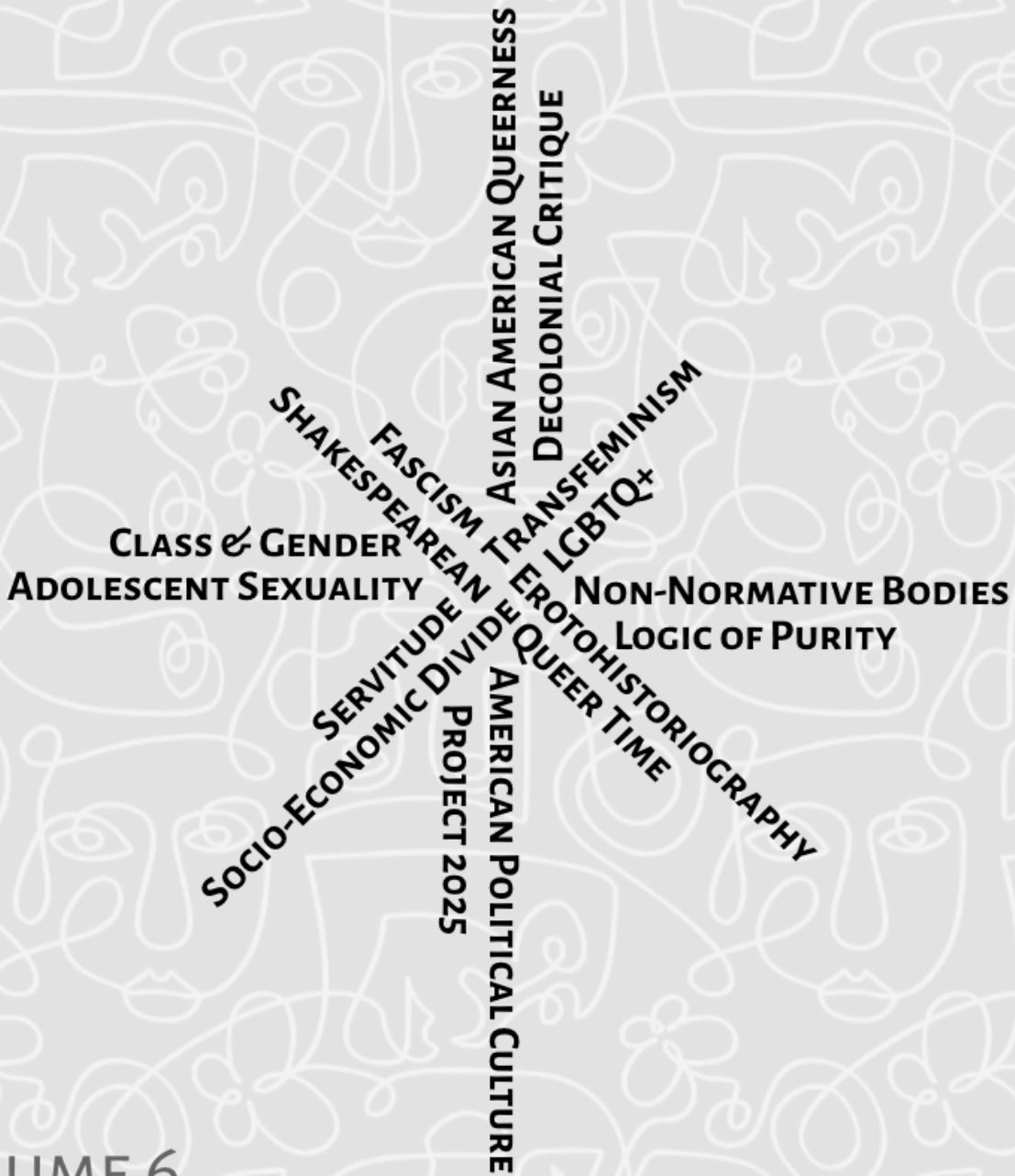
ISSN 2457-0044

Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies



Volume 6
Issue 2

This page has been intentionally left blank.

Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS)

Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (ISSN 2457-0044) is an open access e-journal with a double-blind peer review policy. Hosted at https://ellids.com/, it is published under the Continuous Publication Model. *LLIDS* is conceived as a platform to engage with the existing fault lines of standard academic research through perceptive and rigorous enquiry. Committed to promote the standards of quality research, it provides discursive space for relevant and meaningful investigations in the fields of Humanities and Interdisciplinary research.

Issue Publication Date: 24 December, 2024

Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (*LLIDS*) is a Diamond Open Access journal which relies on its patrons to continue its publication. The "**Subscribe to Support Diamond OA – 'Pay What You Can'**" model supports the journal's Open Access mission—to provide equitable writing and publishing opportunities to everyone. The subscriptions are flexible as per the convenience of the patrons and are acknowledged on our website. Please consider subscribing to show your support – https://ellids.com/subscribe-to-support-diamond-oa/.

For any further queries, please write to us at editors@ellids.com.

CONTENTS

This page has been intentionally left blank.

Begoña Vilouta-Vázquez (bvilouta@citadel.edu) is an adjunct professor in the English, Fine Arts, and Communications Department at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, USA. She received a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. She afterwards received a master's degree in literatures in English from the University of Kansas and a PhD in the same field from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She is interested in postcolonial studies, trauma studies, and the repercussions of whiteness ideology in 20th and 21st-century literature from the anglophone Caribbean.

George H. Jensen (ghjensen@ualr.edu) is retired from the Department of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, USA, where he served as Professor and Department Chair. A pioneer in the development of personality theories of writing, he has written extensively on the application of Jungian personality types to the teaching of composition. A published memoirist, his most recent publications explore the genres and ethics of nonfiction.

James S. Baumlin (jbaumlin@missouristate.edu) is a Distinguished Professor of English at Missouri State University, USA, where he teaches coursework in early-modern English literature (Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton), critical theories, and the history of rhetoric, having published extensively in these fields. He has also widely published in rhetorical theory and composition pedagogy. His current research focuses on the history of Western ethos from antiquity to the present day.

Samiksha (samiks98_llg@jnu.ac.in) is a doctoral candidate at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. Her Ph.D. project looks at narratives of cross-class engagements in the domestic sphere, particularly focusing on the representations of master-servant relationships in literary narratives. Her research work explores the inter-relations between labour involved in earning livelihoods and labour expended in creative and aesthetic processes, specifically in working-class spaces. Her other academic interests include South Asian folk literature, critical feminist theory, and translation studies.

Ying Ma (yma@nova.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Literature and Gender Studies in the Department of Humanities and Politics at Nova Southeastern University, USA. She completed her PhD at the University of Texas at Dallas, and her dissertation examines queer Asian American literature. Her current research focuses on queer family making.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

ISSN 2457-0044

www.ellids.com

Reading Meredith Talusan's *Fairest*: A Queer Decolonial Critique of the U.S. Empire

Ying Ma | Nova Southeastern University
https://ellids.com/archives/2024/10/6.2-Ma.pdf

Abstract | This essay examines Meredith Talusan's *Fairest*, the first book-length memoir by and about a trans Asian woman. I argue that Talusan's gender and sexual reconstruction is an ongoing process of accepting, negotiating, and rejecting ideas deeply rooted in the white heteropatriarchy that prevails throughout the U.S. transnational empire. I first investigate Talusan's critique of the colonial mentality that is imposed on Filipinos, and their suggestion to resist such a sense of indigenous inferiority. Next, I explore how Talusan molded themself to blend into the masculinity-obsessed American gay culture that renders Asian men undesirable, but they ultimately realized that either passing as white or gay erased certain parts of who they really are. Last, I analyze how Talusan proposes a new direction of trans feminism that centers on woman-identification while rejecting the male privileges that they had enjoyed before gender transition. Inspired by nineteenth-century British women writers, Talusan revisits the colonial history of Filipino transgender people as victims of gender-based violence.

Keywords | LGBTIQ+, Asian American Queerness, Transwoman, Transfeminism, Filipino Transgender, Meredith Talusan, Sexual Fluidity, American Imperialism

Meredith Talusan's *Fairest*, published by Viking in 2020 and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Nonfiction, is the first critically acclaimed memoir by and about a trans woman of Asian descent. *Fairest* is about a boy with albinism growing up in a rural Philippine village, moving to the United States, and pursuing education at Harvard University as an openly gay man before seeking gender reassignment surgery. The narrative of their personal life adds nuance and specificity to the still insufficiently researched experiences of trans women of color.[1] Using a transpacific, decolonial, and intersectional approach, I trace Talusan's journey from Asia to the U.S. and their transition from manhood to womanhood. I argue that Talusan's decolonial trans Filipina identity is formulated through an ongoing process of accepting, negotiating, and rejecting ideas deeply rooted in the white heteropatriarchy that prevails throughout the U.S. transnational empire.

Talusan, while growing up in the Philippines, embodied colonial mentality which falsely created a sense of inferiority among the colonized people who deemed the culture of the colonizer superior. However, Talusan eventually realized that such "colonial brainwashing" (Talusan 100) was imposed on their fellow Filipinos to be made into submissive imperial subjects. Talusan started to refuse this mindset. As a gay immigrant studying at Harvard, Talusan devoted themself to gay liberation and submitted to Harvard's norm of an ideal gay man as white and masculine. However, they revealed that the 1990s gay liberation that used sex as a form of rebellion did not fully liberate gay men of color. Asian men were placed in the almost bottom of the racialized hierarchy of desire, who further confronted racism in the mainstream white queer community.

As a transwoman of color, Talusan was inspired by the works of nineteenth-century British women authors to reexamine the history of Filipino transgender people having been victimized by multiple colonial powers. Additionally, learning about the plight of cisgender women allows Talusan to distance themself from the male advantages that they had enjoyed. Therefore, whether identified as a man or woman, a colonial subject at home or a sexualized minority in the U.S., Talusan has been continuously scrutinized for non-whiteness and non-conforming gender. Their life and memories are a template for turning decolonial critique into an intersectional queer critique, finally seeing and understanding how sexism, heterosexism, and colonialism limit everyone, and offering a new direction for trans feminists of color. Overall, this analysis of Talusan's queer narrative contributes to a body of work by scholars interested in decolonial queer critique by highlighting their implications for the Filipino diaspora context.

[1]Talusan's preferred personal pronouns are she/they. Since in this article I investigate Talusan's life of presenting as a man and woman, I choose to use they/them/their to avoid confusion.

In her influential book *Imagine Otherwise* (2003), Kandice Chuh redefines the function of Asian American literature as a "theoretical device" that "apprehend[s] and unravel[s] the narrative dimensions of naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities" (x). In other words, ethnic literature is an important tool of revealing the internal contradiction of dominant ideologies of race, gender, and identity. To analyze this complexity, deconstruction is needed to not only destabilize the existing conceptual framework but to continuously search for knowledge and create new knowledge. Some scholars investigating queer Asian American experiences adopt a similar strategy. David L. Eng in *Racial Castration* (2001) analyzes how the Asian male is feminized in literary and cultural productions such as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Eng extends his analysis of Asian masculinity to the whole ethnic group, claiming that racial castration is "a theoretical project examining the numerous ways in which articulations of national subjectivity depend intimately on racializing, gendering, and sexualizing strategies" (3). From a historical perspective, Asians were excluded from the national imagination of American citizenship, which is reflected in exclusive immigration policies and the racial stereotyping of Asian sexuality as "deviant." The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is the first and only law prohibiting the immigration of a certain ethnic group from entering the U.S. It provided a ban on Chinese laborers migrating to the country, but gave exemption to certain Chinese non-laborers, such as diplomats. Before that, the Page Law of 1875 basically considered Chinese women as prostitutes and prohibited their entry to the country. Anti-miscegenation laws such as the Expatriation Act of 1907 regulated the loss of citizenship for American women if they married aliens. The Cable Act of 1922 specified that women should be deprived of citizenship if they married an "alien ineligible to citizenship"—a category that included Asians. These factors combined led to Chinatown being a place of male cohabitation—a "bachelor society" that is so-called "deviant" (Eng 18). In other words, whereas Asian women were stereotyped as hypersexual and willing to exchange sex for money, Asian men were criticized for non-heterosexuality because of the lack of wives in Chinatown. Therefore, queerness for queer Asians is not only about overcoming constraints around non-heterosexuality but combating the racist tropes that emasculate men and hypersexualize women. In short, queerness for Asian Americans is also a racial critique (217).

Martin F. Manalansan and Anthony C. Ocampo use similar deconstructive strategies to describe the lives of queer Filipinos in diaspora. They both suggest that Filipino gay men do not follow a linear process of moving from tradition represented by Filipino culture to modernity represented by the mainstream white gay culture. Manalansan in *Global Divas* (2003) examines the immigrant life of Filipino *baklas* in the U.S. *Bakla*, a Tagalog term, combines the word for woman (*babae*) and the word for man (*lalaki*), which in Tagalog dictionaries is defined as a hermaphrodite (25). The term focuses on "effeminate mannerism, feminine physical characters (i.e., small, frail bodies, delicate facial features, and so on), and cross-dressing" (25). *Bakla* can also be used as a verb, meaning someone struggling to find a true inner self via both introspection and influence by outside force(s) (43). This outside force, in the context of *Global Divas*, is New York City and its culture, which embraced their queer identity more sincerely than their racial identity. Although the U.S. might be perceived as a more liberating place for Filipino gay men, Manalansan writes that they often returned to their own culture for comfort and belonging. One of his informants says that his apartment in NYC consists of

two parts—the American side and the Filipino side—and by crossing the room, "he traverses two boundaries of his two selves" (95).

Ocampo investigates how the biological heterosexual family fails to accommodate queer desire, and the coping strategies of second-generation gay Filipino Americans in Los Angeles. Influenced by Catholic religion and the negative stereotype of particularly white gay men, many Asian families found it difficult to accept their children's queerness. These children strategically perform a masculinity that lives up to the expectations of their parents before gradually coming out to them by educating them about positive images associated with being gay (Ocampo 171). As told from Manalansan's and Ocampo's research, the experiences of queer people of color are suffused with ambiguities and ambivalences, which are shaped by their intertwined racial and gender identities. For queer Filipinos, including Talusan whose work I will analyze later, it is an endless project of negotiating between hegemonic gender and sexual ideologies of the West and Asia. During this process, they create a decolonial queer culture as an important survival strategy.

My research is also guided by Jian Neo Chen's *Trans Exploits* (2019), especially the chapter reading trans Black-Native Hawaiian woman Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More* (2014). Chen analyzes Mock's gender and sexual reconstruction while looking back to the histories of slavery, Black diaspora, and the 1898 Annexation of Hawaii. Chen relates Mock's self-exploration as a transgender woman to the intergenerational trauma of all Native Americans whose third-gender ancestors were eradicated by white settlers to impose Western heterosexuality and patriarchy. The author cites Deborah A. Miranda's research on California *joyas* whose third gender rendered them a special role of guiding the passage from life to death (93).[2] Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, *joyas* were murdered by Spanish colonizers and those who survived were pushed underground. Sexual violence against Native women were justified by the racist claim that their bodies were "inherently impure and sexually perverse" (93). Compared to Native American invisibility, Black Americans were hyper-visualized in the discourse of white supremacy. For instance, it destroyed Black people's social and kinship relations and changed them into forced labor. Chen states that the slave ship in the Atlantic Middle Passage is "the womb that births blackness" (94), where Black women were deprived of agency as women and mothers while being forced to "transmit the nonhuman status of the black slave to [their] children" (95). Meanwhile, Black femininity was doubly scrutinized by both Black patriarchy and white patriarchy, which is illuminated in Mock's father's policing gaze of her femininity (97). Therefore, Chen inspired me to tie together the personal history of queer individuals and the colonial history of minorities. I situate Talusan's diasporic experience in a larger context of the imperial regulation of race and sexuality both in the Philippines and the U.S. This includes the psychological effects of colonization, the exclusion of men of color from the American queer community that is dominated by white males, as well as the dehumanization of transgender Filipinos by

[2]As early as 1775, *joya* was used by Spaniards to name the California Indian men (Native Americans in the pre-contact period) dressing as women and having sex with other men (Miranda 261). Instead of applying Spanish labels showing sodomy to Indians or adopting the way in which Californian tribes referred to transgender people as "Cuit" "Uluqui" and "Coias," Spaniards reappropriated the term *joya* to indicate "something more or different than the deviant 'sodomites' of their own culture" (262).

different colonial powers. I start my analysis of *Fairest* by examining how colonial mentality shaped the mindset of Talusan while growing up in the Philippines.

While still living in the Philippines, Talusan was a privileged boy with the look of a Westerner and they had lived with the idea of moving to the U.S. as far back as they could remember. Born *anakaraw*—a Tagalog term for albinism—Talusan had pale skin and blonde hair, which caused them to be regarded as beautiful, unlike dark-skinned Filipino children. Additionally, their obsession with the dream of becoming an American stimulated an interest in learning English with an American accent and imitating the behaviors of characters in American shows. One of Talusan's favorite shows was *Silver Spoons*, which features an American boy, Ricky, who was metaphorically born with a silver spoon in his mouth. While watching the show, Talusan imagined themself as an American boy who behaves like Ricky, including such behaviors as shrugging and cocking one's head (47). After many years, Talusan had unconsciously absorbed many of Ricky's mannerisms. Years later, Talusan was selected to perform in a show starring the Filipino actor Redford White to play White's son. The show gave Talusan a second chance to perform a different identity and it brought them closer to the dream of being an American. Talusan writes that "it was as if dreaming of being Ricky had transported me inside that television and I had become him, a real American boy who lived in a giant house and got everything he wanted" (59). Meanwhile, Talusan frankly attributes their early admiration of the United States and its culture to "blind faith and colonial brainwashing" (100). They explain that Filipinos have a colonial mentality, having been "brainwashed to believe that Americans were superior, which meant that we still behaved as though we were colonized rather than as fully independent people" (64).

Psychologist E. J. R. David conceptualizes colonial mentality as being "characterized by a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority that is […] a specific consequence of centuries of colonization under Spain and the U.S." and "it involves an automatic and uncritical rejection of anything Filipino and an automatic and uncritical preference for anything American" (David and Okazaki 241). That is, the colonized are *made* to perceive themselves as secondary and cultureless, who would blindly accept the fact that everything associated with the country that conquered them is superior to their own. In his monograph, *Brown Skin, White Minds* (2013), David thoroughly explains the psychological effects of colonialism in the Philippines. According to David, after Spain and the U.S. gained control of the island's labor and natural resources, they imposed a binary ideological structure that rendered Western cultures "superior" and "civilized," and indigenous cultures "inferior" and "uncivilized." To reinforce this structure, the colonizers educated, Christianized, and trained Filipinos. After that, they established political, social, and economic institutions to solidify their superior position and further exploit indigenous Filipinos (54–55). When the Philippines became a U.S. territory in 1898, Filipinos were categorized as nationals, a status of neither citizen nor alien, who were not subject to immigration laws. Their unique status, however, did not guarantee them a safe place from racial bias and hate crime (38–42). While Filipinos in the early twentieth-century U.S. were being maltreated, their ethnic fellows at home lived in a social environment that had been largely taken over by Western entities in various cultural, economic, and military aspects. By the time the book was published in 2013, English was the primary language in education, business, and diplomacy; Filipino soldiers were trained by American soldiers as if sending a message that Filipino men and

women are less capable of protecting their own country; and Filipino economy was highly dependent on foreign sources to survive (43–44).

Talusan's life in the Philippines involved many moments of colonial mentality, as examined in David's research. First, David writes that people having Filipino characteristics such as brown skin and speaking Filipino languages are not as desirable as those with Western characteristics such as white skin, living in the U.S., and speaking fluent English (46). Talusan was a privileged child because of lighter skin and a "given" future in the U.S., as they knew that their family would eventually immigrate to the country. Second, English proficiency was seen as an indicator of social status and intelligence. Mocked by Filipino Americans who spoke "standard English," Filipinos who spoke English with a Filipino accent were often called "'FOB' (fresh-off-the-boat), 'backward,' or 'buckbuok'" (David 69). I previously wrote that Talusan learned from *Silver Spoon* to gain an American accent. This habit did not end when they arrived in the U.S. They further improved their American accent by watching television after being made fun of in an American high school (8, 122). Third, many Filipinos are exposed from a young age to the colonial message that presents the U.S. as superior via multiple forms of American popular culture. Talusan writes that they listened to American pop music on the radio and watched American television shows and films such as *Jeopardy!, Silver Spoons*, and *Dead Poets Society* in order to immerse themself in a "better" American culture (27, 39, 45–59, 84–87).

As David warns us, colonial mentality can be passed on from one generation to the next and in the long term it slows down the process of raising political awareness and building solidarity with other disempowered groups (133). The ultimate phase of colonialism consists of making the colonized believe that oppression and exploitation are the natural costs of producing a new civilization. Internalizing such thoughts, Filipinos with colonial mentality automatically deny the injustice done to their own people by the colonial and imperialist powers of Spain, Japan, and the United States. They are also not able to relate their own oppression to the struggles of immigrants from other Asian countries and members of other races. Fortunately, Talusan stopped worshiping the United States when they "felt shame" at being a Filipino who had been "brainwashed to believe that Americans were superior" (64). An entirely different article could be written dealing with Talusan's fear and shame with regard to their relationship with other Filipinos, queer partners, and the transphobic American public. Here, however, I emphasize only that Talusan's shame in this context productively enabled them to learn about the binary power dynamic that exists between Filipinos and Americans because of internalized oppression. Elspeth Probyn in *Blush* says that shame can lead to self-evaluation and even transformation, and I argue that Talusan's shame at realizing their own colonial mentality enriched their criticism of the American colonization of the Philippines. After fifteen years of waiting, Talusan's family was called for an immigration interview at the U.S. embassy in Manila. During the interview Talusan had a realization:

> I realized I no longer worshipped Americans like [the immigration officer], or the promise of living in such a rich country and becoming white myself, indistinguishable from those creatures with so much power who ruled the rest of the world, who every day decided on the fates of us brown people pleading to be

> let into their country, a situation they themselves created when they conquered us against our will, used our land and our hands for free to enrich themselves. (99)

Here, Talusan reveals the fact that the massive immigration of Filipinos into the U.S. is a situation that the Americans created in the first place by exploiting Filipinos' territories and labor, but this pressure to emigrate ironically became the American dream of many Filipinos who wish to leave their homeland.[3] Although Talusan admits that they no longer wished to blend into white culture, they still invested tremendous efforts in hiding their immigrant identity after moving to the U.S. For example, Talusan completely submitted themself to Harvard's standard of what constitutes the most desirable gay man.

For Talusan, the Harvard of 1990s was a place that encouraged gay people to challenge the norms of heterosexuality and monogamy but inhibited gay men of color from questioning the exclusivity of the predominantly white gay community. According to Talusan's memoir, Harvard gave them an alienated feeling of being a poor immigrant student in the world's richest school, whose norms are defined by centuries of white elitism. Harvard expected Talusan to grow into someone who could "think freely" and to be "groundbreaking and innovative, yet also to conform to whatever arbitrary standard the university decided I should meet" (49). For example, Talusan was enrolled in a course named "Topics in Gay Male Representation" in which the Harvard professor assigned the well-known article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" by Leo Bersani (115). In this essay, Bersani drew attention to rampant violence against gay men at the height of the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis. He calls upon gay men to not apologize for their promiscuity, which had been strongly criticized due to the supposed connection between HIV/AIDS and gay sex; nor, according to Bersani, should they embrace monogamy as a positive outcome of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (25). Talusan's sexual relationships and artistic activities indicate that they religiously practiced Bersani's advice of using sex as a form of political rebellion. In various places in the book, Talusan posted dating advertisements in newspaper (156), tried threesome sex as a transgender woman with two other men (163–164), and was actively seeking sexual partners in gay men dominated theaters and bathhouses (146, 173). In addition, Talusan performed a show called *Dancing Deviant* encouraging viewers to "take shame out of sex and the body" (200). But the show was denied funding by Harvard for reasons of decency (197).

However, pursuing gay liberation as taught by white society did not exempt Talusan from having to be placed at the bottom of the racialized hierarchy of desire, which is topped by white men. That is, being sexually liberated did not automatically translate into a favorable position on the homoerotic market. I wrote above that due to immigration laws that favor Asian men over women and anti-miscegenation laws, numerous Asian men without wives lived in bachelor societies and were accused of "deviant" sexuality for their male cohabitation. Filipinos in particular were regarded as "'little brown brothers' who need 'fifty or one hundred years' of close supervision 'to develop anything resembling Ango-Saxon political principles and skills'" (Lee 175).

[3]The U.S. colonization of the Philippines led to the second wave of Filipino migration to the country. Erika Lee writes in *The Making of Asian America* (2015) that around 150,000 Filipinos migrated to Hawaii and the continental U.S. during the early twentieth century (174). Filipinos immigrated to the Hawaii islands were mostly laborers and those who later arrived in San Francisco were likely servants to U.S. navy officers (178).

Their work was feminized, for instance, in the military, as those enlisted in the U.S. navy were only asked to do "women's work" such as preparing meals for officers and cleaning up their living spaces (176). In terms of sexuality, Filipinos were called "feminized males, not homosexual yet not fully heterosexual either" (Ngai 113) insofar as they lived in a "womanless" group but were especially attractive to white women, which caused white men to see them as a threat. Harvard, in Talusan's account, is a miniature version of the predominantly white gay community that marginalizes gay men of color. Talusan disappointedly admits that non-white gay men occupied only "liminal places" at Harvard, where "looks so determined our place in the gay pecking order and our lack of attractiveness had so much to do with our race and femininity" (3–4). This means that white and masculine men are the most desired within gay communities, whereas Asian men are automatically feminized and waiting to be penetrated. Talusan realized that they belonged to the group of Asian men with an "undesirable" physical appearance because "[I] didn't puff up my chest or speak in the lowest voice possible" and "my gait wasn't halting and my hips swayed a little when I walked" (122). Talusan was seen as a "femmy twink" (122) who only attracted old men and was often the bottom.

Despite consciously being aware of the racialized and feminized construction of gay Asians as unwanted, Talusan still "made the utmost effort to be as un-fat, un-femme, and un-Asian as possible" (143). To adopt a white gay lifestyle, Talusan regularly went to the gym, only slept with white men, dismissed Asians as partners, and learned from white gay men to use sex as "a form of political rebellion in the time of plague" (123, 146–47). In his book, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community* (2002), Eric Wat confirms this pattern of Asian men seeking white males as sex partners on the West Coast in pre-AIDS Los Angeles. Wat writes that the white-Asian male coupling was accepted as a natural relationship, even as natural as heterosexuality. On the contrary, Asian-Asian gay couples were called "lesbians." For "rice queens" who have a special interest in hunting for Asian partners, their Asian lovers are "geisha boys" who might be as muscular and strong as whites but were still expected to be "boyish, innocent, and pliant" (Wat 62). On the other hand, Manalansan in *Global Divas* suggests that white-Filipino gay coupling is not universally patterned on the racial assumption that lower-class Filipino men completely depend on middle- or upper-class white men: exceptions exist wherein a Filipino has highbrow cultural tastes cultivated back in the Philippines whereas his white partner is a telephone lineman, and, in those cases, the Filipinos financially support their white boyfriends (Manlansan 109–17). Examining the activities of gay Filipinos on dating apps, Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza in "I Think I'll Be More Slutty" claims that Filipinos still see desirability as the golden standard of a gay man, a stereotype that exists both online and offline, in Los Angeles and in Manila. A Filipino gay man's offline activity of improving physical appearance through exercise may lead him to select partners from a larger online dating pool ranging from old white men to young muscular Asian men.

Talusan had maintained as masculine an image as they could imagine, although they occasionally practiced cross-dressing, which gave them more pleasure. In his book, *A View from the Bottom* (2014), Tan Hoang Nguyen contends that Asian gay men, despite often being positioned on the bottom in sexual intercourse, also experience pleasure. This was partially true for Talusan. Talusan did obtain pleasure from having white partners, both in a stable relationship with a wealthy British professor, Ralph, and in temporary

relations with other men. At the same time, however, Talusan became increasingly unsatisfied with their complete submission to Harvard's gender norm that strictly tied gayness to masculinity. Talusan compares their gay experience to "belonging to a strict church" and noting that "it was the specific, masculinity-obsessed form gay male culture took in America that I eventually couldn't tolerate" (137). Conforming to either standard, whiteness or masculinity, would mean that Talusan failed to be seen as their complex real self. On the one hand, Talusan admits that their whiteness is related only to education, wealth, and beauty, not actual European ancestry (165–66). Pretending to be white forces Talusan to hide their Filipino origin and make invisible all their efforts to accommodate a mainstream culture that is hostile to Asians. Furthermore, while manifesting maximum masculinity Talusan lost their freedom of expression—that is, the right to decide what form of femininity they wanted to embody. Instead, Talusan had to "negotiate every feminine accessory or mannerism with a strict gay church that constantly threatened to reject [them]" (137). Hence, Talusan frames their decision to become a woman as an effort to be seen as their "complete self":

> [W]hat I wanted was to be seen as my complete self—my gender, my race, my history—without being judged because of it. I wanted people close to me to see an albino person who had learned how to look and act white so the world would more readily accept her, and understand how that had been a key part of her survival. I wanted people to see how that albino person was also transgender, how she transitioned to be able to express her femininity and had surgery so she would be perceived as being like any other woman, her qualities appreciated on those terms. And if she ever hid who she actually was, it was only so that she could be granted entrance into worlds she couldn't otherwise reach, worlds that should rightfully belong to everyone, not just those who happen to uphold the prevailing standards of whiteness and womanhood. (166–67)

By saying "complete self," Talusan strives to be seen as a transgender person of color struggling to blend into white culture while embodying a certain form of femininity. Their gender and sexual reconstruction is not simply a transition from one gender to another and from the sex assigned at birth to the opposite sex to achieve a sense of certainty and security in terms of gender embodiment. Rather, it is a process filled with twists and doubts, progression and regression. Talusan molded themself to first meet the social expectation of a colonial subject to blindly admire Western culture. Despite their suggestion to resist colonial mentality, Talusan submitted themself to another standard—the masculinity-obsessed American gay culture, which seems to reinforce colonial mentality. Nonetheless, this was a crucial step for Talusan to realize that hiding behind the mask of a white muscular gay man erased their real identity as a Filipino immigrant hoping to embody a larger extent of femininity without being scrutinized. Talusan's life reveals that a racialized subject's optimal survival strategy is not simply to accept or reject the rules that are created by the U.S. empire to further exploit them. Instead, they learn about the social norms that disvalue them, mold themselves to meet these expectations, question, and reject them, and then repeat this process. This is not a linear process of transformation, but a spiral structure of making important progress while looking backwards.

Talusan's transition to womanhood is closely linked with their deconstruction of the meanings of race and gender based on their own experiences as a colonial subject and gay immigrant. I have analyzed Talusan's identities as a colonial subject and a gay man. In the next section, I focus on their narrative of becoming a woman. I investigate how Talusan relates their personal life to the plight of nineteenth-century British women writers and female characters in these authors' works, a connection which helped Talusan toward their final decision with regard to gender transition. As Talusan eloquently states, "if I could see how being a woman was not the objectively ideal gender and still want to be one, then I was meant to be a woman after all" (296). Put another way, Talusan identified more with women's challenges than the power that is naturally given to men, an advantage Talusan had taken for granted when presenting as a man. These challenges involve the obstacles confronting British white women and transgender Filipino women in the colony when pursuing intellectual and spiritual advancement, and gender-based violence faced by women characters in the nineteen-century British literature and women in the twenty-first century U.S.

Talusan shows empathy with British women authors whose works indicate that many white women, as victims of sexism and patriarchy, were trapped within their households and discouraged from pursuing intellectual advancement. Majoring in literature at Harvard and once spending a summer in London on scholarship provided Talusan with access to numerous readings covering a wide range of topics. Particularly interested in nineteenth-century British women authors, Talusan read both the classic and less popular works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Christina Rossetti. For example, Talusan's booklist included *Emma* (1815), *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Middlemarch* (1871), as well as *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Villette* (1853), and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, and Christina Rossetti never married, and Charlotte Brontë did not marry until her late thirties, which made Talusan realize that it was extremely hard for women writers to "be both devoted to their personal passions and fulfill the expectations of their society" (155). Talusan explains that it was the Western ideology of sexism that discouraged women with talents from seeking intellectual pursuits, a tendency that is absent in traditional Filipino culture:

> Having grown up with no notion that women were in any way inferior—the president who took over from our dictator a woman, my grandmother fully equal to my grandfather in terms of running their business affairs, an indigenous culture that did not promote the idea of male superiority except for the colonial influence of machismo—the idea of women being kept out of intellectual pursuits simply because of their gender was infuriating, and studying their efforts to produce art under these conditions enraptured me. (169)

In contrast with white women who were "kept out of intellectual pursuits simply because of their gender," Talusan learned that not only were Filipino women not considered inferior to men, but transgender people in the pre-colonial Philippines were not as marginalized as they are today. They write that "among my own indigenous ancestors, select male-bodied people who lived their lives as women were held in high esteem and found themselves husbands, in domestic life treated identically as other women" (279). One group of men presenting as women were Shamans. Brenda Rodriguez Alegre points out that the pre-colonial Philippines was a matriarchal society where women were

revered for their power of procreation (54). This power was accompanied by the abilities of healing, communicating with the spirits that also have the power of procreation, and confronting the attacks of evil forces (54). Therefore, women were usually elevated to a class of spiritual leadership with the common name of *babaylan*, although in different religions they were called by different names. Some powerful *babaylans* were called as "*Baylan* or *baylian*, *asog*, *bayok*, *catalonan*, *mumbaki* or *itneg*" (54). Although some *babaylans* were born women, others were men identifying as women. This group was known as *bayas* who were "male priests characterized by being effeminate, uninterested in sex, and never participating in warfare. Their penis size, it was rumored, was only half a finger long. Using a special language, they could summon spirits (*wurake*) to conduct them heavenward in order to recover the soulstuff (*tanoana*) which had fled an individual, causing her to fall ill" (Andaya 66). In indigenous culture, *bayas* occupied a neutral third space outside the binary structure of male and female, femininity and masculinity. However, Spanish missionaries upon arrival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wrote reports renouncing their "defective" transvestism (Brewer). At the time, women were excluded from Catholic priesthood, and Spaniards brought over this sexist point of view to the island. The missionaries used gender non-conforming Shamans as a confirmation that it was not only the female body that the Devil was attracted to but femininity itself (Brewer). Since then, transgender people have been subjected to sexual violence by different colonial powers.

Alegre introduces Walterina Markova, during the Japanese colonial period of 1942 to 1945, as a man dressing like a woman entertaining soldiers and later being forced to provide sex services (57–8). Markova is a *bakla*—a Tagalog term for a man with feminine appearance, which I have explained above. Stories of *baklas* like Markova and those of cisgender women constituted the collective memory of Filipino comfort women and men.[4] More recently, the increasing U.S. military presence in the Philippines further encouraged the selling of female bodies, including many trans women, for sex service. The most tragic case of a Filipino trans woman being the victim of crime committed by an American serviceman is the murder of Jennifer Laude by Joseph Scott Pemberton in 2014.[5] As Talusan contends, the Filipino indigenous culture "did not promote the idea of male superiority" (169) and the capabilities of third gender Filipinos were fully recognized in the pre-colonial period. Powers including Spain, Japan, and the United

[4]An estimate of 80,000 to 200,000 Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, Dutch and Indonesian women were forced to provide sex service to the Japanese military during the Pacific War (Mendoza 248). These women were called "comfort women." Katharina Mendoza argues that "the comfort system can be understood as a disciplinary institution that, through the use of women's bodies, disciplined the soldier with the intent of creating a body that was both intelligible and useful for furthering the Japanese imperial project" (251). Maria Rosa Henson's *Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny* is one of the few memoirs written by a Filipino woman narrating her experience of working in Japanese military brothels.

[5]It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze Talusan's activism in revealing the violence that trans Filipina women face, especially with regard to their detailed reports on the killing of Laude and the trans movement's pursuit of justice for Laude's death. Talusan's publications on Laude's death include: "How the Killing of a Trans Filipina Woman Ignited an International Incident." *Vice*, 26 Feb. 2015, www.vice.com/en/article/avyd4z/how-to-get-away-with-murder-0000602-v22n3; "Jennifer Laude's Death Would've Caused an Outcry—If She Wasn't Transgender." *The Guardian*, 28 Jul. 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/28/jennifer-laude-death-transgender-philippines; "The Aftermath of a Marine's Conviction in the Death of a Philippine Trans Woman." *Buzzfeed*, 3 Jan. 2016, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meredithtalusan/the-aftermath-of-jennifer-laude-and-joseph-scott-pemberton.

States brought over a colonial standpoint of sexism that not only demonized indigenous femininity but led to the rape and murder of transgender individuals.

Talusan continues to investigate this colonial concept of sexism by revealing the social expectation of women and the subsequent danger of meeting this expectation. Talusan "learned about trying to live up to an ideal of attractiveness but being beset with obstacles as soon as you approached it, how the prettier you are, the less you're taken seriously, how you become more vulnerable to harassment or rape" (289). In addition to British women authors, Talusan shows empathy to the women characters in these authors' literature. Talusan highlights Rossetti's portrayal of the plight of women, including how easily women may be lured by male temptation in "Goblin Market" and the way women exist only to impress men in "In an Artist's Studio" (155). "Goblin Market" narrates the story of young women being tempted by fruits of goblin merchants, because of which some even lose their lives. At the end of the story, Lizzie saves Laura's life by purchasing some fruit from the merchants, although the merchants attempt to force Lizzie to eat the fruit herself. "In an Artist's Studio" presents several portraits of the same gorgeous woman who was only captured for her beauty, which indicates the objectification of women. Like these women characters, Talusan confesses that "so much of me had been molded by my desire to be worthy of other people's approval" (155). Here Talusan refers to themself maintaining an attractive gay figure. Practicing cross-dressing was their rebellion against the social expectation of a masculine gay man. However, it meets the expectation of a beautiful woman, which made Talusan easily become a target of sex violence. Talusan encountered a man from a gay bar who desperately and violently kissed them against their will without knowing that Talusan was a man (294–95).

Talusan further relates their experience of being harassed to other women's plight told by the female performers of the show called *The Vagina Monologues*. Talusan auditioned for the show as a man in October 2001, and by the time they performed several nights in February 2002, they had decided to permanently transition to womanhood (285, 296). The performer's group had twenty women studying at MIT, and one of them told the story of a woman being given the choice of whether to be raped or killed (289–290). Hearing this, Talusan recalls their story of being chased by several men after one of them approached Talusan and threatened Talusan for not agreeing to have sex with him (290). Relating their traumatic experience as a trans woman to cisgender women, Talusan realized that "what I went through as a trans woman was not fundamentally different from what they'd been going through their entire lives" (290).

Reflecting on women's plight made Talusan start reconsidering the advantages of manhood which they had enjoyed for a long time when identifying as a man. They eventually alienated themself from this male privilege. Talusan admits that "I identified with the challenges women faced rather than the power of men and found myself experiencing regret over the ways I had taken advantage of being male, how I didn't do household chores like the women in my family, how I was consistently praised for being smart while girls were only expected to be beautiful" (296). Talusan also recalled how much freedom they felt as a nineteen-year-old young man during a summer trip in London (289). A man did not need to pay attention to danger while wandering on the street and going to clubs late at night, which could have been dramatically different for

the other gender. Using Talusan's words, "[m]y great adventure would have been compromised, and yet that compromise suddenly felt like an unavoidable part as a woman" (290).

I argue that Talusan's rejection of male privilege is a key step of questioning what Adrienne Rich terms "male-identification" (190) and progressing towards her notion of "woman-identification" (199). Rich defines male-identification as "the casting of one's social, political, and intellectual allegiances with men" (189). She cites Catharine A. MacKinnon from *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* that the effect of male-identification means "internalizing the values of the colonizer and actively participating in carrying out the colonization of one's self and one's sex. […] Male identification is the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation" (190). Put it another way, when identifying with men, women accept the opinion that men's values are naturally entitled, and men's authority cannot be challenged. Talusan's confession—that they had taken advantage of the power that is only given to men—stands in opposition to such male-identification. Instead, Rich proposes woman-identification as a form of "female power," with which women see other women as "allies, life companions, and community," and together they can "*change the social relations of sexes, to liberate [themselves] and each other*" (199, italic in original). Developing from Rich, I argue that Talusan as a transwoman of color practices woman-identification by cultivating empathy with other women for their shared vulnerability to gender-based violence. Talusan suggests that "[t]he fact that I could experience these threats and hear terrible stories from other women only fortified my belief that I should be a woman myself" (296).

In this article, I have analyzed the formation of Talusan's decolonial trans Filipina identity as described in their recently released memoir *Fairest*. I have examined how Talusan, as a colonial subject, gay immigrant, and trans Filipina woman, continuously conforms to, negotiates with, and rebels against the heteronormativity that prevails throughout the U.S. transnational empire. Both at home and as part of the diaspora, Talusan navigates the rules of white heteropatriarchy while confronting the widespread colonial message of American superiority as communicated in American popular culture, white gay cultural practices that value desirability and visibility, the policing of white women for domesticity, and the regulation of indigenous non-normative gender. Talusan's critique of the colonial ideas normalizing whiteness, gender, and heterosexuality reveals that Filipinos and Filipino Americans, Asian gay men, white women, and trans women of color are all situated together within the framework of white heteropatriarchy, although I have no intention of claiming homogeneity within each group, nor of saying that the struggles of different communities are identical.

Talusan's *Fairest* is still one of the few book-length memoirs by and about a trans woman of color ever published in the United States. As a pioneering work, *Fairest* contains Talusan's decolonized knowledge of race, gender, and sexuality, cultivated as they traveled between the Philippines and the United States. As *Fairest* suggests, a new trans politics should indicate the intersection of gender, sexuality, and colonization. This intersectionality provides a basis for female power that unites women from different

backgrounds but having shared experiences of oppression due to the colonial influence of machismo.

Works Cited

Alegre, Brenda Rodriguez. "From Asog to Bakla to Transpinay: Weaving a Complex History of Transness and Decolonizing the Future." *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2022, pp. 51–64.

Andaya, Leonard Y. "The Bissu: Study of a Third Gender in Indonesia." *Gender in Focus: Identities, Codes, Stereotypes and Politics*, edited by Andreea Zamfira, Christian de Montlibert, and Daniela Radu, 1st ed., Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2018, pp. 64–87.

Atienza, Paul Michael Leonardo. "'I Think I'll Be *More* Slutty': The Promise of Queer Philipinx American Desire on Mobile Digital Apps in Los Angeles and Manila." *Q & A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*, edited by Martin F. Manalasan IV, Alice Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo, Temple UP, 2021, pp. 237–247.

Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October*, vol. 43, 1987, pp. 197–222.

Brewer, Carolyn. "Baylan, Asog, Transvestism, and Sodomy: Gender, Sexuality and the Sacred in Early Colonial Philippines." *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, no. 2, 1999, pp. 1–5. http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html.

Chen, Jian Neo. *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement*. Duke UP, 2019.

Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. Duke UP, 2003.

David, E. J. R. *Brown Skin, White Minds: Filipino-American Postcolonial Psychology*. Information Age Publishing, 2013.

---, and Sumie Okazaki. "The Colonial Mentality Scale (CMS) for Filipino Americans: Scale Construction and Psychological Implications." *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2006, pp. 241–252.

Eng, David L. *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Duke UP, 2001.

Henson, Maria Rosa. *Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny*. Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1996.

Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.

MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*. Yale UP, 1979.

Manalansan, Martin F., IV. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Duke UP, 2003.

Mendoza, Katharina R. "Freeing the 'Slaves of Destiny': The Lolas of the Filipino Comfort Women Movement." *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 247–266.

Miranda, Deborah A. "Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California." *GLQ*, vol. 16, no. 1–2, 2010, pp 253–284.

Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America.* Princeton UP, 2014.

Nguyen, Tan Hoang. *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation.* Duke UP, 2014.

Ocampo, Anthony C. "The Gay Second Generation: Sexual Identity and Family Relations of Filipino and Latino Gay Men." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2014, pp. 155–173.

Probyn, Elspeth. *Blush: Faces of Shame*. U of Minnesota P, 2005.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. Monthly Review Press, 1983, pp. 177–205.

Talusan, Meredith. *Fairest: A Memoir*. Viking, 2020.

Wat, Eric. *The Making of a Gay Asian Community: An Oral History of Pre-AIDS Los Angeles.* Rowman & Littlefield, 2002

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

ISSN 2457-0044

www.ellids.com

Erotohistoriography, Identity, and Queer Times and Spaces in Michelle Cliff's Novels

Begoña Vilouta-Vázquez | The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina
https://ellids.com/archives/2024/12/6.2-Vilouta-Vazquez.pdf

Abstract | This article presents a discussion on Michelle Cliff's project to unveil the counterhistories of Jamaica, buried, left out, and underrepresented by the colonial project. In the case of *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), an intersection of postcolonial and queer theories facilitates a unique reading of these novels as vehicles in this project to focus on the experiences of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Erotohistoriography is introduced as a concept that helps debunk the linear discourse of Western modernity: pleasurable moments experienced by both normative and non-normative bodies become instrumental in these reconnections between the present and the past, thus enabling the creation of non-official mappings of space and time.

Keywords | Erotohistoriography, Embodied Experience, Non-Normative Bodies, Identity, Resistance, Memory, Logic of Purity, Coloniality of Power, Queer Time, Queer Space, Postcolonial Theory, *Abeng*, *No Telephone to Heaven*, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam

In *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Michelle Cliff intricately weaves themes of identity, memory, and resistance into a narrative that challenges colonial and heteronormative frameworks. The novels' exploration of Clare Savage's journey toward self-discovery and empowerment offers a compelling entry point for examining how histories of race, gender, and sexuality are not only inherited but also reimagined through intimate, embodied experiences. From a postcolonial queer perspective, these novels can be read through the lens of erotohistoriography, a framework that embraces desire and affect as a means of engaging with the past. This erotohistoriographical approach allows readers to see how Cliff reclaims silenced histories and interrogates the lingering effects of the "coloniality of power"[1] (Quijano 533) positioning desire and memory as vital tools of resistance.

By emphasizing Clare Savage's bodily connections to her ancestors, her homeland, and her sexual and cultural identities, erotohistoriography reveals how the novel critiques linear, oppressive understandings of time, instead fostering a sense of continuity that centers marginalized experiences. Critics like Dipesh Chakrabarty have explored the tension between European ideas of linear historical progression and the continuity of lived experiences in postcolonial contexts (70–71). Linearity is a limiting framework because it often upholds dominant historical discourses that present a one-sided narrative of history. Such narratives marginalize the non-dominant perspectives and affective histories that erotohistoriography recovers. Continuity, on the other hand, refers to the affective threads that connect disparate events, characters, or times within a narrative. It does not require adherence to a chronological order but instead focuses on relational or emotional connections. Erotohistoriographical continuity allows for the exploration of affective histories tied to desire, memory, and embodiment that were buried in linear historical accounts. It values the resonances between past and present, linking them through shared feelings, desires, and resistances. Through this lens, these novels become not only a story of personal reclamation, but also a subversive historical narrative that reimagines connections between past and present, positioning desire and memory as vital tools of resistance.

These two novels depict Clare Savage's painful struggle to reconnect with her roots, places, people, multiple heritages, and history she was, in Michelle Cliff's own

[1]Anibal Quiijano's concept of "coloniality of power" (2000) refers to the enduring structures of domination established during colonialism that persist in modern societies around the world reinforcing Western hegemonies in epistemology, politics, and/or economics. Colonial patterns of economic exploitation, racial hierarchy, and cultural suppression continue to shape power dynamics long after colonialism officially ended.

words, "taught to despise" (*Claiming* 45). They represent Cliff's overall project to speak to the pain of those "hidden by histories of conquest and the traumas of colonial conditions" (MacDonald, "A Tribute"). In her fiction, essays, and poetry, Cliff explores the legacies of colonialism, and themes of identity, belonging, displacement, race, gender, and sexuality. She relentlessly interrogates the legacies of colonialism in Jamaica while drawing attention to the complexities of female and queer identities. Together, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* depict Clare Savage's evolution from a confused, silenced child struggling to come to terms with the legacies of race, privilege, and colonial history to an adult who actively confronts individual and collective oppressions. The daughter of Boy and Kitty Savage, Clare's identity can be defined as multiracial, multicultural, and multiethnic. Her light skin color, however, takes predominance and initially determines her allegiance to the dominant social class.

As a light-skinned member of Kingston's privileged class, Clare is apparently successfully integrated into the dominant hierarchy in Jamaican society; however, she chooses to leave the construct after years and years of being forced to silence her Afro-Jamaican identity. Although Clare never fully rejects it, she keeps it silenced but close to her heart throughout most of her life. The damaging effects of this repression persist for years until a visit to Kingston and a renewed friendship lead to a liberatory effort to recover these connections that have been forbidden for years. After years in London pursuing a career in art history, a choice made with "the logic of a Creole"[2] (*No Telephone* 109), Clare makes the decision to return to Jamaica and join a revolutionary group, a guerilla resisting neocolonial oppression in mid-80's Jamaica.[3] This decision is heavily influenced by her relationship with Harry/Harriet, a complex character that, similar to Clare, belongs to multiple worlds. A transgender individual, Harry/Harriet faces unique struggles related to identity and acceptance within the postcolonial heteronormative societies of the Caribbean. As a friend and a mentor, Harry/Harriet helps Clare explore questions of race, gender, sexuality, and belonging she has been pushing aside for a long time. The time they spend together plays a key role in Clare's journey of transformation and resistance against imposed social norms. Harry/Harriet's influence helps Clare break her silence and interrogate how race, class, and gender expectations of the coloniality of power have shaped her life choices.

A postcolonial queer reading of these two novels sheds light on these characters and their efforts to resist these expectations, their embodied non-conformity, the cultural tensions they navigate, and the ways their identities disrupt the lingering binaries left by

[2]As a Creole, or mixed-race light-skinned Jamaican, Clare is expected to take advantage of the privileges granted by the color of her skin. As one of the "chosen to represent the colonizer's values, ideas, and notions of what is real, alien, other, normal, supreme" (Cliff, "Caliban's Daughter" 40). At this point in her life, Clare unquestioningly accepts her father's authority and silences anything and everything related to the Afro-Jamaican side of her identity.

[3]In the 1980's, cultural neocolonialism in Jamaica was marked by the pervasive influence of West, especially American media, consumer culture, and ideological values. While Jamaica was politically independent, its cultural landscape was increasingly shaped by imported music, movies, fashion, and commercial products that promoted Western ideals and lifestyles. This domination had a strong impact on Jamaican youth, affecting local cultural expressions and leading to a perceived devaluation of traditional Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean identities. This cultural shift was not just a matter of media influence; it was deeply tied to economic policies that promoted foreign investment and opened Jamaica's markets to global corporations (Getachew).

the coloniality of power. As will be seen, these disruptions allow for new connections, access to counterhistories, and a new sense of belonging. The necessary reconnection with Jamaica as well as the key role played by Harry/Harriet, are tightly related to recovering a sense of belonging that is associated with alternative (re)constructions of space and time. These play a critical role in challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming identities outside Western colonial and heteronormative frameworks. Traditional colonial discourse, characterized by a "logic of purity,"[4] often imposes rigid structures of space (such as nation-states, borders, and public vs. private realms) and time (such as linear progress and developmental stages) that marginalize or erase non-Western, non-heteronormative ways of being.

Postcolonial queer theory aims to dismantle these imposed structures and explore more fluid, cyclical, and non-linear understandings of space and time that align more closely with diverse cultural and sexual identities. By reimagining space, postcolonial queer theory opens up possibilities for marginalized communities to reclaim physical, cultural, and ideological spaces that were traditionally denied to them. This involves creating spaces where queer identities are visible, celebrated, and validated. Similarly, reinterpreting time disrupts the linear, progress-driven narrative often associated with Western modernity. Non-linear or cyclical conceptions of time, rooted in indigenous and local cultural understandings, allow for a construction of identities that are not bound by a singular, fixed point of "coming out" or adhering to a progressive life timeline. Instead, these frameworks celebrate fluid identities and multiple pasts, presents, and futures. Clare's and Harry/Harriet's reconstructions take place away from normativity and its constraints, produced by race, class, and gender restrictions that have been imposed on them since very early in their childhood. These two novels can be described as "queer counterhistories of space and time" (Eng 5), since they offer an alternative view of the linear configurations of history offered by "normative" sources: the evolution of Clare Savage towards an open acceptance of her self as an Afro-Jamaican woman becomes a counterhistory of Jamaica, an effort at representing all the stories that have been under- or mis-represented.

Elizabeth Freeman states that postcolonial and queer approaches to literature are very much related ("Time Binds" 57; *Time Binds* XI). One of the points she makes about these connections is the existence of official and non-official mappings of time and space (*Time Binds* 10). The latter offer stories that have been neglected by the former; for

[4]In her groundbreaking *Pilgrimages* (2003), Maria Lugones develops the concept of "logic of purity" to describe how rigid categorizations in postcolonial societies classify people and communities into hierarchical categories based on purity, as opposed to hybridity. Lugones argues that traditional identities often rely on neatly separated categories such as race, gender, and class where these dimensions are treated as discreet and non-overlapping. This logic marginalizes those who exist within multiple or fluid intersections of identities such as those embodying gender non-conformity or *mestiza* identities that resist singular classification.

In postcolonial and queer theories, the mestiza symbolizes the complexities of living within and between multiple worlds, often imposed by colonial histories. Gloria Anzaldúa claims the mestiza consciousness arises from inhabiting a borderland, both a physical and metaphorical space where cultures clash, blend, and create new identities. This space disrupts colonial binaries such as colonizer/colonized, and highlights the fluid, dynamic processes of identity formation under the legacies of the coloniality of power (78–79).

subjects whose lives have been affected by the colonial construction of society and individuals, the events disregarded by official history offer spaces for reconstruction of their identities, not only individual and social, but also sexual. By analyzing these temporal frameworks, Freeman shows that both theoretical approaches seek to destabilize structures that govern identity and history. It is the contention of this paper that an intersection of postcolonial and queer theories facilitates a unique reading of these counterhistories. Central to the main argument of this paper, erotohistoriography identifies bodies and queer relationships as instrumental in the process for individuals and communities to counter the narrow "chronopolitics of Western modernity" (Freeman, "Time Binds" 57). This framing of time as a tool of power creates hierarchies that exclude certain cultural practices or events that do not fit into its ideas of identity and societal order, privileging heteronormative and Eurocentric models of progress while marking non-conforming identities or non-Western practices as "out of time" or irrelevant.

Erotohistoriography, a term coined by Elizabeth Freeman ("Time Binds"), is a method of engaging with history through embodied, affective experiences. This concept emphasizes how bodily pleasures and temporal disruptions—such as nostalgia, memory, and longing—form a counterpoint to normative historical progression. Queer temporalities challenge dominant narratives of time and space by reconfiguring linear histories and normative life trajectories. Bodies become instrumental in this rediscovery/reconnection with the past: "Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it in the present, by treating the present itself as a hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter" (*Time Binds* 95). As will be seen, bodily, pleasurable experiences that resist the fast pace demanded by normative society allow Clare and Harry/Harriet to feel liberated from the constraints of the logic of purity: even small moments of affective intensity, joy, or togetherness can help open up alternative ways of being in the present. These instances of countersociality open up opportunities for the colonized to debunk the linear discourse and insert the experiences of the disenfranchised into it: "erotohistoriography […] insists that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce form(s) of time consciousness, that can intervene upon the material damage done in the name of development" ("Time Binds" 59). By accessing history through the body and pleasure rather than through disembodied, linear accounts, erotohistoriography offers a way to remember and re-experience pasts that were suppressed, erased, or deemed "deviant" by traditional historical accounts.

For queer, postcolonial, and other marginalized communities, this form of historical engagement can be transformative and reparative. Erotohistoriography becomes a form of reclamation, empowering individuals to re-embody histories that were once denied to them. This embodied approach also fosters intergenerational connections, healing traumas of disconnection by linking present bodies to past lives in meaningful, emotionally resonant ways. Sensual engagements with history challenge the idea that only dates and dominant narratives document history. Instead, they propose that history is also embodied and remembered through affective and sensual experiences. As key mechanisms of erotohistoriography, they recover silenced histories by paying attention to physical and emotional traces left on the body, celebrating the embodied resistances of marginalized communities through pleasurable acts, dance or protest, and building

affective solidarities that create connections across time linking individuals to historical figures or moments based on shared embodied experiences. Through such engagements, individuals can heal from feelings of alienation, and they gain a sense of continuity, presence, and belonging in both personal and collective histories.

Michael Eng describes these disruptions as full of possibilities to allow for the reconstruction of the relationship between individuals and history: "Freeman's crossing of queer studies with post-colonial concerns of individual and group development reformulates certain basic tenets of the field such that queer subjectivity and collectivity demand, and take as their reward, particularly inventive and time-traveling forms of grief and compensation" (5). For Freeman, grief involves not just mourning, but also seeking out and creating alternative narratives and histories that include joy and eroticism, and memories of connection. These time traveling forms of grief enable a reclamation of lost relationships, suggesting that incorporation of these memories can foster healing and collective identity. This time-traveling feature of the combination of queer and postcolonial theories reflects the structure of both novels. Past and present are constantly weaved and intertwined in a manner that clearly highlights the former's influence upon the latter. Away from an official mapping of time, these novels reflect experiences that become, in Freeman's words, "residues of positive affect" (*Time Binds* 120) to offer "alternative narratives of development" (Eng 5). These residues allow for a reimagining of history that emphasizes pleasure, intimacy, and desire as modes of resistance to dominant narratives of oppression and trauma. Besides, they serve as a counterbalance to histories often dominated by narratives of suffering, offering alternative ways to engage with the past.

Freeman lists particular groups among the colonized who were more often than not relegated to the background and whose identities were defined against the modernity the colonizing project provided: "Those forced to wait or startled by violence, whose activities do not show up on the official time line, whose own time lines do not synchronize with it, are variously, and often simultaneously black, female, queer" ("Time Binds" 57). Marginalized bodies like Harry/Harriet's and Clare's, and their pleasurable interactions generate alternative rhythms and modes of being that remain as traces that resist normative timelines and expectations of heteronormative life patterns. Kaisa Ilmonen interprets the relationship between postcolonial and queer theories in a similar way: "Eurocentric binary models of identity are not necessarily adequate in different kinds of (post)colonial contexts" (244). Harry/Harriet voices this inadequacy and its dangers: "But we *are* of the past here. […] A peculiar past. For we have taken the master's past as our own. That is the danger" (Cliff*, No Telephone* 127). Harry/Harriet's view highlights how official mappings of time still persist in contemporary Jamaica; at the same time, these words reinforce the need to create a queer space/time where resistance and memory become a possibility.

Jack Halberstam's concepts of queer time and place prove especially useful in the construction of these counterhistories, since they "open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (1–2). Queering time and space means to explore/reclaim new and old spaces where the normativity associated with the behaviors and cultures imposed by the colonizing project can be subverted in favor of unconventional, hidden, despised constructions that were obliterated by the values of the

West: "'queer' refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment and activity in space and time" (6). Halberstam's aim is also to expand the definition to broader aspects of life and construction of identity, and is understood as a way of life that she claims "will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (1–2). Queering space and time means not only to oppose the compulsory, even violent heteronormativity of Jamaican society, but also the impositions and misinterpretations of Jamaican society and culture that colonial and neocolonial powers made/are making. Halberstam also links the presentation of queer times and spaces with the subversion of capitalist/globalizing modes of economy and society, and the creation of specific divisions of time (family time, reproductive time) or space (domestic, public) that become "naturalized" for every gender, race and class. This naturalization, also known as the "heterosexual contract" examines how the binary gender system and compulsive heterosexuality are mutually reinforced through repeated social practices (Butler 524). It refers to the implicit societal agreement that naturalizes the alignment of biological sex, gender, identity, and heterosexual desire, effectively enforcing heteronormativity. This contract serves as a normative framework, marginalizing identities and expressions that fall outside conventional gender and sexual norms (524). Halberstam proposes a subversion of these structures by centering the experiences of characters that choose to live outside of heteronormative life/space constructions: "[those] who destabilize the normative values that make everyone else feel safe and secure; but also those people who live […] outside of the organizations of time and space that have been established for the purposes of protecting the rich from everyone else" (10). Focusing his analysis on subcultural and transgender bodies, Halberstam suggests that characters who opt out of these heteronormative life trajectories represent a form of resistance, creating new spaces and identities beyond traditional social norms. These disruptions in the form of alternative assemblages[5] or heterogeneous communities allow for new forms of kinship, identity, community, and history that challenge social norms regarding relationships and sexuality, calling for a "kind of shared vision […] a vision of community, possibility, and redemption through collaboration" (96).

It is the contention of this paper that Michelle Cliff constructs these spaces in her novels around the figures of Clare Savage and Harry/Harriet, whose identity constructions have been damaged by the coloniality of power in one way or another. Moreover, the relationships they are able to build with the different contexts where colonial violence was/is exercised show the possibility to create new relationships and modes of being in and with the world. The novels analyzed here present Clare as a meaningful embodiment of how the personal and the political become one. In the construction of this character and her universe, Cliff seems to have achieved the purpose described by Antonia MacDonald earlier in this analysis: to represent all of those left behind by the violence of the colonizing process. Readers see her grow and become an

[5]Originated in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, assemblage theory explores how heterogenous groups unite to form dynamic, evolving communities that challenge traditional structures or binary models of thinking. Additionally, Buchanan argues alternative assemblages "have the capacity for agency within and beyond the assemblage [...] claim a territory, are dynamic, and constantly in the process of being made and remade" (459)

adult: *Abeng* opens in 1958, when the protagonist is barely twelve years old, and *No Telephone to Heaven* closes when she dies at the age of thirty-six as a member of an anti-colonial guerrilla, a revolutionary group. *Abeng* shows readers the complexity of Clare's upbringing and formal education. As a member of the Savage Freeman family, she is the descendant of enslavers and the enslaved. Clare Savage inhabits, in Cliff's words, at least two worlds, where she experiences moments of privilege or dispossession of her rights depending especially on the location of the different episodes the narrative voice chooses to show. Her sexuality, together with her color, her gender, and her class, place the protagonist in different spaces of discrimination or advantage at various times of her existence, whether at school in Kingston or in her grandmother's farm in the mountains, where she can freely enjoy and learn about the Afro-Jamaican side of her family. However, the chronology in the novel is much more complicated than a linear description of the facts of the life of its protagonist.

In *Abeng*, Cliff deftly combines portions of the unknown events of the history of Jamaica with Clare's family history and her intimate life, establishing a close connection between both country and individual. By constantly switching between different spatial and chronological frameworks, the third person narrative voice immerses readers in Jamaica's violent histories of conquest and domination. The very opening of the novel is evidence of this: the third person narrative voice emphasizes the island's cyclical transformation and the layering of its histories: "The island rose and sank. Twice. This is a book about the time which followed on that time. As the island became a place where people lived. Indians. African. Europeans" (*Abeng* 3). The fragmented structure of the description mirrors the fragmentation caused by colonialism, as the narrative traces the emergence of Jamaica as a contested site of settlement and displacement. Through these narrative devices, Cliff foregrounds the silenced histories of the disenfranchised, exposing the violence and erasure embedded in the island's past.

Cliff constructs Clare Savage as a multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural character who must carefully and painfully navigate at least the two worlds her parents represent. In my previous work, I defined her as an embodiment of Jamaican history, representing dichotomies that remind readers of traumatic histories: colonizer/colonized, or oppressor/oppressed (Vilouta-Vázquez 41). As an adult, she undergoes a process that culminates with her negotiating and reclaiming the losses she suffered throughout her formative years. However, the initial stages of her life, are marked by the limited options related to the privileges attached to her lighter skin and last name, which, on the other hand, limit the opportunities she has to access the maternal side of her family, a cultural heritage and ethnicity she is taught to hide: "But she was a lucky girl—everyone said so—she was light-skinned. She lived in a world where the worst thing to be—especially when you were a girl—was to be dark" (*Abeng* 77). Her constant desire to reconcile both sides is nothing but undermined by her family's insistence on her pursuing the future and the performances expected of a light-skinned Jamaican girl. This long, painful process of reclamation of her Afro-Jamaican identity is not without its obstacles. Her light skin and green eyes make her her father's daughter: Boy Savage constantly encourages Clare to pass as white. Every single time she tries to interrogate the certitudes of the logic of purity, her questions are stifled not only by her teachers but also by her father. Boy Savage's adherence to the logic of purity derives from his staunch reverence of his

family's British cultural heritage and a doctrine of elitism he intends to pass on to his daughter: "She was a true Savage, he assured her. Her fate was sealed" (*Abeng* 45).

In contrast, Clare's mother, Kitty, silently witnesses Boy's powerful influence over their daughter, believing her Afro-Jamaican heritage worthless and an obstacle to the bright future that awaits her light-skinned daughter. Clare, however, perceives this loss as traumatic: she longs to access an identity that is forbidden to her, as she is only considered her father's daughter: "Those mornings with her mother in the bush sometimes made Clare think-wish-that they were on a desert island together-away from her father and his theories and whiteness and her sister and her needs. That they would survive on this island with just the fruit her mother gathered. And she wanted this" (*Abeng* 80). The life of privilege her father plans for her involves rejecting/silencing everything related to her mother's identity and culture, including traditions and knowledge her mother and grandmother have acquired through the years like healing methods, oral stories, music and folk traditions. Clare will not be allowed to know or even acknowledge anything outside of the confines of her grandmother's village in the mountains. On the other hand, Kitty, Clare's mother, uses this argument to persuade Clare to choose the Savage side, as everybody, including her, see only advantages in this. Clare's own sister, Zoey, clarifies their mother's view on the differences between both sisters: "One time she said she feel you would prosper here. She say is because you favour backra, and fe you Daddy" (*Abeng* 105). Her white outlook ("backra") is understood by everyone as a stepping stone to a promising future; this possibility, however, entails that she is forced to make a series of choices and renunciations that affect her future. For Clare, some of the most traumatic ones include not being allowed to return to Jamaica with her mother and sister after a brief period in the United States. Forced to stay behind with her father, Clare decides to move to London to pursue studies in art "with the logic of a Creole" (*No Telephone* 109).

In *No Telephone to Heaven* Cliff chooses to describe Clare Savage's life by constructing a highly effective allegory that highlights some of the most important aspects of her life; at the same time, the passage below advances some of the topics that are central in the development of this paper, including Jamaica's traumatic history, Clare's childhood and her feelings of unbelonging, the traumatic choices she had to make in order to comply with her family's desires, her coping mechanisms (mostly her studies in London), and her final choice to fight for her Afro-Jamaican identity:

> The albino gorilla moving through the underbrush. […] Not feeling much of anything, except a vague dread that she belongs nowhere. She fills her time. In schools, playgrounds, other people's beds. In pursuit of knowledge, grubs, and she thinks, life. […] Time passes. The longing for tribe surfaces—unmistakable. […] She cannot shake it off. She remembers the jungle. The contours of wildness. Buried so long, she fears they may have atrophied. Distant treks with her dark-pelted mother. With a solid urgency they may emerge but she must also give herself to the struggle. She belongs in these hills. (*No Telephone* 91)

The albino gorilla allegory deftly describes the different phases Clare has gone through, from her birth and her education as privileged, middle class, light-colored Jamaican girl to her choice to abandon a life in the metropolitan center (London) to join an anti-

neocolonialist guerrilla army, where she re-encounters and embraces the Afro-Jamaican side of her identity, related to her mother, and silenced so that she can have the normative life that corresponds to her status as the light-skinned descendant of a family of white landowners.[6] Her feelings of unbelonging stem from the uneasiness Clare has felt for almost all her life: despite being integrated into the dominant hierarchy, she's never been happy while being forced to ignore parts of her identity. Different scenes in *Abeng* depict this discomfort: while at school, for example, the realization of the teachers' favoritism towards lighter-skinned students and the discriminatory treatment of darker-skinned students is a source of internal conflict for Clare (96–102). Other instances take place at her grandmother's farm in the mountains, where she becomes aware of the unspoken divisions in society, such as the rejection of certain people based on their background or perceived "inferiority" (54–59). Finally, during her time with Mrs. Phillips at the end of the novel, Clare is confronted with the explicit demands to pass as a white woman. Mrs. Phillips' behavior, as well as the social pressures Clare experiences in this environment reinforce that she must hide or deny her Afro-Jamaican side to succeed in society. This experience deepens her internalized conflict, as Clare is expected to remain silent and conform to narrow, "ladylike" behavior, which involves suppressing any connection to the other side of her identity (152–165). Clare's discomfort with these dynamics is an early sign of her struggles with her identity, as she becomes aware of how race affects her social positioning.

Clare's physical appearance connects her to the Savages, the paternal side of her family. At the same time, however, this causes her to drift further and further away from her maternal side. What causes this alienation from her Afro-Jamaican identity is what is most visible, the lighter skin her father clings to as a reminder of the family's former way of life marked by their power and privilege: "Maybe Kitty thought that Clare would only want this thing, to pass into whiteness, looking as she did, speaking well because of her lessons at St. Catherine's, reading English books and English descriptions of history" (*Abeng* 129). Although this separation affords her a comfortable life, Clare must quell elements of her identity she cherishes. Complying with her father's desire for her to pass as white becomes a double-edged sword: even if she feels protected, she must, at the same time, reject who she is. Kitty and Boy Savage decide that Clare will function better in the world if she becomes a woman without any attachments to her Afro-Jamaican identity. Her father's choice provides a sense of security while simultaneously hindering her ability to think and make independent decisions. Conforming to the gender expectations for a girl belonging to her class and color point to a privileged life as long

[6]In the piece "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character," Cliff describes Clare's evolution in a manner that stresses the need for reconnection: "She is a light-skinned female who has been removed from her homeland in a variety of ways and whose life is a movement back, ragged, interrupted, uncertain, to that homeland" (265). Cliff's project to debunk official accounts of Jamaican history begins with her choice of last name for her main character: it is in fact the lineage of the colonizers that are deemed as 'savages.' To illustrate this point, the third person narrative voice gives a detailed description of the way in which one of Clare's ancestors ran his plantation, describing acts of violence performed in a random manner: "But they did not pretend that J.E.C. Savage had been a benign slaveholder—they talked of his treatment of runaways, if recaptured, and took some pride that he administered the punishment himself. The recaptured slave was strung up in front of the quarters, where the queen's justice applied the cat-o'-nine tails to his or her back. The number of lashes depended upon the exertion the judge was capable of on a given afternoon, or morning" ("Clare Savage" 30).

as she does not break "the heterosexual contract." A "performance" as an "Angel of the House" is expected. However, her behavior as a woman traverses boundaries and, as a result, it has to be trained to go back to the heterosexual contract.

Judith Butler has described the time and spatial dimensions of the gender role as having social, cultural, and political meaning: "There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public nature is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame" (526). An incident while hunting—she is punished not only for killing a bull, but also because this activity does not conform to gender expectations for a light-skinned Jamaican girl— expels her from her grandmother's farm, where she will not be able to go back until twenty years later (*Abeng* 116–119). Killing the bull is a very significant moment that highlights her defiance against the gender norms of her society. This act serves not only as a demonstration of her physical strength and agency but also a rejection of the submissive role typically assigned to women. Her fierce independence challenges the heterosexual contract and the limitations it imposes on her identity. The punishment and marginalization Judith Butler talks about[7] come in the form of an exile at Mrs. Phillips' home, a member of society that will teach Clare how to respect the heterosexual contract and act according to the role society expects of her. As they pack Clare's clothes, Kitty explains to her daughter how only a member of Kingston's high society can train her to behave properly and according to the heteronormativity of the heterosexual contract: "'Child, what you did was a serious thing. […] You have to learn once and for all just who you are in this world. Mrs. Phillips is a lady, and you are getting to the age when you need to be a lady as well. […] Go stay with the old lady and learn what you can from her'" (*Abeng* 150). Only by respecting the culturally accepted roles expected of a female teenager and replicating the performances that align with this compulsory construct can she be accepted back in "good" society.

The heterosexual contract, together with issues of color and class, drive Clare away from the Afro-Jamaican lineage that is related to her mother and that she will have to reconstruct years later away from the heteronormativity of this contract, with the help of Harry/Harriet and the erotohistoriographical moments where their bodies are used to perform encounters between the past and the present. The relationship with Harry/Harriet provides for Clare these spaces to create a time consciousness she has been fighting to make disappear. Her traveling all around Europe to study the art of the Eurocentric traditions is nothing but a desire to forget her sense of unbelongingness and fill it with the culture that was supposedly hers, as asserted by her father in her childhood years. Through her interactions with Harry/Harriet, Clare is compelled to confront the intersections of personal and collective histories, recognizing how the coloniality of power and the fight for identity have affected her and her community. These moments connect her to the past in sensory, intimate ways allowing her to connect with the

[7]"Performing one's gender wrong initiates a series of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated" (Butler 528).

histories of her ancestors, the land, and her cultural identity, which colonialism has otherwise fragmented or erased.

Kaisa Ilmonen describes the presence of Harry/Harriet as crucial in the process of recovery of Clare's Afro-Jamaican identity: "As signifiers of ambivalence, these transsexual characters are able to heal the traumas of history caused by Eurocentric binary thinking while re-signifying the fixed gender structures of colonial modernity" (229–230). Clare identifies with Harry/Harriet because they are similar, divided in two: "No, I don't find you strange. No stranger than I find myself. For we are neither one thing nor the other" (131). Her education and training alienate her from part of her family; for Harry/Harriet, it is his sexual identity that places him in a marginalized space, on the negative side of the binary so that heteronormativity can occupy its privileged position: "Then Harry/Harriet, boy-girl, Buster's brother-sister, half brother-sister actually, who was always strange, since childhood, they say, but everyone tolerates him, as if measuring their normalness against their strangeness. He is only one, after all, one that nature did not claim" (*No Telephone* 21). His role in the social group can only be sustained as the source of entertainment, and in his liminal position as the adoptive/biological son of a high-class family, unnatural but accepted. He was born of the relationship of his mother, a maid, with her boss, and adopted by him and his wife. This way, his position in society is guaranteed by his origins, in a society that is especially violent against social/sexual relationships other than the heteronormative. Cecil Gutzmore describes the situation of homophobia in Jamaica as one of the most restrictive and violent in the world. At the same time, this violent feature of Jamaican patriarchal society defines women's role in society restrictively, defining them only as bodies who must help in the preservation and continuation of society:

> Disapproval is strategically deployed not only against such traditionally designated social 'perversions' as homosexuality, bisexuality, transvestism, trans-sexuality, and so forth, but also against a number of more 'day-to-day' activities relating to the sexed—especially the female—body, particularly in respect of its un/dress, hairstyling, and the like. […] patriarchy […] enforces sociosexual 'normality' as well as the range of identities (individual, group, racial, national, regional, and so on) deemed essential to societal survival. (119)

Faced with the restrictive narrative of what it means to be male or female in Jamaican society, Harry/Harriet's courageous defiance of heteronormativity becomes a beacon, a source of inspiration for Clare to be able to affirm and recognize what she was forced to despise and ignore. Clare's and Harry/Harriet's liminal identities provide spaces of connection to be established between the two: they both live split, and they both will have to make a decision and choose which side to lean to in the search for their identity: "I mean the time will come for both of us to choose. For we will have to make the choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan[8] live split. Not in this world" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 131). Harry/Harriet is the character that enables Clare to re-establish the lost connections to Afro-Jamaican culture, a process that had been prevented by her Eurocentric education.

[8]The term "cyann" is a Jamaican patois word derived from the English "cannot."

There are several moments when Harry/Harriet becomes the source for the pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfilments that make the reconnection with the past possible. They both share experiences of joy and playfulness, physical connection, cultural reflection, and intimate conversations while revisiting the Jamaican landscape. As claimed by Elizabeth Freeman, "queer practices of pleasure, specifically, the body enjoyments that travel under the sign of queer sex, can be thought of as temporal practices, even as portals to historical thinking" ("Time Binds" 59). Practiced in a context where queer affinity is not criminalized, these forms of intimacy are set to another logic and temporal rhythm. In erotohistoriographical moments history is experienced as a lived, felt presence rather than a distant or objective record. These moments are characterized by their intimacy, desire, and affect, allowing individuals or groups to connect deeply with marginalized or suppressed histories, particularly those disrupted by colonialism, capitalism, or heteronormativity.

The first one of these erotohistoriographical moments takes place in a touristic restaurant where both subvert colonial boundaries by staging a performance with the aim to make fun of the stereotyped racial views of an American tourist. In a setting that reminds them of the Middle Passage, they stage a dialogue full of racial/sexual connotations that startle the tourist to challenge his racist behaviour:

> 'I am Prince Badnigga, and this is my consort, Princess Cunnilinga, we are here for the International Festival of Practitioners of Obeah, my dear chap.' Poor man, did he not see their eyes jump with the joke? Afrekete and Anansi.[9] But no, the poor fool, now released, took the whole story back to his table to tell his wife he had spoken with Afro royalty, and, oh, dear, they are as we feared. (*No Telephone*, 125–126)

In the way Jack Halberstam describes, Harry/Harriet uses his ambivalent appearance to disrupt the comfortable positions of heteronormative society, destabilizing the the normative values that make everyone else feel safe and secure. He creates his own queer time and space, where Clare is included and together they undermine the codes of those whose vision of the world is reductive, racist, and homophobic: "'Oh, man, girlfriend, is nuh what dem expect from me? [...] Battyman trash. No harm. Our people kind of narrow, poor souls. Foolish sometimes. Cyaan understand the likes of me'" (*No Telephone* 127). This moment of pleasurable interruption of the colonial patterns of domination helps Clare's historical consciousness of her identity and her Afro-Jamaican roots resurface. Right after the aforementioned dialogue she feels empowered enough to recover one of the signifiers of the Afro-Jamaican identity she was taught to despise as part of her privileged upbringing. In the middle of this disruption, her accent makes a comeback: "'Oh, yes, labrish, but also true-true.' Her twang was coming back, rapidly, in Harry/Harriet's presence, voice breaking the taboo of speaking bad. Discouraged among

[9]Afrekete and Anansi are the names of two trickster figures of Yoruban origin. For this reason, their subversive activities are associated with the fight for freedom. Kara Provost enumerates some of the features that these trickster figures have, and that describe very accurately their association with Harry/Harriet and Clare at this point: "Both Gates and Lorde emphasize the relationship between the trickster and language, Lorde specifically points out the trickster's associations with unpredictability, abundant eroticism, and gender ambiguity" (46).

her people" (*No Telephone* 121). It is in these moments when Clare and Harry/Harriet are able to transgress the rigid boundaries imposed by "her people," that is, the Savage side, the colonizer side and its logic of purity that have coerced their behavior for so long.

They travel around Jamaica together on two separate occasions; both have deep significations for the purposes of this analysis. The first time they travel to the Jamaican coast, significantly trespassing the property of an American absentee landlord, and even more significantly spending the day close to cane fields, that make them remember the history of enslavement of the island by the colonizing and neocolonizing powers. The visit to the beach is described by the third person narrative voice with lots of sensorial detail, introducing readers to an erotic scene between Clare and Harry/Harriet: "This was but the beginning. Soon they would be covered with mango juice, salt water, and the spicy oil of the meat. Resting from riding the breakers, warmed by their feast and the sun, they lay side by side under a sky thrilling in its brightness. Touching gently, kissing, tongues entwined, coming to, laughing" (*No Telephone* 130). Again, enjoying the pleasures of food, the sea and sex with Harry/Harriet is linked to a historical consciousness of Jamaica and the experiences of the disenfranchised: "'Were we to sleep on this beach we might hear more than the breeze rattling the stalks, and singing through the blades. We might feel more than its warmth. We might hear more than our people celebrating cropover" (*No Telephone* 132). The references to the lives of the enslaved and cropover in particular have a highly relevant significance: after the grueling harvesting period, cropover was an opportunity to celebrate survival, express cultural identity, and resist the oppressive realities of plantation life. Through music, dance, and feasting, participants honored their Afro heritage and fostered community bonds (Thompson). In the same way as the scene at the restaurant, the erotohistoriographical moment has its effects on Clare's westernized self: "Clare lay back, shutting her eyelids, against the fire of the sun. She thought she could feel the tint of her skin deepening, melanin rising to the occasion" (*No Telephone* 131). In this case, the disruption provoked by pleasurable bodily moments allows for another transgression related to her privileged upbringing: the lightness of her skin. As a powerful signifier of her belonging to the upper class of Kingston, Clare's skin was revered and was to be preserved with the prospect of a promising future. With Harry/Harriet, Clare feels able to transgress yet another boundary in the process of reclaiming her Afro-Jamaican identity.

Shortly before joining the guerrilla army, Clare goes back to Jamaica and she and Harry/Harriet visit her grandmother's house in the mountains. The trip provides more erotohistoriographical moments for Clare and proves to be decisive in Clare's journey of reclaiming her identity as an Afro-Jamaican woman. At the same time, this setting becomes an example of queer time and space: the development of chronopolitics of colonization disappears, and the land seems to return to a distant past. The farm resembles now a precolonial Jamaica, an era preceding colonization, exploitation, and the violence of the colonizing process: "The building where it was, where she remembered it as being, screened by green. Nothing by the chaos of the green—reaching across space, time too it seemed. When only Arawaks and iguanas and crocodiles and snakes dwelt there. Before landfall, before hardship" (*No Telephone* 172). The third person narrative voice vividly describes the land where Clare's grandmother's farm used to stand as devoid of any human trace. In this return to nature, Cliff evokes a world untouched by the destructive hands of the colonizers. This creates an emotional landscape that draws Clare

and the guerrilla fighters into an intimate relationship with the land and history—one that resists colonial erasure. The scene does not just depict nature reclaiming the land but symbolizes a reconnection with indigenous and precolonial histories.

The practices of pleasure between Harriet and Clare include eating, chatting, remembering their respective childhoods, and a sexual experience that connects Clare to the island in a highly symbolical way: "The importance of this water came back to her. She shut her eyes and let the cool of it wash over her naked body, reaching up into her as she opened her legs. Rebaptism" (*No Telephone* 172). Similar to the previous scene on the beach, these moments help Clare come closer and closer to her Afro-Jamaican identity. Their conversations evoke memories from her childhood in the country, experiences that took place in the same setting. These shared experiences in these familiar settings provide opportunities to reflect on her childhood memories while also forming new, positive associations and connections with her Afro-Jamaican heritage, enabling Clare to feel a sense of belonging. This new sense of inclusion becomes a key element in her decision to join the guerrilla army and fight for the freedom of Jamaica from neocolonial domination:

> Each bend in the river came back to her. […] The five croton trees—dragon's blood—marking off the burial place of slaves, at the side of the river, on a slight rise. Unquiet ground, that—children feared the anger of the spirits, who did not rest, who had not been sung to their new home. Her mother had told her of the slaves. Her people. Yes. (*No Telephone* 174)

The disenfranchised and her mother become the center of her memories, and the project to recover a relationship with the culture she represented makes a modern maroon of her. The third person narrative voice portrays all the events that end with Clare joining the guerrilla movement using techniques like flashbacks and stream of consciousness. With the use of these, readers gain insight into the motivations and decisions that have led Clare to this situation, where she seeks to distance herself from society and become a modern warrior in the manner of the revered Nanny of the Maroons. The connections with maroon history[10] and the figure of Nanny of the maroons[11] provide the counterhistorical space where the reconstruction of both Jamaican history and Clare's identity can be performed. *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* offer new contexts for

[10]The phenomenon of the creation of new communities by escaped fugitives, known as *maroonage*, represented a common reaction to slavery in the Americas. From its beginnings in the sixteenth century, enslaved Africans ran away from the plantations to establish self-governed, independent communities. This topic represents the dreams of self-determination of black people, the desire to develop their own culture without any outer interference, living with their own norms and beliefs. This separatist impulse that may be defined as the basis of maroonage impelled enslaved people to abandon the plantations in search of a new land or some kind of pacific co-existence (Kelley 31).

[11]Historical maroon leaders as Zumbi from Palmares, or Nanny from Mooretown in Jamaica, have become a source of inspiration for many Afro-Latin-American and Afro-Caribbean movements. In the case of the Anglophone Caribbean, it is Nanny who becomes a symbol of resistance and fight for freedom. Nanny's figure, and with her the maroonage phenomenon, have become a symbol of active resistance against slavery and against the negation of the humanity of enslaved peoples, of their culture, their language and their African cultural traditions (Mathurin-Mair 36).

recalling, narrating, and interpreting the individual and collective histories of (post)-colonial subjects.

Clare is finally able to reclaim her Afro-Jamaican identity, and returns to the farm her grandmother owned, to establish a new counter-hegemonic community with the rest of the members of the revolutionary group. They form a heterogeneous group composed of members of different ethnicities, races, and genders; an alternative assemblage rooted in the principles of queer time and space, drawing inspiration from the maroon communities that sought isolation to resist colonial domination. By returning to the bush, more specifically to Accompong Town, where Nanny and her soldiers retreated to create an independent community, this modern guerrilla echoes and honors this legacy of resistance. Alongside the other members of the group, Clare and Harry/Harriet establish a queer temporality and spatiality that contest capitalist, heteronormative, and neocolonial oppressions. Interestingly enough, the chapter where the members of the guerrilla army are described is called "*Ruinate*." This highly significant title is explained by a footnote in a manner that describes this queer space as not belonging to official chronology anymore, but returning to an achronological one, without any markings in it: "*Ruinate*: This distinctive Jamaican term is used to describe lands which were once cleared for agricultural purposes and have now lapsed back into […] bush" (*No Telephone* 1; italics in original). The same achronological state is emphasized a little later by the third person narrative voice, when describing Clare's grandmother's farm: "The forest had obliterated the family graves, so that the grandmother and her husband, and their son who died before them, were wrapped by wild vines" (*No Telephone* 8). In this setting, dates and linear chronologies disappear, situating this assemblage within Halberstam's definition of queer times and spaces; the bourgeois/capitalist definition of it does not apply to them. Neither does the definition of space: they have chosen to occupy this space away from capitalist/neocolonial society, one that no one can claim, because no one knows, not even their own family members: "Some of them think we are living off the streets of Kingston. Some of them think we have made a better life in America. They might hate us if they knew" (*No Telephone* 10).

For Clare, in particular, the guerrilla community and their project become a queer counterspace, an instance of countersociality where she finally finds a sense of belonging, not only to a community, but also to Jamaica and her roots. The guerrilla constitutes a real effort to build an eccentric community, an egalitarian society that fights against the sweeping influence of American (Usonian) culture in 1970s Jamaica, that continues the misreading and obliteration of Jamaican history, as exemplified by the wrong reading and telling of the story and figure of Nanny, the maroon warrior:

> Two figures stood out in the customed group. One, a woman, the actress called in whenever someone was needed to play a Black heroine, whether Sojourner Truth or Bessie Smith, this woman wore a pair of leather breeches and a silk shirt—a designer's notion of the clothes Nanny wore. Dear Nanny, the Coromantee warrior, leader of the Windward Maroons, whom one book described as an old woman naked except for a necklace made from the teeth of whitemen […]. But such detail was out of the question, given these people even knew the truth. Or cared. (*No Telephone* 206)

Their fight against this cultural/economic invasion leads to Clare's death during an attack of the guerrilla on this Hollywood production. Clare dies in the attempt to destroy the neocolonial influence that was misinterpreting a history that deserves to be unburied, but not commodified in the global market. As Michelle Cliff has asserted, her death has been understood as a sad event, but also as the final reconnection with Jamaica: "soon enough she will be indistinguishable from the ground. Her bones will turn to potash, as did her ancestors' bones" (*No Telephone* 265).

In both *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, the destructive effects of colonial education and the ensuing propagation of heteronormativity as the "desired" social formation make characters such as Clare and Harry/Harriet long for alternative spaces where they can develop their identities fully without and away from the race, class, gender, and sexual identity constructions that thwart their personalities. Clare and Harry/Harriet's journey culminates in a reimagination of their identity as a dynamic process that disrupts the heteronormative constructions of time and space of the coloniality of power. Embracing Afro-Jamaican history and reconstructing connections with Jamaica's revolutionary figures are key steps for these characters to queer the ideal linear narrative of self-discovery. Their identities no longer adhere to the fixed binaries of the logic of purity. Instead, they create a fluid, relational sense of self rooted in a resistance project of communal memory, allowing them to inhabit and shape alternative temporalities and spatialities that challenge dominant narratives.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* 4th ed. Aunt Lute Books, 2012.

Buchanan, Ian. "Assemblage Theory, or The Future of an Illusion." *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2017, pp. 457–474.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, Dec 1988, pp. 519–531.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000.

Cliff, Michelle. *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise.* Persephone Press, 1980.
---. *Abeng*. Crossing Press, 1984.
---. *No Telephone to Heaven*. Plume, 1987.
---. "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character." *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International* Conference, edited by Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Calaloux, 1990, pp. 263–268.
---. "Caliban's Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot." *Frontiers* vol. 12, no. 2, 1991, pp. 36–51.

Eng, David L., Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. "Introduction. What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text*, vol. 23, no. ¾, 2005, pp. 1–17.

Freeman, Elizabeth. "Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography." *Social Text*, vol. 23, no. 3/4, 2005, pp. 57–68.
---. *Time Binds. Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke UP, 2010.

Getachew, Adom. "When Jamaica Led the Postcolonial Fight Against Exploitation." *Boston Review*, 5 Feb. 2019, www.bostonreview.net/articles/when-jamaica-led-fight-against-exploitation/.

Gutzmore, Cecil. "Casting the First Stone. Policing of Homo/Sexuality in Jamaican Popular Culture." *Interventions*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2004, pp.118–134.

Halberstam, Jack [published as Judith Halberstam]. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. NYU Press, 2005.

Ilmonen, Kaisa. "Healing the Traumas of History: (Trans)sexual Diasporas in Caribbean Literature." *Seeking the Self – Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*, edited by Tuomas Huttunen, Kaisa Ilmonen, Janne Korkka and Elina Valovirta, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 263–278.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2003.

Lugones, María. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions.* Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

MacDonald, Antonia. "A Tribute to Michelle Cliff." *Caribbean Sexualities.* 30 Aug. 2017, www.caribbeansexualities.org/2017/08/30/a-tribute-to-michelle-cliff.

Mathurin-Mair, Lucille. *The Rebel Woman in the West Indies During Slavery*. The Institute of Jamaica, 1975.

Provost, Kara. "Becoming Afrekete. The Trickster in the Work of Audre Lorde." *MELUS*, vol. 20, no. 4, Winter 1995, pp. 45–60.

Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 533–580.

Thompson, Allison. "Sonia Boyce and *Crop Over*." *Small Axe,* vol. 13, no. 2, 2009, pp. 148–163.

Vilouta-Vázquez, Begoña. *Maroon Girl: Digging up History in Michelle Cliff's Novels.* 2006. University of Kansas. Master's Thesis.

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

ISSN 2457-0044

www.ellids.com

Unseen Bodies: Sexuality and Subordination in Manto's "Blouse"

Samiksha | Jawaharlal Nehru University
https://ellids.com/archives/2024/12/6.2-Samiksha.pdf

Abstract | Domestic servants are shadowy yet ubiquitous presences in upper and middle-class homes in the Indian subcontinent. Separated by socio-economic divisions and hierarchies, the unavoidability of proximity between bodies from different social strata inhabiting the same domestic space often creates tensions over possibilities of cross-class intimacies. This paper, through a close reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Blouse," examines how bodies—as sites of budding sexuality—located in structures of servitude, experience and navigate the changing contours of the self and the other. The paper focuses on how conditions of invisibilisation, which characterise the servant's position, on one hand produce effects of marginalisation and exclusion, but on the other hand also engender conditions for the servant to observe, encounter, and experience the other in such an intimate manner that it often threatens to disrupt the carefully maintained relations of social difference. The paper attempts to understand how different bodies behave and engage with each other—through relations of indifference, fascination, and deprecation—while navigating the complex terrain of gender performativity and class politics in the private space of home.

Keywords | Body, Class, Gender, Adolescent Sexuality, Domestic Servant, Servitude, Socio-economic Divide, Indian Household, Saadat Hasan Manto

Bodies can be pitilessly demanding and powerfully disruptive. Playing a crucial role in the formation of selfhoods, social identities, and other processes of being and becoming, bodies are central to an individual's world-making process. This paper is an attempt to explore the significance of inter-relations between bodies that occupy a space of proximity but are divided and differentiated by vast social disparities, through a close reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Blouse." The space of the home and the status of servant are employed as two critical lenses to focus on the meanings and effects bodies—located at the intersections of class, gender, and sexuality—produce in their engagements with other people, spaces, and objects within the precincts of the middle-class domestic sphere. Using Kimberle Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality, the paper seeks to understand how bodies, occupying what Ann Mattis terms as "the contact zone of domestic service" (2), imbibe, resist, navigate, and, in the process, reconfigure structures of marginalisation and subordination.

Most of the critical attention given to Manto's work focuses on "the more virulent and shocking aspects of his writing" (Daruwalla 57), directed either toward his portrayal of the violence and brutality of partition or the stories that saw him being summoned to the court on charges of depiction of "obscenity." What has been overlooked in these critical commentaries on the literary oeuvre of one of Urdu literature's finest writers are his stories on the ordinary and the quotidian. One such story by Manto is "Blouse," which is categorised as one of the "minor stories" by Leslie Flemming on account of a lack of the "significant and powerful themes of Manto's best stories" (55). This paper, arguing on the contrary, proposes to show that Manto's depiction of the registers of everyday life is as significant, both in terms of its aesthetic and political implications, as his literary engagements with the more momentous events in history. Manto's story "Blouse" is about a young boy named Momin who works as a domestic servant in a deputy *saab*'s[1] house. Having recently entered into the adolescent stage of his life, the story revolves around the changes Momin experiences in his body and mind, regarding his sense of self and his association with others. He particularly finds his perspective towards the eldest daughter of his employer's family, Shakeela, changing. He encounters newfound pleasure in looking at her body, talking to her, and finding occasions to spend time around her. Given the social gulf between them, Momin's growing desires for Shakeela do not find a 'legitimate' outlet and get concentrated around the blouse that Shakeela is stitching, which, due to the symbolic charge it acquires, emerges as central to the characters, the narrator, and the readers of the story.

[1]*Saab* is the shortened form of the honorific term *Sahib* commonly used in South Asia to denote respect and social superiority.

Momin, stepping into adolescence, finds it difficult to make sense of the changes his body is undergoing. Unable to decipher their origin, meaning, and effects, a strong sense of uncertainty and anxiety overwhelms him. What particularly distresses him is the unpredictable nature of these changes as he is neither able to comprehend nor control his own body. Unaware of the nuances and complexities of adolescent sexuality, a sense of helplessness and confusion unsettles the life Momin has known and has been used to. The body plays a crucial role in a subject's organisation of the world around them. Michael Polanyi noted that "Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts" (147–148). Given the significant influence of body in shaping an individual's perceptions and experiences, the changes in Momin's body extend beyond its corporeal boundaries, necessitating corresponding shifts in his conception of self, engagement with his work, and his inter-personal relations. Momin tries to assuage the surging tension and strange sensations in his body through different means he could find around him. He stands barefoot to let the vibrations produced by the pounding of spices run through his body; another time he tries hanging from a hook in the wall to stretch his body, but finds little respite in these misplaced attempts. His efforts at exploring the intimate parts of his body in private also end up with him feeling ashamed and frustrated over his actions (Manto 18).

The inner turmoil that Momin goes through and the challenges it poses to his selfhood and identity need to be placed in the context of the social location he finds himself placed in. As a domestic servant in deputy *saab*'s house, Momin's work requires him to spend most of his time inside his employer's home. He helps with the household chores and runs small errands for the mistress and her two daughters—Shakeela and Razia. The only other person in the house with whom Momin has some contact is the old lady who works in the kitchen. It must be noted that the household space where Momin spends most of his time, both working and residing, is largely occupied by women. Gender, noted as one of the most visible and significant subdivisions of human society (Weisgram et al. 778), plays a defining role in the subject's understanding, experimentation, and expression of their sexual behaviour. In contrast to pubescent girls, where signs of approaching adulthood invite increased vigilance and regulations (Kågesten et al. 3), the development of adolescent sexuality in boys is largely affirmed by the patriarchal structures of the society. This initiation into manhood is accompanied by "greater freedom to move outside of the household and engage in leisure activities while also facing increased exposures to environmental risks as well as expectations to work and help support the family financially" (3). Many cultures and societies mark this stage with specific rites and rituals that work as "ceremonial markers of passage from one social stage to another, serving functionally to ease the transition" (Norbeck et al. 478). James L. Brain observes that "initiation rites cannot be considered in isolation, but must be viewed as part of a general human concern with categorization, with order and disorder" (192). One of the major functions that initiation ceremonies—such as *bar mitzvah* in Judaism, *metatah* ceremony in Hindu Balinese community, and *bismillah* ceremonies observed in South Asian Muslim communities[2]—perform is to mitigate the

[2]*Bar mitzvah* is a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony performed when a boy turns thirteen, marked by a special synagogue service where the adolescent assumes his religious responsibilities; *Metatah* is a tooth-filling ceremony performed for Hindu Balinese to mark a young person's transition towards adulthood;

uncertainty, confusion, and instability that characterise the liminal nature of any transition stage.

The practices and rituals that mark this transition into adulthood also become an essential means through which young men are equipped with the knowledge about social roles and cultural values concerning gender and sexuality that come with their changed status and identity (Smith 4), and provide the "help to establish a sense of social-emotional anchorage for the growing individual" (Cohen 5). Such processes of socialisation, often performed by an exclusively male social circle which may include parents, siblings, cousins, and friends, mostly belonging to the same gender cohort (Ferreira 217), are also crucial for providing the adolescent male subject with a sense of belonging to their immediate community in light of the new developments and relationships that now characterise their place in it. This social space, crucial in situating and channelling the newly emerging desires, changes, and apprehensions of young men in established socio-cultural structures, plays a critical role in the development of the male sexual self. Momin, on account of the nature and requirements of his role as a domestic servant in a female-dominated household, lacks this circle of male companionship where he could open up about his predicament and seek answers to his misgivings. The images and longings that crop up in Momin's mind are also heavily influenced by the domestic environment in which he is placed. His misplaced projections of his bodily desires on the household setting around him are reflected in the strange urges he experiences such as a yearning for his body to be grounded like spices in a cauldron, for plates arranged on the table to start flying, and for the lid of the kettle to shoot up in the sky (Manto 20).

Most of Momin's interactions with others in the house revolve around performing domestic chores. Any other conversations between Momin and his employer's family members are not very frequent; defined and delimited by the class disparities and hierarchies between them. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum in their seminal work *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India* note that domestic service in Indian middle-class homes is premised upon a culture of servitude which they define as:

> one in which social relations of domination/subordination, dependency, and inequality are normalized and permeate both the domestic and public spheres […] these social relations are legitimized ideologically such that domination, dependency, and inequality are not only tolerated but accepted; and […] are reproduced through everyday social interaction and practice. (3–4)

The narrator of the story notes that one of the reasons why nobody in the household noticed the changes Momin undergoes is because of his social status: "Who could pay that much attention to the lives of servants? They covered all life's stages on foot, from infancy to old age, and those around them never knew anything of it" (Manto 20). Attempts at invisibilisation of the servant subject by ensuring that they remain unobtrusive and peripheral presences are essential to what Ray and Qayum have noted as the process of naturalisation of the relations of inequality and domination, reaffirmed and reproduced through everyday household practices in Indian middle-class homes.

Bismillah ceremony is observed in some Muslim communities of the Indian subcontinent to mark the beginning of a child's initiation into education.

Momin, though he had been recently employed, was hardworking and, hence, was liked by everyone in the house. With the growing restlessness and anxiety that had taken hold of him, Momin found it difficult to work as efficiently as before but the narrator observes that "despite his listlessness, he hadn't become lazy, which was why no one in the house was aware of his inner turmoil" (Manto 19). It is interesting to note that Momin's presence in the household is visible and valued only in terms of his role and function as a servant. It is only when some disruption is caused in the normal functioning of the household that other aspects of a servant's life become apparent to the employers, suggesting that the middle-class's conception of the servant's identity and selfhood remain restricted to the concerns of domestic employment. Since Momin does not let his feelings of unrest and distress affect his tasks and duties, the other members of the household remain wilfully oblivious to the newly emerging aspects and concerns of his personal life.

Historically, in the Indian subcontinent, gender has been the defining axis in the segregation of social spaces (Chatterjee 239). The public sphere has been seen as the domain to be dominated by men, inclined towards and engaged in concerns of commerce, politics, technology, etc., whereas women have been positioned as "naturally" belonging to the private space of home to look after households and families. Momin's position as a male domestic servant needs to be looked at in the light of this larger discourse on gender based division and categorisation of people, spaces, and work. The consolidation of an individual's identity based on gender and sexuality is significantly shaped by the nature of work they find themselves involved in (Hai 2). Occupying the inner realms of home for long periods of time, whether it be for work or leisure, has been traditionally considered to have emasculating effects on men. The traditional constructions of masculinity primarily locate the male identity in relation to spaces of waged employment that are clearly segregated from the domestic sphere (Smith and Winchester 328). Linda McDowell's observation that "the very definition of hegemonic masculinity in industrial capitalist societies is bound up with labour market participation" (17) foregrounds the importance of the workplace in the constitution of distinct gender roles and relations.

Men working as domestic servants, particularly under the supervision of women, is seen as an extremely degrading situation for the former as not only do they have to perform household chores—work seen as suited to a gender beneath theirs—but in doing so they have to follow instructions and take orders from a woman, amounting to a scenario of double humiliation. This is one of the main reasons why male domestic servants have historically been seen as effeminate men. Ray and Qayum observe that the narratives of the male servants they interviewed for their study were heavy with a "bitterness about their compromised masculinity" (23). Given that a deep sense of subservience underlies the position of a domestic servant, the male servant often struggles to adjust to the demands of their work (designated as feminine and unproductive) with the traditional ideals of masculinity (136). Shakeela and Razia's behaviour towards Momin is not only shaped by the class difference between them but also in terms of his position as a male who resides and works for the female occupants in the domestic sphere. In addition to the callousness and ridicule evident in the sisters' interactions with Momin (Manto 25), it is particularly the intimate and indiscreet manner in which Shakeela presents and displays her body in Momin's attendance (23) that indicates that the latter

is not seen in terms of the threat and potency that would be associated with hegemonic masculinity in a similar scenario.

Struggling with navigating the changes that accompany the onset of puberty, Momin finds his attitude towards Shakeela changing. Shakeela, preoccupied with stitching a perfectly fitting blouse for herself, frequently calls on Momin to carry out small errands. In this process, Momin discovers his growing feelings of attraction and fascination for her. When Shakeela takes off her shirt to take measurements for the blouse, Momin, seeing her only in her white vest, experiences "a strange jolt" (Manto 22), although he had seen her like that on many occasions previously. It must be noted that the social hierarchy between them continues to inform Momin's changing feelings for Shakeela; for instance, on experiencing new sensations when he sees Shakeela in the vest, he immediately averts his eyes (22). In addition to Shakeela's complete absorption and involvement in the process of stitching a blouse that perfectly fits her body, the blouse also becomes an obsessive concern for Momin, as well as an important focal point for the narrator of the story. What particularly stands out in this process of stitching the blouse is Shakeela's body. Her body is foregrounded in the narrative on two fronts—one, the body as it is involved in the process of stitching the blouse, and second, the body for which the blouse is being finally prepared. Shakeela spends much effort and time making sure that the satin blouse turns out to have the same design and fit that she has in her mind. Meticulously occupied in perfecting every little detail, the narrator describes Shakeela's work as marked by "great care and composure" (21).

Shakeela's body, particularly, as it is involved in the process of making the blouse, is conspicuous in the display of calmness and control with which it carries out the stitching work: "She would turn its wheel with two or three fingers, slowly and cleanly, her wrist gently arched. Her neck would bend forward slightly, and a lock of hair, unable to find a fixed place, would slip down. She would be so absorbed with her work that she wouldn't push it away" (Manto 21). Here, Shakeela's body appears in stark contrast to Momin's restless and jittery body. Calm and self-possessed, her body parts work in remarkable harmony to stitch the blouse with absolute precision. She sends Momin over to the neighbour's house to borrow their tape measure as her own had turned old and faded. Shakeela had other blouses to check the fit but she decides to take fresh measurements to avoid any lapses (21). Shakeela's consuming concern over getting the exact measurements and designing the right style suggests a body that can be accurately measured, demarcated, and is deserving of the finest of fits. In contrast to Shakeela's body that is calm, self possessed, and well attended to, stands Momin's restless, disoriented, and isolated body, who helplessly struggles to understand and contain the unexpected changes happening to it. The difference in these bodies needs to be understood in terms of the different social identities they carry. A working-class individual like Momin cannot afford the privilege of time, effort, and investment spent in acquiring ease and knowledge, both intimate and social, about his body. The only possibility available to bodies located on the margins like Momin's is to admire and assist bodies like Shakeela's placed at the center by virtue of their social location. Shakeela's indifference and insensitivity towards a subordinate body is both a consequence and reaffirmation of this social difference that demarcates both the bodies.

The lack of agency that Momin feels on account of the unforeseen changes his body undergoes as it transitions into adulthood is further augmented by the deep social subordination that characterises a servant's place in a middle-class domestic space. The nature of domestic servitude in the Indian subcontinent is such that it severely curtails the agency of the servant who has to every day engage with the expectations and practices based on "servility, self-abasement, ingratiation, subordination, [and] indignity" (Hai 6). The uncertainty and anxiety that accompany adolescence tend to further intensify Momin's already precarious condition in terms of the little control he has over himself and his surroundings. The servant placed as an outsider-insider in the employer's house occupies a liminal position. As a class other, the servant never fully belongs, but as one familiar and proximate with the household space and its inhabitants, is also never a complete outsider. In Momin's case, the complexities that he faces in navigating this position of in-betweenness in deputy *saab*'s household are further complicated by another liminal stage he all of sudden finds himself in—the transition stage between childhood and adulthood. The image of Momin standing at the doorway while Razia is taking measurements for Shakeela, "waiting out the uncomfortable silence" (Manto 22), perfectly captures the uneasiness and anguish of a self placed on the threshold, both literally and metaphorically, negotiating with the complex demands of body, sexuality, and structures of social hierarchies.

The act of the stitching of the blouse is described in great detail in the story. Shakeela first makes the paper cut-outs of the blouse sample, then copies the design on the fabric to avoid any errors, gets another tape measure from the neighbour to prevent any lapses in measurement (Manto 21), scolds Razia for not measuring her body properly (22), patiently puts preliminary stitches to estimate the fit, and then begins the final stitching of the blouse (26). The attentive, meticulous, and immersive manner in which Shakeela carries out the stitching seems to produce an aura around the blouse which extends to the body for which it is being prepared and which will finally wear it, foregrounding and enhancing the presence and the value of that body. Momin, seeing Shakeela's fond involvement in stitching a new article of clothing for herself, opens his trunk to inspect his own newly stitched clothes for Eid. While doing this, he feels a sudden impulse to present himself in his new clothes to Shakeela. Momin considers channelising his attraction towards Shakeela by placing himself in the same economy in which she is so fondly involved—an economy where the body, decked in new clothes, becomes the center of attention and admiration. However, Momin's desire for his body—and through that, aspects of his self and identity beyond his status as a servant—to be seen and acknowledged are callously cut short by Shakeela. When Momin coyly tells her that he was thinking of asking for money from the mistress to buy a silk handkerchief as it will look good with his new Eid outfit, both Razia and Shakeela burst out laughing (Manto 25). The sisters' reaction indicates that Momin's aspiration to place himself in a similar economy of desire and adulation as them is seen as a possibility that can only evoke surprise and ridicule from their end. Still laughing, Shakeela tells Momin that she will strangle him with the same silk handkerchief that he is thinking of tying around his neck (25). It is important to note that both the sisters laugh at Momin, and not with him. Shakeela's comments, though meant as a joke, work to show Momin his place as a social subordinate, indicating the potency of asymmetries of power relations in everyday interactions between social unequals.

Given the nature of domestic work, proximity between employers and servants is often unavoidable as both occupy the same space of the middle-class home. Ann Mattis notes that the contact zone of domestic service, which is "fraught with social anxieties over interclass relations," offers "a fluid range of social possibilities brought on by the disturbing proximity of servants and their employing families" (32). Mattis argues that the contradictions and ambivalences that characterise this contact zone are crucial since "[t]hese spaces of ambivalence challenge, if only momentarily, 'dominant life narratives' that naturalize privatized intimacy and racist hegemony under capitalism" (33). Similarly, the indifference and invisibilisation that characterises Momin's position in the contact zone between him and Shakeela, also create certain conditions for him to encounter moments of intimacies that transgress the norms and practices of class division and other forms of social hierarchy. It is precisely this kind of intimacy in the domestic space that allows Shakeela to remove her shirt and take her body measurements in just a vest in the presence of Momin. She holds her breath and pushes out her breasts for Razia to measure her chest while Momin is waiting in the room to take the measuring tape back to the neighbours (Manto 22–23). Shakeela gives Momin her vest, still damp with sweat and smelling of her body odour—something that Momin finds very pleasing—to take it to the shop to ask for the price of similar vests (25). The ease with which Shakeela engages with her body—sizing it up, measuring its parts, revealing it in an intimate fashion such that Momin catches a glimpse of the tuft of black hair in her armpit (23)—in a male presence is not perceived by her as a threat or a source of anxiety; rather, she stays absolutely unperturbed by Momin's proximity to her body, engendered by his assistance in the stitching process. It is interesting to note that Shakeela does not see a marginalised subject like Momin as someone who would possess the "power of the gaze" (Stewart 186). For Shakeela, Momin's subordinate status as a servant reduces his subject position to an almost inconsequential and impotent presence, further diminished by the emasculation that is associated with a man working in the domestic sphere.

Crenshaw's introduction to the concept of intersectionality in context of the violence experienced by women of colour as shaped by the interwoven nature of their gender and racial location could be extended to understand how other forms of marginalisation are a result of intersections between a subject's different identities and social relations in which they are situated. The significance of intersectionality lies in "the need for multiplex epistemologies [that] must treat social positions as relational" (Phoenix and Pattynama 187). Crenshaw's emphasis on "the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1245) allows one to see how tensions and confluence between different social, political, and economic identities and categories shape an individual's experiences. The fact that no one in Deputy *Saab*'s household considers the sisters' proximity with a non-kin male presence as disconcerting is precisely because Momin's gender identity and its effects are inextricably intertwined with his class and professional identity which works to (partially) curb the male privilege and power sanctioned and sustained by the patriarchal structures of society. The fact that Shakeela thinks little about attributing male sexual agency to a subject rooted so deeply in structures of servitude, allows Momin to observe, access, and engage with the sisters and the space they occupy in a relatively unhindered manner. His employers' nonchalance towards Momin becomes crucial in enabling him to observe and interact with bodies that are distanced from his by social hierarchies yet

brought close through certain relations of proximity that develop in the contact zone of domestic service. These intimate conditions between social unequals may open up possibilities for transgression and, consequently, reconfiguration of the relations of difference and distinction based on class, gender, and sexuality. The sustained close contact that Momin is able to have with Shakeela is what allows him to center the experience of his sexual awakening around his employer's daughter despite the social gulf between them.

Cultural context and social identities heavily modulate and differentiate the expression of sexual behaviour and practices (Drury and Bukowski 120). Due to the socio-economic inequalities that characterise the employer-servant relationship, Momin finds it difficult to express his feelings for Shakeela. His repressed desires, given the lack of reciprocity from Shakeela and strict social inhibitions, get transferred to the satin blouse that she is stitching for herself. Momin finds himself drawn to the brightness and smoothness of the violet satin cloth from which the blouse is being made, feeling an urge "not just to touch, but to caress its soft, silky surface with his rough fingers" (Manto 27). Having saved some scraps of the satin cloth while cleaning the room, Momin pulls out its threads. While rubbing and pressing these soft strings in his hands, he wonders if Shakeela's armpit hair would also be so soft (27). Momin, feeling confused and anxious over his newly emerging desires for Shakeela, finds some gratification in observing and touching the blouse which is designed to fit her body so perfectly that it almost becomes an extension of Shakeela's body itself. When she finally puts on the stitched blouse to see herself in the mirror, Momin feels as if the blouse has come alive. His eyes gaze on "the long curve and full depth of her spine" visible due to the close fitting of the blouse (27). He exclaims over her excellent craftmanship, but Shakeela hardly pays any attention to him and rushes out of the room to get Razia's opinion. The image of Momin "left gazing at the mirror, in which the blouse's dark and bright reflection lingered for a while" (28) captures the poignancy of the fleeting contact that Momin can have with someone like Shakeela since the social distance between them prevents this proximity from turning into intimacy.

Bodies can be obliging, discomforting, curious, unpredictable, agreeable, and rebellious. Momin's body in the story emerges as an important site that fosters rethinking about a (embodied) self located at the margins of the middle-class domestic economy. By engendering changes and disruption, the body presses the subject to reconsider and reconceptualise his own identity and inter-personal relationships. Reined and restricted by social hierarchies and structures of servitude, the demands and desires of Momin's adolescent body struggle to find other ways of expression and fulfillment. It is not only Momin's efforts at understanding the changes happening to him that influence his experience of sexual awakening, but equally important are the conditions of invisibilisation and subordination that the servant subject is situated in and navigates through in his everyday life at a middle-class urban domesticity. These play a crucial role in shaping the meanings and effects that working-class sexuality embodies in relations of cross-class proximity. Momin's simultaneous experiences, as an embodied subject, of both servitude and adolescence, are shaped by the contradictory co-existence of distance and proximities, differences and intimacies, conformity and resistance/subversion that constitute the relations of asymmetrical dependencies between employers and servants. Momin's body, in its engagement with the subject himself and through its interactions

with other bodies, engenders critical conditions where corporeality, intersecting with the social forces of class, gender, and sexuality, acquires new significance, exhorting us to rethink about the complexities of bodies located at the margins.

Works Cited

Brain, James L., et al. "Sex, Incest, and Death: Initiation Rites Reconsidered [and Comments and Reply]." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1977, pp. 191–208.

Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*, Columbia UP, 2010.

Cohen, Yehudi A. "The establishment of identity in a social nexus: The special case of initiation ceremonies and their relation to value and legal systems." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 66, no. 3, 1964, pp. 529–552.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Daruwalla. Keki N. "The Craft of Manto: Warts and All." *Life and Works of Saadat Hasan Manto*, edited by Alok Bhalla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997.

Drury, Kate Mills, and William M. Bukowski. "Sexual Development." *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexuality: Developmental and Forensic Psychology*, edited by Daniel Bromberg and William O'Donohue, Academic Press, 2013, pp. 115–144.

Ferreira, Manuela, et. al. "Family Culture and Adolescent Sexuality." *Aten Primaria*, vol. 45, 2013, pp. 216–222, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0212-6567(13)70025-8.

Flemming, Leslie A., editor. *Another Lonely Voice: The Life and Works of Saadat Hassan Manto*. Vanguard Books, 1985.

Hai, Ambreen. *Postcolonial Servitude: Domestic Servants in Global South Asian English Literature*. Oxford UP, 2024.

Kågesten, Anna, et al. "Understanding Factors That Shape Gender Attitudes in Early Adolescence Globally: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 11, no. 6, June 2016, pp. 1–36, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0157805.

Manto, Saadat Hasan. "Blouse." *Manto: Selected Stories*, translated by Aatish Taseer, Random House, 2008.

Mattis, Ann. *Dirty Work: Domestic Service in Progressive-Era Women's Fiction*. U of Michigan P, 2019.

McDowell, Linda. "The Men and the Boys: Bankers, Burger Makers and Barmen." *Spaces of Masculinities*, edited by Bettina van Hoven and Kathrin Hörschelmann, Routledge, 2005.

Norbeck, Edward, et al. "The Interpretation of Data: Puberty Rites." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1962, pp. 463–485.

Phoenix, Ann, and Pamela Pattynama. "Intersectionality." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, pp. 187–192, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065751.

Polanyi, Michael. *Knowing and Being.* Edited by M. Grene, U of Chicago P, 1969.

Ray, Raka, and Seemin Qayum. *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*. Stanford UP, 2009.

Smith, Glendon D., and Hilary P. M. Winchester. "Negotiating Space: Alternative Masculinities at the Work/Home Boundary." *Australian Geographer*, vol. 29, no. 3, Nov. 1998, pp. 327–339.

Smith, Michael. *Initiating Adolescent Males into Manhood: A Retreat Experience for Fathers and Sons.* Jan. 1993. Loyola University Chicago, Master's Thesis. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/4048.

Stewart, Susan Louise. "In the Ellison Tradition: In/Visible Bodies of Adolescent and YA Fiction." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 40, no. 3, Sept. 2009, pp. 180–196, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-008-9077-5.

Weisgram, Erica S., et. al. "Gender, values, and occupational interests among children, adolescents, and adults." *Child Development*, vol. 81, no. 3, May 2010, pp. 778–796.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

ISSN 2457-0044

www.ellids.com

In response to James S. Baumlin's "'The Shakespearean Moment' in American Popular/Political Culture: Editorializing in an Age of Trump"[1]

The "Truly Shakespearean" Trump: Reading Fascism in *Project 2025*

George H. Jensen | University of Arkansas at Little Rock
https://ellids.com/archives/2024/09/6.2-Response-Jensen.pdf

As they struggle to report on our abnormal times, American news reporters and television newscasters have regularly invoked the name of Shakespeare, declaring this or that MAGA-Trumpian act "almost Shakespearean," "Shakespearean," or "truly Shakespearean." In "'The Shakespearean Moment' in American Popular/Political Culture," James S. Baumlin explores the underlying rhetoric. As Baumlin writes, there's something "vague yet somehow apt" in the term:

> When, for example, some public figure does something monumentally stupid or mean and that act then redounds upon the person's own head: Is that what the TV host intend[s] by the term, "Shakespearean"? When some politician leads a crowd chanting "Lock her up!" and then gets locked up himself, can we call that "Shakespearean"? Surely there's some "cosmic irony" in such a moment […]. There's something incredulous, as well. We find it hard to believe that anyone could be so stupid or so mean as to do or to say … that. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it": Words to that effect invite us to call a moment "Shakespearean." So I assume. But there's something more lurking in this usage. (2.29)

The "something more," as Baumlin describes it, focuses less on actions of the age's political "players" and more on the cultural/political role of their citizen-audiences. As Baumlin notes, "the term 'Shakespearean' serves to identify or, more saliently, 'to make visible' our own historical moment, when we become aware of ourselves as witness/audience *within* that moment" (2.32).

This makes sense, but there's more still lurking in this deployment. A comment like "that's truly Shakespearean" can be a shorthand for understanding a complex

[1]Baumlin, James S. "'The Shakespearean Moment' in American Popular/ Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump." *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies,* vol. 6, no. 1, 23 Jul. 2024, pp. 2.28–2.43, https://ellids.com/archives/2024/07/6.1-Baumlin.pdf.

political or social event, like the MAGA movement, which allows us to establish common ground, a starting point to an extended discussion. But it can also be a substitute, a tag line, that allows us to think we understand something we don't want to think about. It can end discussion.

Baumlin's article reminds me of a story my dissertation advisor told me. At the time, around 1975, he was a well-established scholar in his late forties, a grown man, and I was twenty-five, trying to figure out how to be an adult and an academic. He told me that, when things were going badly in the Department of English, five or six of the faculty met in someone's basement to discuss a plot to overthrow the department head. I don't remember the details, but the plot failed and made a bad situation worse. As he told the story, I remember thinking: Two of the professors in the room taught courses in Shakespeare. Everyone else had read Shakespeare. Everyone was smart. Still, they all seemed incapable of predicting that their silly little plot would not end well. They couldn't see that they were doing their own community theater version of *Julius Caesar.*

We all believe that we can learn from literature. Even Ron DeSantis, arch-conservative governor of Florida, believes this, and that is precisely why he is banning books.[2] It would be wonderful if we consistently learned from books, but we don't. Not even smart professors of literature. Not even professors of history. Not even graduates from Ivy League institutions, like Donald J. Trump and J.D. Vance.[3] Uwe Wittstock's *February 1933: The Winter of Literature* (2023) chronicles the failure of German writers and intellectuals to derail the rise of Nazism. Some didn't see it coming. Some understood what was happening but were ineffective in resisting it.

Maybe this is because we don't read the texts of contemporary political culture in the right way. Shakespeare, as arguably the world's most esteemed writer, is going to be misread—and misquoted—more often than not. One of my favorite scenes in Joyce's *Ulysses* is when Mr. Deasy, Stephen Dedalus's dull-witted schoolmaster, is lecturing him about why the poet is always broke:

> —Because you don't save, Mr. Deasy said, pointing his finger. You don't know yet what money is. Money is power, when you have lived as long as I have. I know, I know. If youth but knew. But what does Shakespeare say? *Put but money in thy purse.*
> —Iago. Stephen muttered. (30)

Unlike Mr. Deasy, Stephen notes the irony in taking advice from a malicious, murderous man. We say "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" without remembering that

[2]According to the National Free Speech Movement, there were 3,362 instances of book bannings during the 2022–23 school year, an increase of 33 percent. See, Soule, Douglas. "Florida Is the Nation's Book Banning Leader." *Tallahassee Democrat*, 21 Sep. 2023, www.tallahassee.com/story/news/politics/2023/09/21/ron-desantis-florida-is-no-1-in-book-banning-free-speech-group-says/70900798007/. Among the books banned in Florida, the most related to LGBTQ issues (26 percent) and race issues (30 percent). See, Granieri, Susanna. "Three Laws Signed by DeSantis at the Center of Florida's Surge in Book Bans." *First Amendment Watch*, 2 Jun. 2023, https://firstamendmentwatch.org/three-laws-signed-by-desantis-at-the-center-of-floridas-surge-in-book-bans/.

[3]Trump was awarded a BS in Economics from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, in 1968. Vance was awarded a JD from Yale University School of Law in 2013.

Romeo and Juliet died because they had different family names.[4] We say "Give every man thy ear; but few thy voice" and forget that Polonius, who utters this phrase, is one of the worse political advisors in all of Shakespeare.[5] Unlike most of us, Stephen Dedalus understands a Shakespearean quote within the context of an entire play—within its own complex world, rife with ironies.

As I read Baumlin's essay, I am also reminded of an exchange between German-American political philosopher, Hannah Arendt and German-Swiss psychiatrist, Karl Jaspers, shortly after World War II, when they were on opposite sides of the Atlantic. They were both struggling with how to understand Nazi Germany, how to assign blame for the Holocaust, and how to prevent history from repeating itself. Jaspers had sent a copy of *The Question of German Guilt* to Arendt.[6] On August 17, 1946, Arendt wrote to Jaspers: "We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue" (Kohler and Saner 54). On October 19, Jaspers responded:

> You say what the Nazis did cannot be comprehended as "crime"—I'm not altogether comfortable with your view; because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of "greatness"—of satanic greatness—which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the "demonic" element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of myth and legend with horror, and everything unspecific is just such a hint […]. The way you do express it, you've almost taken the path of poetry. And a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material—his instinctive aesthetic sense would lead to a falsification of it—and that's why he couldn't attempt it. (62)

Jaspers offers a stark warning: We can never understand massive cultural trauma, like the Holocaust, through any "myth," "legend," or "path of poetry." Any attempt at aestheticizing Nazism effectively erases its horror. Or, rather, any attempt at representing that horror in its fullness would necessarily turn audiences into witnesses—some as collaborators, some as survivors—who must turn away from the guilt-ridden spectacle, disgusted and ashamed.

Arendt continued to think about Jaspers's response. In 1961, when writing about the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Arendt would herself use the phrase, "the banality of evil" to describe the role of the bureaucratic Eichmann as "mastermind" of the Holocaust. She was widely criticized for using the phrase, perhaps by people who wanted more of a narrative, a "hint of myth and legend." Is the Holocaust, Jaspers and Arendt might ask, beyond human understanding, beyond narrative, beyond even the genius of Shakespeare?

In our own times, could *Project 2025*—a Heritage Foundation plan to bureaucratize Christian nationalism by replacing politically-neutral federal employees

[4]*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2.
[5]*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 3.
[6]Published in German as *Die Schuldfrage* (Schneider, 1946). Published in English as *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Dial Press, 1947).

with Trump loyalists—be read "in a Shakespearean manner"?[7] Can we read it in ways that disclose its underlying fascist narrative? Or does such a text, in all its banality, resist ironizing?

In *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning* (2020), Dan P. McAdams, who studies narrative identity, writes that Trump is incapable of telling a story about himself, something that most children can do by age five or six. He is, as McAdams terms it, an "episodic man":

> He moves through life, episode by episode, from one battle to the next, striving, in turn, to win each battle he fights. The episodes do not add up. They do not build to form a narrative arc. There is no life story, at least not the kind of coherent and integrative narrative identity that psychologists like me expect a life to convey. (20)

Could even Shakespeare write a tragedy about a man who is living an incoherent, non-narrative life without distorting the reality of it? What *mythos* can capture the full danger of such a man?

I desperately want to believe that literature, philosophy, and history can help us to form a stronger and more equitable democracy. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Walt Whitman wrote that America did not yet have a democracy. To become a true democracy, we need to develop individuals who could fully participate in democracy, including women (455–501). He felt that the right kind of literature would help develop the democratic self. We have no shortage of writers who are currently focused on trying to save our democracy—even a weak form of it. We certainly need to understand the existential threat of our times, and we need to know how to act to preserve democratic institutions and values.

What we are not doing, as writers, is reflecting on how we are writing about this moment in history. We know how to convince readers who already agree with us. I am more interested in having an impact on hardcore MAGAs who construct an entire world, which is only fully realized within the mob of a Trump rally, to protect their view of Trump. Is there a form of art or rhetoric that can produce even a bit of irony or doubt or caution in hardcore MAGAs?

[7]The Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* has four pillars: (1) "Mandate for Leadership," which is "a vision of conservative success at each federal agency during the next administration," a document of over 900 pages, (2) a "Conservative Linkedin," an online database of vetted conservatives who might serve as political appointees, (3) the "Presidential Administrative Academy," a series of videos designed to train political appointees, and (4) a playbook or "implementation plan." See, "Project 2025." *The Heritage Foundation*, 31 Jan. 2023, www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/project-2025. For a critique of *Project 2025*, see, "Project 2025, Explained," *American Civil Liberties Union*, www.aclu.org/project-2025-explained.

Works Cited

Baumlin, James S. ""The Shakespearean Moment" in American Popular/ Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump." *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 23 Jul. 2024, pp. 2.28–2.43, https://ellids.com/archives/2024/07/6.1-Baumlin.pdf.

Joyce, James. *Ulysses.* 1922. Cambridge Centenary Ed., edited by Catherine Flynn, Cambridge UP, 2022.

Kohler, Lotte and Hans Saner, editors. *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence: 1926-1969.* Translated by Robert and Rita Kimger. Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1985.

McAdams, Dan P. *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning*. Oxford UP, 2020.

Walt Whitman. "Democratic Vistas." 1871. *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, edited by James E. Miller, Jr. Houghton Mifflin, 1959, pp. 455–501.

Wittstock, Uwe. *February 1933: The Winter of Literature.* Polity, 2023.

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (LLIDS)

ISSN 2457-0044

www.ellids.com

In response to George H. Jensen's "The 'Truly Shakespearean' Trump: Reading Fascism in *Project 2025*"[1]

James S. Baumlin | Missouri State University
https://ellids.com/archives/2024/10/6.2-Response-Baumlin.pdf

I appreciate Dr. Jensen's exploration of the ways that we seek to interpret and respond to (in effect, "to read") our times through the patterns of narrative (call them *mythoi*) expressed in literature. In *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), Kenneth Burke interpreted his own historic moment—one marked by the rise of Hitlerian fascism—through contrasting lenses of comedy and tragedy. As Burke writes, "the progress of human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*" (41; emphasis in original). To read American politics today through the *mythos* of comedy is to assume that its "players" have good will and are capable of correction; in which case, laughter might offer a curative to an opposing side's "mistaken" beliefs. One might mention satire here as a more militant version of comedy, wherein mockery and caricature replace laughter as antidotes to an opposing side's folly. In comedy, both sides learn to laugh together, reconciling; in satire, one side seeks to shame the other into submission. (In this respect, the satiric "correction" is cruel, *but not deadly*.) In contrast, to read politics through the *mythos* of tragedy is to see viciousness only: The crime of an opposing viewpoint demands scapegoat-punishment ranging from banishment to death. There's one further *mythos* to mention: that of epic, which celebrates the violent victory of one side over an enemy. In this fourth *mythos*, the ultimate act of heroism rests in that enemy's destruction.

In my original essay, I ascribed "the Shakespearean moment" to an ironizing awareness of the hypocrisies rifling through current political discourse. I still believe that aspects of contemporary politics *can* be read and editorialized or responded to "in Shakespearean manner." Irony (and its more militant deployments in satire) do offer a defense against folly. But Jensen is right: The mere declaration, "How Shakespearean!" "can also be a substitute" for living critical discourse, "allow[ing] us to think we

[1]Jensen, George H. "The 'Truly Shakespearean' Trump: Reading Fascism in *Project 2025*." *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 25 Sep. 2024, pp. 2.1–2.5. https://ellids.com/archives/2024/09/6.2-Response-Jensen.pdf.

Jensen's work, in turn, was written in response to my paper, "'The Shakespearean Moment' in American Popular/Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump," published in *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1.

understand something we don't want to think about." Rather, "it can end discussion" (2.2). The danger lurking in such facile editorializing is that it fails to acknowledge the nearness of tragedy. The personal foibles of the likes of Trump are easy to mock, but the potential consequences of their fascism cannot raise laughter.

Shall we learn the lessons of history as taught by Burke, Arendt, and Jaspers, wherein the rise of European fascism led to the incommensurable mass suffering of the Holocaust? Indeed, the ideology currently promoted under the guise of *Project 2025* is no laughing matter. It is impermeable to ironizing, because its world-vision is totalizing, totalitarian, and—in all its bureaucratic banality—profoundly one-sidedly literal. In its literalism, Jensen discloses that singular aspect of the MAGA-fascist mentality which makes it immune to irony: Its ideology (that is, its underlying narrative or *mythos*) sees only evil in its political opponents—and it's an evil that must be eradicated at all costs. There is, in fact, a mythologizing narrative underlying the MAGA movement as a whole, whose most radicalized adherents imagine themselves as a crusading army meant to crush secularism, progressivism, and "wokeism" (Toke; "Woke"). It's not an exaggeration to declare its *mythos* apocalyptic: Win or lose electorally, the Christian-nationalist makers of *Project 2025* aim for nothing less than an enforced ideological "cleansing" of the nation.

For example, we're told that "the next conservative President must make the institutions of American civil society hard targets for woke culture warriors" (Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project 4):

> This starts with deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity ('SOGI'), diversity, equity, and inclusion ('DEI'), gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists. (4–5)

We know what a "hard target" is. A term from modern military doctrine, it describes heavily-fortified installations—embassies, military compounds, government centers—that prove difficult to take down and destroy. The language here pretends to be defensive, aimed at protecting "American civil society" against progressive (i.e., "woke") policies. But, as the authors note, "this starts with" the cleansing of all politically progressive language, law, and policy (and, implicitly here, of the government institutions themselves, along with their career civil servants). Clearly the project's creators are preparing for battle legally, ideologically, and otherwise.

Though it was conceived in 2022, public scrutiny began the year after, with the start of presidential campaigning. The admonitory title of a web article by the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) reads as "Project 2025: A Heightened Threat of Christian Nationalism and Authoritarianism." In late 2023, when media outlets began reporting in earnest on the project, the connection between Christian nationalism and MAGA-style extremism was already clear. Published 13 November 2023, the article begins: "[T]oday [the GPAHE] released its deep-dive analysis into the '2025 Presidential Transition Project' (Project 2025), led by the far-right Heritage Foundation and supported

by more than 80 organizations, many well-known for their extreme positions and for pushing hate and Christian Nationalism" (GPAHE). It continues:

> "Our country is facing an authoritarian threat from far-right extremists and Christian Nationalists in a new, unique, and frightening way," said GPAHE co-founder Wendy Via. "Voters, political figures, and the media must be on alert that Project 2025 is an authoritarian roadmap to dismantling a thriving, inclusive democracy for all."
>
> GPAHE released its analysis roughly a year out from the 2024 elections, arguing that this plan for the "next conservative president" would, under the guise of religious freedom, impose on all Americans policies pushed by Christian Nationalists, including draconian and reactionary measures when it comes to sexual health and reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ equality, racial equity, public education, the climate, and preference an exclusionary interpretation of Christianity, stripping rights from other communities.

While readers might accuse the GPAHE of a strong progressivist bias, the same should not be said of National Public Radio (NPR) and its interview of Tim Whitaker, founder of *The New Evangelicals*. Published 14 February 2023, the NPR title reads, "More than half of Republicans support Christian nationalism, according to a new survey" conducted by the PRRI/Brookings Institute. "'We need to understand that the world of Christian nationalism largely rejects pluralism, which this study shows,' [Whitaker] said. 'Most Christian nationalists—either adherents or sympathizers—either agree or strongly agree with the notion that they should live in a country full of other Christians'" (Lopez). The web article continues:

> Whitaker said he has faith that most Americans will continue to reject these ideas when they hear them, but he's worried about the outsized influence these views have in the Republican Party.
>
> "The reality is that a lot of these folks—especially the adherents—are very militant in this belief that God has given them a mandate to rule over the nation," he said. "And so for them, I think that compromise is a sign of weakness and [the Republican Party] needs to understand what they are dealing with." According to the survey, adherents of Christian nationalism say they will go to great lengths to impose their vision of the country. Jones with PRRI said they found adherents are far more likely to agree with the statement: "true patriots might have to resort to violence to save our country."

"Now is that everyone?" asks the PRRI/Brookings spokesperson. "No," Jones adds, "but it's a sizeable minority that is not only willing to declare themselves opposed to pluralism and democracy—but are also willing to say, 'I am willing to fight and either kill or harm my fellow Americans to keep it that way'" (Lopez).

We have seen this attempt at cleansing before. Self-styled as epic, the Hitlerian-fascist myth of an Aryan Third Reich ended in unspeakable tragedy. This brings me to Jensen's further point. "Is the Holocaust," he asks, "beyond human understanding" (2.3)? As Arendt writes to Jaspers, "We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue." In Jaspers' response, the Holocaust defies representation, literary or otherwise:

"a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material" (qtd. in Jensen 2.3).

Elsewhere, I've argued that Shakespearean tragedy gives us a harbinger of the Holocaust. It's in *King Lear*, though I admit that even this most terrifying of plays falls short in its representations of terror. But it has something to teach us, still. The slaughter of millions may lie beyond rational comprehension, but not beyond human feeling. What the character of Lear teaches us is the failure, not so much of human understanding, but rather of human language in confronting the horrors of Holocaust. In the end, Lear witnesses the defeat of the French army and death of his daughter, Cordelia: "Howl, howl, howl!" are the guttural, animalistic moans that escape his throat in response. As Shakespeare teaches us, *there are no words*. The play's survivor, Edgar, speaks last, and his speech reinforces this fact:

> 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. (qtd. in Baumlin, "*King Lear*, Mandel's *Station Eleven*" 19–20)

We live in a time when scholars, teachers, and intellectuals generally must take a stand. If the new-old fascism of the 21st century has its way, our scholarship, our teaching, our freedoms as intellectuals will suffer. Though the true full horrors of Holocaust lie beyond human telling, still we can stand in silent witness to its victims while declaring our own strength of will against fascism, vowing "never again."

Works Cited

Baumlin, James S. "*King Lear*, Mandel's *Station Eleven*, and the Shakespearian Apocalypse: Meditations on Pandemic and Posthumanism." *LLIDS: Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2020, pp. 13–33. https://ellids.com/archives/2020/10/4.1-Baumlin.pdf.

---. "'The Shakespearean Moment' in American Popular/Political Culture: Editorializing in the Age of Trump." *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2024, pp. 2.28–2.43. https://ellids.com/archives/2024/07/6.1-Baumlin.pdf.

Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. 1937. 3rd edition, U of California P, 1984.

GPAHE. "Project 2025: A Heightened Threat of Christian Nationalism and Authoritarianism." *Global Project Against Hate and Extremism*, 13 Nov. 2023. https://globalextremism.org/post/project-2025-a-heightened-threat-of-christian-nationalism-and-authoritarianism/.

Jensen, George H. "The 'Truly Shakespearean' Trump: Reading Fascism in *Project 2025*." *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 25 Sep. 2024, pp. 2.1–2.5. https://ellids.com/archives/2024/09/6.2-Response-Jensen.pdf.

Lopez, Ashley. "More than half of Republicans support Christian nationalism, according to a new survey." *NPR*, 14 Feb. 2023. www.npr.org/2023/02/14/1156642544/more-than-half-of-republicans-support-christian-nationalism-according-to-a-new-s.

Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project. *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, edited by Paul Dans and Steven Groves, The Heritage Foundation, 2023. https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

Toke, Naia. "Wokeism: What Does It Mean, Why Is It Important, And Why We Need To Support It." *Diversity for Social Impact*, 23 May 2023. https://diversity.social/wokeism-woke-culture/.

"Woke." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 22 Sep. 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

www.ellids.com
editors@ellids.com