto 130). Though traditions like Trokosi are rigid due to their historical longevity, cultures are ever changing and evolving (130).

Though it is important to look at the contestation behind these varying approaches, one cannot oversimplify the relationships and associations within cultures (Sen 1). Sen believes that when responding to the universalist and relativist debate, "the main point to note is that both Western and non-Western traditions have much variety within themselves" (1). To look at this practice within the context of universal human rights as an imposition of one culture over the other is a failure to regard the agency of Ghanaians. The idea of agency and fluidity within culture is even evident in the diverse forms in which people choose to practice Trokosi and similar practices that adopt the same traditions, but are referred to by different names. This demonstrates that there is more than one way to practice culture. Sen makes a very important point about the complexities which arise as a result of human rights versus cultural relativism. He states,

> The need to acknowledge diversity applies not only between nations and cultures, but also within each nation and culture. In the anxiety to take adequate note of international diversity and cultural divergences, and the so-called differences between "Western civilizations," "Asian values," "African culture," and so on, there is often a dramatic neglect of heterogeneity within each country and culture. "Nations" and "cultures" are not particularity good units to understand and analyze intellectual and political differences. Lines of division in commitments and skepticism do not run along international boundaries—they criss-cross at many different levels. The rhetoric of cultures, with each "culture" seen in largely homogenized terms, can confound us politically as well as intellectually. (1)

It is needless to say that further research must be done on the practice of Trokosi and other such practices which violate basic human rights. Beyond investigating the human right violations perpetuated by these practices, what must be acknowledged and further analyzed are the complexities and deeply rooted ties to traditions which are

dynamic and play an integral part in people's lives. It is important to stand up for human rights, and against gender violence. However, it is also necessary to consider how and on what grounds people relate to and give meaning to these practices; what kind of values, beliefs, political and social systems are operative in this context; and why such practices have lasted for so long even in an era of democracy. It is not enough to be a signatory to human rights conventions and to adopt the language of human rights into the constitution. Human rights norms and values must be realized by the people and serve their needs and interests.

In this battle of narratives, the practice of Trokosi highlights the shortcomings of human rights and universalist approaches when applied to every day circumstances of women and girls connected to this practice. Human rights, freedom, and empowerment are words that get thrown about but should not be taken for granted. When fully realized and adapted to local contexts in ways that communities deem humanizing, only then can universalist principles achieve free, equal, and safe societies for women, girls, and their families. Therefore, proponents of human rights cannot afford to be reckless, passive, or take shortcuts in administering these values and norms, especially in local contexts where communities struggle to see their benefits in the first place and are naturally inclined towards longstanding institutions like Trokosi.

Proponents of human rights and universalist value systems must seek to understand the rationale for traditionalist systems like Trokosi and develop strategies that meet the needs which the practice of Trokosi fails to deliver. As Ghana's history with this practice conveys, it is not enough to problematize this practice and call it a human rights violation. Universalists must work with people on the ground to create new narratives around universalist principles that are reflective of the values of the people-narratives in a way that does not contradict with their belief systems or put them at risk/ keep them in fear. Nnaemeka states that, "you must have a positive alternative, a vision of a better future that can motivate people to sacrifice their time and energy toward its realization" (Nnaemeka 364). In this process, communities, universalists, and traditionalists must find mutual interest. What the study of Trokosi has made clear is that once the values and needs are aligned, the mechanisms for reinforcing and safeguarding those values are flexible and can be negotiated. African feminist scholarship and Indigenous Knowledge Systems frameworks are useful in understanding what is meaningful to Africans in their context and should therefore be valuable to universalists in their pursuits to promote fundamental freedoms and rights in socio-cultural contexts.

At the root of this challenge is a need to submit that in the case of Trokosi, both cultural relativists and universalists fail women and girls. However, cultures, traditions, and value systems can change, adapt, and be renegotiated as African cultures have managed to do throughout history. Societies must not be bound by traditions. Rather, traditions should be used to cultivate and reinforce free and prosperous societies. The Ghana Women's Manifesto states,

> Gender inequalities cannot be justified in the name of Ghanaian culture. Culture is a dynamic force for good when it changes in response to the concerns and values of the times. We believe that Ghanaian culture is strong and resilient to withstand the questioning and abolition of harmful practices. (46)

When it comes to the application of human rights norms in African societies, as part of cultural negotiation and compromise, African governments and local NGOs must continue to use a critical lens to determine what works in their cultural contexts and leverage universalist ideas and approaches to meet the needs and interests of the people. On the other hand, universalists must thoroughly examine the complexities and nuances of cultures and traditions with which they seek to engage so as to safeguard mutual interest. To further this cause, they must make a case for human rights values and solicit genuine buy-in from local communities. The fluidity and diversity of and within culture gives hope that we can reimagine a society that both embraces elements of customary traditions as well as a society that values women through the protection of their rights. The evolving nature of culture ensures that Ghanaians can simultaneously embrace norms and customs that address current day problems and reinforce their values.

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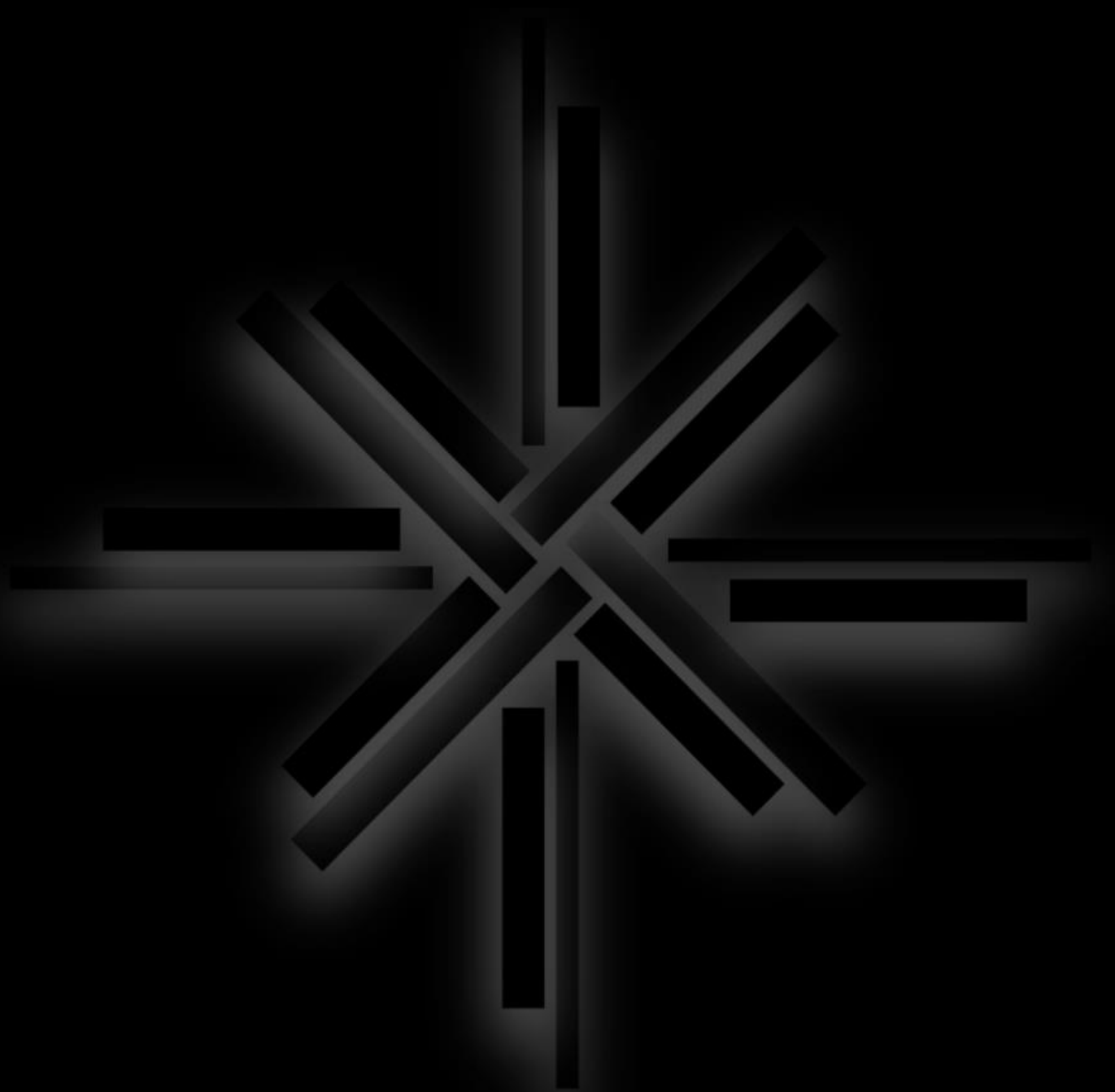

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