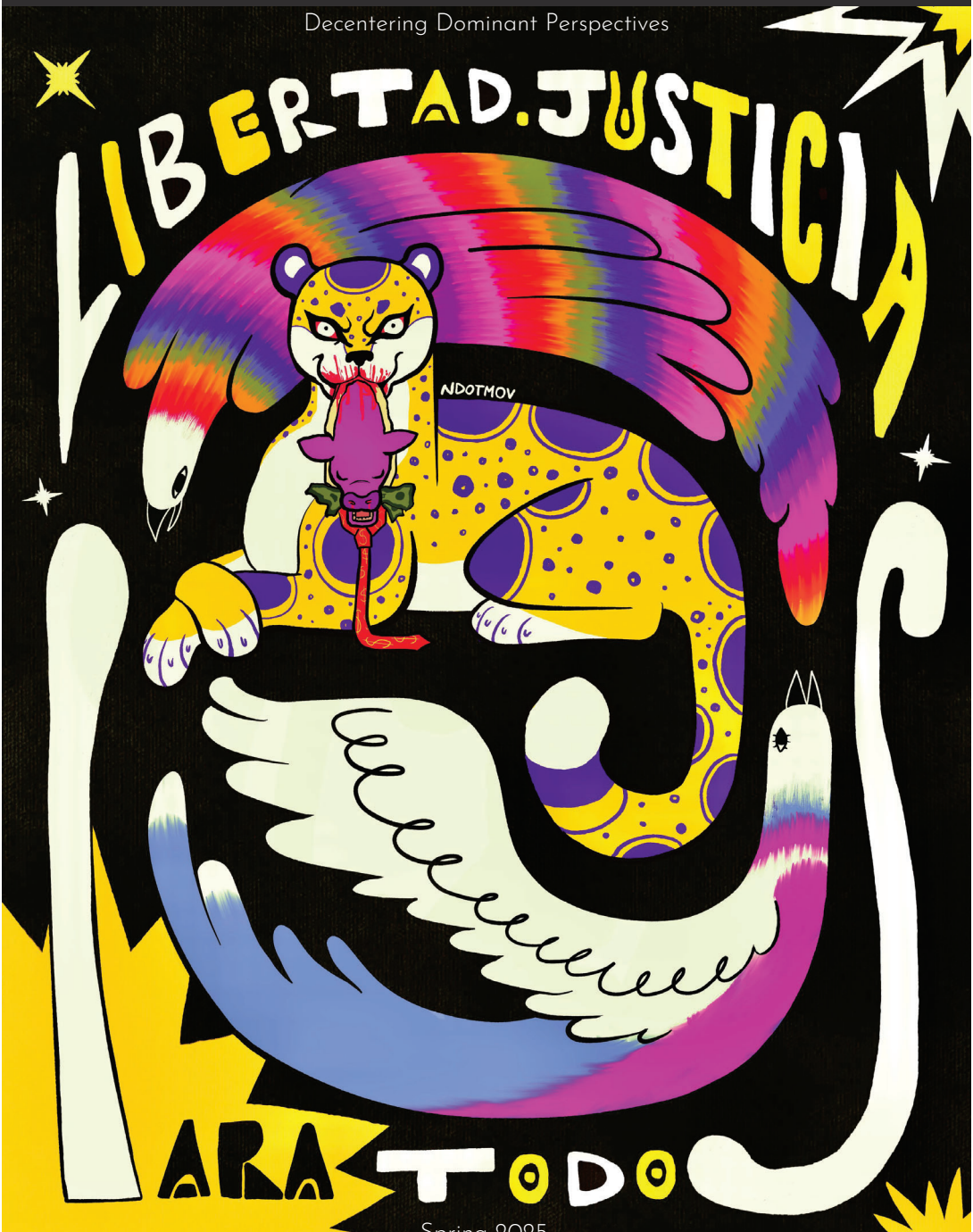
HUMANITIES REVIEW

Decentering Dominant Perspectives



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ST JOHN'S UNIVERSITY HUMANITIES REVIEW
"Decentering Dominant Perspectives"
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Table of contents

Table of contents

EDITOR'S PREFACE
by Seán Griffin

As I write this, highly civilized men are taking away the rights and lives of those who don't conform to white supremacist standards. I say highly civilized as these standards were the ones the 'civilized' world spread with illness and Christian 'values'. I am inundated each day where the sluice rush of policies are described as 'flooding' the speed of which is described as 'muzzle velocity'. Questioning my sanity in the mirror is followed by affirmations.

So what do we do? We find ways to communicate our rage and love. We protest, call our representatives, and boycott, and we donate to mutual funds, check-in on vulnerable neighbors, and aggressively care about our community. For those of us prone to writing and creating. We create. We channel our shared humanity into our art, both forcing our audience to experience our unique perspective, while humanizing ourselves—given that patriots keep trying to wrest the label of 'human' from us.

This theme of decentering dominant perspectives came from the idea that, no matter who won the election, we would still have to fight. Whether we were fighting corporatism or fascism seemed the only options. I wanted the scholarship and art of those who are keenly impacted by the dominant perspective of our society, that of the white, straight, cisgendered, able-bodied, neurotypical, upper-class, and just generally prickish folk. With those who answered this call for papers, I was struck with great affection. Not only are the people whose work appears in this issue lovely people, but their works are works to love.

N. Orengo Vera's cover of this issue, "SOMOS FUERTES," and her first version with explanation of process sets the tone of the issue. One of liberty and justice, while also fiercely opposing the billionaire class and corporatism. Elizabeth Kaufmann's poem "#mecore" contemplates selfhood in a society of constant fads, styles, and social media updates. Alicia Edwards "Speak" and "Hair Parade" captures both the defiance of expression and Black joy and a celebration of self, respectively. Moren Mao's essay on yaogun, Chinese rock and roll, where she performs a genre analysis, finding the genre's roots in resistance, reminds us of the power of music as a form of protest. Kiara Mapp writes about reclaiming Black creativity in digital spaces as a way of addressing injustice and erasure of Black creators. Tina Gurcharan's haunting poem "life penalty" ponders our existence within such heavy propaganda and apathy of community, while feeling like a performer in trying to be an activist on social media. She reminds us that our prison is one we've paid for ourselves. Victoria Santamorena's analysis of Isabella Bird's travels in Japan focus on that of her guide, Ito, the space he occupies, the ventriloquizing of his voice, and the way he

haunts the page with his constant presence, even when he's not being directly written about. Dana N. Livingston's ekphrastic poem responding to August Wilson's The Piano Lesson, is a sonic hammering of keys that provides two visceral moments and the contemplation of continuum. Guoshuai Zhang's ruminations on Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake brings a comparative reading of the novel and investigates the character's Asian American identity and literacy practice to decenter our colonial conception of English as a language. Our arts editor, Anjeanette Ang's work, "Living is Resistance" features a colorful airborne figure evading the grasp of many hands, a challenge to the viewer. Illustrator Gabi Lopez uses sequential art to tell the story of their experience as a queer Latine person in existing, dating, and feeling like they belong. Jenn Lebowitz Patel's essay, drawing from parts of her dissertation, expounds on liberatory harm reduction in pedagogical praxis investigates how to mitigate harmful mental health practices in the university system. Lastly, Abigail Davis gave her keen scholarship to our issue decentering us even further. Using Daniel Mason's North Woods, Davis moves our perspective away from the human and recenters us in nature.

I do none of these pieces justice with such brief talking points. It's my hope that this reads as my own resistance to my cynicism towards the world, and a celebration of this issue that you're reading. With a theme that is as challenging as decentering the dominant perspective, amazing, creative people responded with their own unique perspectives, ruminations, and analysis. I'm nourished by these works. I call them works, not only because they're artistic productions, but because each piece represents the labor of the person who created it. In creating, we grant our audience the ability to see beyond our current moment and, with the labor of reading and viewing, see the possibilities that perhaps our cynicism obscures from our perspective.

#mecore
by Elizabeth Kaufmann

I'm staring into the reflection on my phone and my soul is screaming
Who am I?
Spotify says
Mallgoth Skateboarding Punk
Surf Crush Slack Key Tiki
And Serotonin Strut Pop
And I think they're right
And Pinterest is predicting I can be
Castlecore
Terra Futura
Fisherman Aesthetic
Rococo Revival
Pickle Green Color Aesthetic
Aesthetics and labels
What you're giving
Gilmore Girl fall
Following Euro-summer
Barn jackets
Or maybe leather bombers?
Bold lip?
No, lip gloss
What nail color?
Who am I?
Who are you?
You, in the screen
You look just like me
Or do I look just like you
I really love your jacket

Is it linked in your bio?
Your Amazon storefront?
Details in the description?
Just tell me where it's from
Please
Please let me be like you
Although...I actually like that you're you
It's different
It's giving...so you

Actually, please don't tell me where you got that jacket
Actually, do you like my jacket?
Is it me enough?
Because as I sit down to write this poem in my matching PJ set like all the girls on TikTok
I'm scared I sound too much like that one girl on TikTok
You know, the one with the robot voice
You know, TikTok's resident slam poet, you know her?
Most people do, I think
Most people know what I'm talking about
Do you not?

So...
I'm just trying really hard to figure out
What do
I
like?
Well...I love pointed toed flats
Those are so in
And I love turtlenecks, always so in
Braiding my hair is so in for me
My mom gave me a pair of her old jeans, so in for me
I love using my (one) Stanley cup from last year
Underconsumption core!
I love a simple tee
I love gold earrings
I've been big on sunglasses
Sunglasses...
"Groundbreaking..."
As I figure out what's in for me
I think about who I would be
Who any of us would be
Without you to show me
Are we who try to be edgy and different and fully

Me
Stuck
All the way on the outskirts
Of society's hopes and dreams
For all "me" could ever possibly be

Or not
Because we bond over sharing lip colors
We bond over sharing the aesthetic
We have perfectly crafted
After spending too much
Worrying too much
If our jeans were too skinny
About the name of our hair color
Because as I worried about all this
I feel
Like I'm all the way out here

Far away from you
You tell me you love my jacket
And I said "thanks!"
And I tell you where it's from
And I remember buying it because it felt so me
And then I saw someone else wearing something similar
And it was so cool to see the same jacket all over the mall
But this jacket
This one is mine
It feels
So
Me
But am I still too far out for you?
I think I'm right where I want to be
Curating my own center
Curating my own truth
Orbiting something
Dodging comets labeled by word generator nonsense
This thing is so close
And I can only describe it
As me

SPEAK
by Alicia Edwards

CHINESE ROCK & ROLL: A GENRE ANALYSIS
by Moren Mao

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s and early 90s, China was dominated by gangtai music (港台音乐, music from Hong Kong and Taiwan). It played on the radio, at dance halls, and on the television. It focused on themes of love, family, and friendship, and it was the mainstream music genre of that time. However, as social unrest and political turmoil built up, anxious youths were in dire need of something different and more representative. So, when Western rock music exploded in popularity, young musicians latched on and were eager to develop their version of the rock sound. As China left Mao's cultural grip and entered Deng's period of reform, the Chinese people cautiously welcomed Western cultural influences. When Western music, film, and art entered China, it was as if a new variable was introduced into a closed ecosystem by force and without prior notice. This "invasion" of Western rock and roll ignited the development of Chinese rock music. Initially a creative outlet, then a tool of activism, then later commercialized in the 21st century.

Yaogun (摇滚), which literally translates to "shaking and rolling," is the Chinese phrase for rock music. The phrase "rock genre" from here on will be replaced by "yaogun." Yaogun has gone through a period of imitation, then sinification, to ultimately establishing itself as a genre on the world stage. Through the framework of genre theory, this article describes yaogun's genre evolution as contemporary Chinese musicians navigate genre restraints and face increasing censorship pressures from the Chinese state. The article will be divided into five parts, beginning with a scholarly review of genre theory; followed by yaogun's relationship with intertextuality; a discussion on authenticity and sinification; the absence of genre literacy; and finally, the instability and dynamic nature of the yaogun genre. It's essential to recognize that yaogun exceeds the typical understanding of rock and roll from a Eurocentric perspective, it is not an equivalent of the rock genre but rather stands as a distinct genre of its own.

REFLECTIONS ON SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

To fully understand why yaogun stands alone as a genre, the meaning of "genre" must be defined. Linguist John M. Swales explains that "a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community. And thereby constitutes the rationale for the genre" (58). Genre participants must also "communicate through approved channels" and adhere to a set of regulated guidelines that define the genre (Porter 38).

Therefore, it is up to the members of the discourse community to decide what valid characteristics belong in a genre. Participators share a singular communicative objective that is recognizable by the entire discourse community, and for the yaogun genre, it can be largely summarized as "the rock mythology, which promises (bodily) freedom, masculinity, rebellion, and protest" ("Authenticating Geographies and Temporalities" 231).

Intertextuality refers to the idea that all current texts are directly influenced by their predecessors and "genres do not function in isolation; they relate to other more and less powerful genres" (Bawarshi and Reiff 82). According to James E. Porter, a scholar of rhetoric, "text is intertext," the current genre cannot exist without the influence of its past iterations (35). Porter further breaks down intertextuality into two main components: iterability and presupposition. Iterability contains explicit textual references, while presupposition "refers to assumptions a text makes about its referent, its readers, and its context—to portions of the text which are read, but which are not explicitly 'there'" (35). Presuppositions are contents that a participant chooses to explicitly contribute to the discourse community that leave no room for misinterpretation.

How a participant chooses to communicate within the discourse community will reflect on their genre literacy, or how well they can match the discourse community's expectations of the participant's behavior. Professor Flore Coulouma summarized genre literacy as "the ability to identify and use genre appropriately in various contexts" (177). When we are presented with a piece of text, our genre recognition comes from understanding its formal features, while our ability to participate comes from how well we can engage with those features. However, the concept of genre literacy should only be applicable if its audience already possesses some prior knowledge of the genre's existence. In other words, a genre misunderstanding can only occur if there exists an underlying assumption about the discourse narrative.

Disregarding the rules of a genre is not a sign of misunderstanding when the genre itself is not well established. In the context of Chinese rock and roll, there were no agreed-upon conventions that participants must follow to be accepted into the community, nor was the community regulated by a concrete set of objectives. As a result, the first ones to participate in yaogun music effectively became trendsetters, establishing the appropriate presuppositions, uptakes, and nomenclature for the discourse community. Porter observed that "Genuine originality is difficult within the confines of a well-regulated system. Genius is possible, but it may be constrained." (40). This is precisely why the Chinese rock sound is so distinctive; there was no established system to confine its growth.

The idea of genre literacy is closely tied to social status. The act of correctly identifying and participating in a genre is an inherent privilege of knowledge, which effectively separates those who "understand" and those who "misunderstand." But what do we hold these standards in relation to? We presume those who "correctly" participate in the rock genre are Westerners and "the differentiated levels of access to generic norms and standards are signifiers of social status and integration" (Coulouma 177). It is irresponsible to say that Chinese musicians lack social status due to their "misunderstanding" of the genre, especially when the yaogun genre's social hierarchy and dynamic are inherently different from the West's. Such a notion of hierarchy is only applicable if genre participators come from the same cultural and social background. China's general inaccessibility of Western rock music isn't due to inferior social standings or willful ignorance but rather a purposeful implementation of censorship by the government.

INTERTEXTUALITY IN A NONLINEAR MUSIC WORLD

Dakou tapes played a significant role in developing the yaogun scene, it encapsulated "one man's trash is another man's treasure." In the 90s, Western record companies exported excess CDs and cassettes into China to be recycled. The Chinese customs will physically damage the tapes by sawing a gash or drilling a hole to prevent them from being traded. The tapes were referred to as cut-out tapes (a direct translation of

Dakou 打口). Some tapes became partially corrupted after the cut-out, but the music quality stayed the same. Gray market vendors took and sold the scrapped tapes at a relatively low price. Foreign music achieved great popularity during this time and effectively introduced Western rock to many young listeners and creators. The yaogun genre began with the trade of Dakou tapes, music critic Hao Fang estimated that thousands of CDs were sold in Beijing every day (Nirvana and Pulp).

Western music became available through a non-chronological order, thus Chinese people welcomed Western music in a nonlinear timeline. During Deng Xiaoping's era of reform, foreign media was still heavily stigmatized, the internet was not yet unavailable, and there were few ways to access Western mainstream culture due to import restrictions. Therefore, the historical and cultural significance of Western rock music was not a piece of readily available information to the public. In the beginning, there was little understanding of which band preceded which or what band influenced another. It was near impossible for the new Chinese audience to discern the relationship between genres and sub-genres, where their ancestral roots are, or how they affected each other. However, this fundamentally conflicts with our understanding of intertextuality. Musicologist J. Peter Burkholder explains that:

> Ultimately, all of these ways of using music, and all of these scholarly fields, involve looking at the relationships between a piece of music and the other music it recalls to our minds. Every musical statement – every new performance, arrangement or composition – is a variation on old music. That is the central lesson of intertextuality: we understand each new text we encounter through the texts we already know, in a multidirectional and multidimensional web of interweaving meanings. (90)

As with all genres of artistic expression, any new school must have evolved from or been influenced by an older iteration. For instance, the Rococo art style emerged from the Baroque period. The Baroque art style often involved religious themes, emphasizing drama, emotions, and contrasting lights and shadows. While the Rococo style followed by overthrowing the dramatics with graceful pastel colors signifying happiness and freedom. The significance of the former cannot exist without the latter. Porter summarized that "All texts are interdependent: We understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors" (34). Similarly, cofounder of China's first heavy metal band, Kaiser Kuo said in an interview that, "Nirvana doesn't make sense unless you understand what it was in reaction to" (Radiolab). Dakou tapes told the story of Western music history through alternating narratives, and the Chinese audience could not demonstrate a linear knowledge until further exposure to Western popular media. Consequently, yaogun musicians could not subconsciously borrow from the previous iterations of the rock genre. Instead, the non-chronological intake of Western music allowed Chinese rockers to develop a unique and daring understanding of what yaogun should sound like.

China's contemporary literary giant, Yu Hua, shares a similar sentiment in his reflection on the influx of Western literature into China, "The [Western] books we read did not include a history of literature, we were not interested in knowing these authors' age and background. We just wanted to read their works, whatever their narrative form might be. So, when we wrote, we knew it was fine to write in any narrative form" (51-52). In the 60s and 70s, Yu Hua and his fellow cohort of avant-garde writers knocked down all rules of preexisting Chinese literature, despite pushbacks. Thirty years later, yaogun musicians were ready to do the same to rock and roll.

Understanding the intertextuality of Western rock and roll will allow Chinese individuals to participate more effectively in the Western rock scene. However, had this understanding been prevalent at the introduction of Western rock music in China, then the unique formal features of yaogun would have been largely diminished. Knowledge is often determined by linearity and therefore "ancestral genres help define the potentialities of the new genre" (Miller and Shepherd 12). Conversely, lacking awareness of ancestral roots is what allowed Chinese musicians to create differentiable rock music.

DEFINING YAOGUN: THE CHINESE IDENTITY

The alternative genre before yaogun was the xibeifeng (西北风 , Northwest Wind style), featuring a sound similar to ethnic folk that incorporates certain early rock elements. Dakou tapes brought a significant change to the traditional Chinese music scene, it "provided young Chinese of the 1990s with a large selection of Western rock music censored by the authorities, and it allowed them to re-create rock communities" (Amar 13). More and more marginalized Chinese musicians began imitating the Western sound and making their own rock music. Soon, the first wave of yaogun musicians spun the umbrella term of "rock" into more nuanced subgenres, such as punk, metal, Britpop, etc.

Despite being heavily influenced by Western music, these re-created rock communities were not a complete imitation of their Western counterparts. What makes yaogun uniquely Chinese is the impact of cultural and social context on music. Through the political instability of the 80s and 90s, many musicians expressed their frustration and discontent through music. Musicians will not shy away from criticizing societal corruptions and making their dissatisfaction known, because "authenticity is, like in the West, a key element of Chinese rock culture" ("Popular Music" 611).

Cui Jian, the pioneer of yaogun music, began his career by expressing such criticisms of the Chinese government in his early albums. "Nothing to My Name" from his 1989 album Rock N' Roll on the New Long March alludes to the lack of individualism felt by Chinese youths:

I have asked you endlessly
When will you leave with me?
But you've always laughed at me
Saying there's nothing to my name
I want to give you
My freedom and my dreams
Yet you've always laughed at me

"Nothing to My Name" eventually became the unofficial anthem of the Tiananmen Square protests, solidifying the relationship between yaogun and non-violent resistance. Cui Jian and other rock musician's involvement in the 1989 protests and their politically charged songs eventually led to government crackdowns on the rock scene (Huang 5). In the decade post-Tiananmen, China experienced a "resurgence of anti-Western nationalism encouraged by the party" (Liu and Shi 25), and rock too, was considered a foreign influence. As a result, at the height of yaogun's popularity in China, rock musicians were banned from playing at large gatherings, effectively driving them back underground.

Between the political turmoil and government-sponsored censorship, yaogun emerged as a call to action within the Chinese youth subculture. Drawing similarities to the 1960s and 1970s Western rock scene, where plenty of famous musicians supported the counterculture movement and became a voice for justice. Chinese musicians, such as the Beijing punk He Yong, folk singer Li Zhi, and the Wuhan punk band SMZB have all experimented with using music to address issues of power and inequality. Genre participants voiced their personal displeasure beyond the self, to a broader audience that is equally as interested in activism as the music. Yaogun became a voice for the entire community through shared interests and intents. Rhetoric professor Carolyn R. Miller explains that "Genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent" (163). Western rock and roll's initial genre characteristics were more rhythmically focused with strong showmanship, with the likes of Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis. They shaped lifestyle and pioneered America's cultural and sexual liberation. Similarly, yaogun also share characteristics of subversion and rebellion to Western rock. However, the foundation of the yaogun genre is built on China's sociopolitical environment rather than just rhythmic harmony.

Aside from being impacted by the sociopolitical climate, yaogun is also influenced by less controversial aspects of the Chinese identity. For instance, the inclusion of traditional Chinese instruments and the "slice of life" lyrical style. In He Yong's debut album *Garbage Dump*, "Bell

Drum Towers" took a nostalgic view on the hutongs of Beijing, lamenting the bygone days of old Beijing neighborhoods. The song features a sanxian solo, a three-stringed Chinese fiddle. Similarly, Cui Jian also used traditional Chinese instruments in his songs, such as the suona, a double-reed horn, and guzheng, a type of zither. Musicians have also written lyrics reminiscent of classical Chinese literature, by using literary Chinese instead of vernacular Chinese. The black metal band Zuriaake takes inspiration from Chinese philosophical poetry and folklore. "Evil Spirit" from their 2019 EP Resentment in the Ancient Courtyard goes as follows:

A chill breeze crawls in the courtyard deep,
'Tis in the pale moonlight her shadow hides.
O withered and lone, the locust trees weep,
Through an ancient well, resentments arise.
The evil spirits dress by a window to the east,
On a bed still warm her remains cold and torn.
Behold the cravings for she longs for a feast,
In the house adjoined here cries the newborn.

Similarly, China's first metal band, Tang Dynasty, also used poetic lyrical themes and traditional imagery to glorify ancient China. As well as Zi Yue, a band that combined Western rock elements with ethnic Chinese folk music.

Through social commentary and the inclusion of traditional Chinese culture, the yaogun genre appealed to the audience's sense of Chinese identity. Yaogun musicians have successfully created a community that is authentic and accepted by its audience, where the content only makes sense when it falls within the boundaries of the genre. Porter summarized that "Success is measured by the writer's ability to know what can be presupposed and to borrow that community's traces effectively to create a text that contributes to the maintenance or, possibly, the definition of the community" (43). In this case, the yaogun community is defined by two factors: post-sinification, the audience's knowledge of traditional Chinese culture and the shared disappointment in China's socio-political environment are both presupposed by musicians, and new musical features borrowed from Western influences. As a result, it is impossible to replicate the yaogun style without an in-depth understanding of yaogun's cultural significance, thus distinguishing it in the world arena.

DEFINING YAOGUN: A GENRE REMIX

In the early days of Dakou tapes, there lacked a general knowledge of what is considered good Western music. Noise musician Li Jianhong noted that sellers of Dakou goods were often concerned that they might sell valuable records for too little because they didn't have much information about these records to begin with, especially the more obscure ones (Newby). The sudden availability of Western music gave consumers no additional background context aside from the music and the cover designs. Li continued, "The most effective way to find a cassette (the first dakou were mainly cassettes) that fitted my taste was to remember the logo of record labels." Interestingly enough, most rocker's earliest influences were metal, because among the vast selection of tapes, metal logos and fonts were the easiest to recognize (Campbell 100). There was also a language barrier, often the experience of listening to music was purely based on the non-lyrical aspects. It gave the audience a wider selection of music that might appeal to them when the lyrical element is disregarded.

Dakou tapes came from Western record company's excess inventory, so the more popular a musician is, the rarer and more expensive their tapes will be. This phenomenon encouraged the Chinese youths to listen to more obscure bands—whose tapes were more affordable—in different subgenres and cultivated a diverse music taste. Wang Yue of Hang on the Box, China's first all-women punk band said, "If there were no scrapped CDs in those years, our music tastes and horizons would be very low. If you don't have enough knowledge of music, how can you compose?" (Nirvana and Pulp). At the same time, the act of searching and sharing new music via Dakou tapes built solidarity amongst marginalized Chinese youths, providing them with a sense of belonging that was previously absent (Campbell 47).

Following the Dakou era, yaogun chimeras of multiple genres were also born. Disregarding the rules of Western rock and roll was not a misunderstanding of the genre, because initially,

few Chinese musicians were aware of any genres at all. The frontman of Demerit, Li Yang, explained that "nobody was there to teach us: this is metal, this is punk, this is grunge, this is garage, this is emo. We were just not clear on this in the beginning" (Radiolab). For Demerit, what resulted was a curious fusion of all these genres. They are labeled as a punk band from Beijing, but diving into their music, one would discover them reminiscent of "70s American punk and 80s British metal" (Radiolab). Such instances of mixing and matching genres, while still being accepted under the label of yaogun, were happening all over China, "loud punk was tempered by traditional Chinese instruments, synthesizer dance music would spin into jazz improvisation—all sometimes during the same song…For example, Zhang [Chu] combines guitar and harmonica with the traditional flute of his native Shaanxi province." (Mihaica 34-36). From a Eurocentric perspective, the early generation of rockers lacked genre literacy; the ability to understand and contextualize genre rules.

Yet, Chinese musicians were not obligated to conform to Western rock genre standards. There were no guidelines to dictate how participants must interact with the genre, nor were there rules for acceptable behavior, nor the existence of a "well-established ethos" (Porter 39) within the discourse community. As such, there was no need to worry about how their approach to the yaogun genre might be viewed by the discourse community because there was no community to begin with. Instead, the early generation of musicians and audience pioneered the yaogun genre and became trendsetters for their successors. Indifferent to the conventions of the genre, musicians were truly free to create music that was unrestrained, or as Li Yang said: "We didn't have any rules, we could just make music by mixing everything together" (Radiolab). The simultaneous influence of different subgenres fostered experimentalism, from which many avant-garde musicians were also born. Led by underground bands such as the Fly, NO, and the Tongue, who stood in stark contrast to bands such as Tang Dynasty and Black Panther, that already achieved widespread popularity in the market and celebrity status in the yaogun community. Notably, the Fly employed elements of noise music combined with sexually provocative lyrics. Capturing authenticity, grittiness, and "espousing a collective rage at [the] current social squalor" (Huang 10), which accurately reflects the lived experience of Chinese youths.

At the same time, yaogun also took a stance against what an appropriate concert experience should look like. Post Tiananmen, yaogun influence reached new heights in 1994 at "The Power of Chinese Rock" concert. The most influential yaogun musicians at that time—Dou Wei, Zhang Chu, He Yong, and the Tang Dynasty—were invited to perform at the Hong Kong Coliseum, one of the most prestigious stadium venues. During the concert, people left their seats, stood up to dance, and yelled out the lyrics. Some audience members were even escorted out by police. The mainstream media was shocked by the performer's antics on stage and the audience's reaction, this was not a concert typical of the 1990s. "The Power of Chinese Rock" became one of the most successful and well-known yaogun concerts in China, it was a step into commercialization and positioned itself in opposition to the popular gangtai music.

CONCLUSION: STABILITY, CHANGE, AND COMMERCIALIZATION

Moving into the 21st century, increased censorship oversight and streamlined commodification of the yaogun industry seem to mark the end of yaogun's golden age. It is undeniable that the yaogun scene has shifted since the late 20th century; China's sociopolitical and sociocultural landscapes are vastly different. It is challenging to compare yaogun of the last century to today, especially when its initial rise occurred synchronously with the political instability of the 80s and 90s. It is uncertain how ideological changes will impact the future of yaogun, especially with a growing trend of nationalism among Chinese youths. When asked about political messages in yaogun music, Cui Jian responded "Right now, most people of rock music just don't want to touch this…the young people think it's not cool" (CNN). Today, yaogun

musicians will consciously avoid politicizing their music, as controversy could jeopardize their livelihoods. It seems like the rockers' knowledge of when and why to interact with the yaogun genre has fundamentally shifted.

In other words, the dynamic nature of the yaogun genre will always be a by-product of Chinese culture. Cui Jian commented in a 2009 documentary, Night of an Era, that "Chinese people don't appreciate the beauty of rock. Being critical is never a kind of beauty in Chinese aesthetics." Chinese rock and roll was built on rebellious ideals and intentions to break the status quo; the genre has been intertwined with politics from its conception. However, when the urgency and ability to criticize falter, it also altered certain identifying characteristics of the yaogun genre.

In recent years, yaogun has moved mainstream with the rise of band variety shows and internet-famous bands (网红乐队). They dominate social media platforms with catchy tunes and attractive band members. Its pop-leaning elements lead to questions of whether their music can still be classified as a subgenre of yaogun. In the discussion of literature, "'genre' is very commonly used in the English-speaking world to distinguish high-brow literature from 'genre fiction,' i.e. productions of lower aesthetic and intellectual standards but successful and financially profitable" (Coulouma 178). Yaogun too, is split into two polarized factions. Where one leans into and prides itself on authenticity and the other crosses the threshold into the realm of pop, which is both commercialized and gentrified. Yet, both parties will still claim the title of "yaogun." Membership to the yaogun discourse is no longer limited to those who demonstrate their ability to fit into the stereotypical yaogun genre conventions, but also those who can profit from the rocker's image.

Content is created through our interactions with the genre, while context is shaped by our social and cultural environment. The older generation of yaogun musicians shifted attention away from understanding the genre before participating, but rather allowing their social context and music experience to shape the genre itself. Yaogun becomes a social process that binds its community together. In contrast, it seems like the new generation of Chinese youths have moved on from authentic yaogun to other music possibilities to find self-expression. When asked about the changes in the yaogun scene since 1994, Qiu Ye of the Zi Yue band responded "The excessive pursuit of commercialization has corroded a large number of young musicians. It seems that the roar of rock has been exhausted. It's no longer as bold and independent as it was then, and there is not as much creative freedom. I think the next big genre here will be hip-hop."

As yaogun enters its fourth decade, what constitutes yaogun in the 2020s has come a long way from its 20th century definition. In the late 80s, Cui Jian's success emerged from a cultural vacuum, establishing a brand-new type of performer-to-audience relationship. Then came the yaogun community's direct involvement with politics and non-violent resistance. In the early 90s, the nonlinear spread of Western music through Dakou tapes inspired a generation of musicians that embraced experimentation. Yaogun proves itself to be an inherently unstable and multifaceted genre. It changes with each generation of Chinese youth's cultural and social experience. It is evident that "genres, therefore, are always sites of contention between stability and change. They are inherently dynamic, constantly (if gradually) changing over time in response to the sociocognitive needs of individual users" (Berkenkotter and Huckin 6). Yaogun must maintain enough stability to be recognized and accepted into the discourse community but dynamic enough to accommodate modern social and commercial demands. Perhaps four decades later— "when societal and technological developments truly freed Chinese citizens from constraints that may not have been physically preventing contact with and absorption of foreign culture, but might as well have been"—yaogun will finally catch up to the Western definition of rock and roll (Campell 15).

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RENEGADE RESISTANCE: RECLAIMING BLACK CREATIVITY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL ERASURE

by Kiara Mapp

Cultural appropriation and systemic erasure of Black creators have deep historical roots, reflecting the ongoing undervaluation of Black labor and contributions. Black cultural production has been commodified by mainstream, predominantly white industries, while the original creators are often left unrecognized and uncompensated. The story of Jalaiah Harmon, a young Black creator of the viral "Renegade" dance, is emblematic of this broader pattern. Jalaiah's choreography was popularized by white influencers, whose platforms and audiences were far larger, allowing them to gain recognition while Jalaiah initially remained invisible. This pattern is not new. In the early 20th century, Black musicians like Little Richard and Sister Rosetta Tharpe pioneered the sounds of rock and roll, yet their contributions were overshadowed by white artists such as Elvis Presley, who gained fame and wealth by performing similar styles. Similarly, in contemporary digital spaces, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) phrases such as "on fleek" or "bae" gained viral popularity, often detached from the Black communities that coined them.

This simple but electrifying routine, created by Jalaiah Harmon, became a global sensation, though its origins were initially obscured in the very digital spaces that propelled its popularity. In her original video, Jalaiah seamlessly combines a series of moves that include clapping, arm swings, chest pumps, and intricate hand gestures, all performed with effortless confidence. Her choreography, set to K CAMP's track "Lottery," exudes energy and creativity, capturing the attention of anyone who watches it. Jalaiah first uploaded the dance to Funimate and later shared it on Instagram, where it slowly began to gain traction. However, it wasn't until the dance was popularized by white influencers with larger followings, that it exploded into the mainstream. Despite her initial lack of recognition, Jalaiah's ingenuity and talent sparked a cultural phenomenon, ultimately shining a spotlight on the systemic erasure of Black creators in viral internet culture. The erasure of Black creators is not merely about individual recognition but reflects a historical legacy of undervaluing Black intellectual and creative labor. Addressing these injustices requires both systemic changes and collective action to ensure that Black creators are celebrated, credited, and compensated for their contributions.

Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter serve as both spaces of opportunity and sites of exploitation for Black creators. On one hand, these platforms provide accessible tools for self-expression, visibility, and community building. Creators like Jalaiah Harmon are offered avenues to share their talent with the world,

bypassing traditional gatekeepers in industries like entertainment or media. On the other hand, these same platforms operate in structures that replicate offline power imbalances, where algorithms and audience dynamics often favor white creators, further marginalizing Black voices. The potential of social media as a democratizing force is evident in moments when creators reclaim their narratives.

These platforms are governed by algorithms designed to maximize engagement, often privileging creators who already possess large followings or whose content appeals to mainstream audiences—predominantly white audiences. Consequently, the creators who originate trends frequently find their work co-opted and commercialized without credit or compensation. These algorithms frequently amplify white creators, who may have access to greater visibility and more significant monetization opportunities, while overlooking the Black creators who created the content. This dynamic is compounded by the viral nature of trends, where the rapid spread of a dance, meme, or phrase often detaches it from its source. As a result, the original context and creators are obscured, leaving those who built the trend with little recognition or reward. In the case of the "Renegade" dance, popular TikTok influencers like Charli D'Amelio and Addison Rae incorporated Jalaiah's choreography into their videos, garnering millions of views and significant media attention. These influencers were invited to perform the dance on mainstream platforms such as The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, gaining opportunities that were never extended to Jalaiah. Instances of stolen content, harassment, and algorithmic bias are widespread, and the burden of addressing these issues frequently falls on the creators themselves.

Yet, what sets this story apart is the role of social media in reclaiming credit and amplifying Jalaiah's voice. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram became tools for advocacy, as users rallied to restore visibility to the young creator. In doing so, they demonstrated how digital spaces can be leveraged to challenge dominant narratives that historically marginalized Black voices. This paper examines how Black women use social media to disrupt traditional, white-dominant discourses and reclaim agency in an environment that often seeks to erase their contributions. Through an analysis of trends, language, and aesthetics developed by Black communities, particularly those appropriated without acknowledgment, this paper explores how these digital platforms both reflect and resist systemic inequities.

The issues at hand go beyond individual creators and encompass systemic inequities within the platforms themselves. For instance, TikTok has been accused of suppressing content from Black creators, whether by limiting its visibility or by failing to take action when content is stolen or not credited. These biases are not coincidental. They are a reflection of broader societal dynamics that prioritize white creators as the norm and relegate Black creativity. These practices not only put Black creators at a disadvantage but also perpetuate a digital environment that mirrors power imbalances offline. Despite the pervasive systemic inequities on social media platforms, Black creators and their communities have developed strategies of resistance and reclamation to challenge these prevailing narratives. Jalaiah Harmon's story serves as a turning point, illustrating how advocacy within digital spaces can reclaim credit and visibility for marginalized voices. When the origins of the "Renegade" dance came to light, Black Twitter, a cultural and activist hub within the digital landscape, played a crucial role in amplifying Jalaiah's name and work. The hashtag #RenegadeCreator began circulating, along with posts demanding recognition for Jalaiah's creativity. These collective efforts pressured mainstream media and influencers to acknowledge her contributions publicly.

The experiences of Black women in digital spaces cannot be fully understood without considering the framework of Black feminist thought. Scholars like Catherine Knight Steele emphasize the importance of examining how systemic erasure and appropriation function in tandem with the creative resistance of Black women. Steele's concept of "digital Black feminism" provides a lens through which we can analyze Jalaiah Harmon's story as more than an isolated incident, situating it within broader patterns of

marginalization and reclamation. Steele argues that digital spaces are both sites of exclusion and powerful tools for resistance. Historically, Black women have been omitted from dominant narratives of technological innovation, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that devalue their contributions. As Steele notes, "The absence of Black women in our understanding of technology is an intentional practice of erasure doing further violence to an already oft violated group. Excluding Black women from the history of technology furthers the now sedimented idea that white men are most responsible for technological innovation"(23). Jalaiah's initial exclusion from the narrative surrounding the "Renegade" dance exemplifies this. Where the labor of Black creators is rendered invisible while their innovations fuel cultural and economic capital for others.

However, digital platforms have also emerged as critical spaces for Black women to assert agency and challenge these dynamics. Through hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic and #RenegadeCreator, Black women have created networks of visibility and solidarity that amplify their voices. These acts of digital activism are deeply rooted in the traditions of Black feminist praxis, which prioritize collective action and the reclamation of agency. In the case of Jalaiah Harmon, the advocacy of Black Twitter was instrumental in restoring credit to her work. By amplifying her name and story, users disrupted the dominant narrative that had erased her contributions. This collective effort reflects what Steele describes as "Black vernacular technological creativity" (61) where Black communities repurpose digital tools to challenge existing power structures. Jalaiah's viral success underscores how Black cultural innovation drives digital trends, while her exclusion reveals the ongoing struggle for recognition and equitable representation. In other words, her story aligns with the goals of digital Black feminism: to center Black women as active agents in digital culture, challenging the dominance of whiteness and affirming the power of Black cultural labor in shaping the digital landscape.

The resilience and creativity Jalaiah embodied through her choreography resonate deeply in femmes, girls, and women. The next reading brings this into sharper focus, exploring how terms like "magic" and movements like #BlackGirlMagic make visible the efforts of Black women to render themselves seen, valued, and celebrated. As discussed in Julia Zachery and Duchess Harris's Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag, the hashtag itself is not just a cultural trend but a tool of resistance, redefining narratives around Black womanhood and shifting the visibility of Black girls and women in the public sphere. Quoting CaShawnThompson, the originator of the #BlackGirlMagic movement, the reading brings up the fact that "Sometimes our [Black women's] accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other Black women" (4). Thompson's own experience mirrors this dynamic; even as the creator of a movement that celebrates Black women's brilliance, her contributions have often been overlooked, a reality that parallels Jalaiah's story of erasure and reclamation. Both Thompson and Jalaiah exemplify how Black women's innovations are frequently co-opted or ignored, only to require collective advocacy to reclaim credit.

Black femmes, girls, and women combat this invisibility by creating visibility on their own terms, using digital platforms like Black Twitter and hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackGirlJoy to assert their presence. This idea is mirrored in Jalaiah's experience, where her supporters on social media rallied to validate her contribution and fight for her rightful place in the dance's history. Jalaiah's recognition for her work did not come through institutional validation but through the advocacy of the Black community determined to amplify her voice. Initially, her choreography was widely used without credit. As Teen Vogue reported, "In about a month, TikTok dancers @Global.Jones and Charli D'Amelio were gaining attention for their version of the Renegade dance. Celebrities such as Lizzo and Alex Rodriguez joined the fray with their renditions. The only problem was none of these videos referenced Jalaiah—the original creator." This erasure reflected a broader pattern of Black creatives being excluded from the recognition and

opportunities their work generates. However, social media users—particularly Black Twitter and TikTok users—mobilized to correct this oversight. When K CAMP, the artist behind the song Lottery (which accompanied the dance), learned of Jalaiah's contribution, he tweeted, "Thank you Jalaiah and Skylar for helping make Lottery the BIGGEST song in the world. Tell the blogs eat it up!" This public acknowledgment, along with mounting pressure from social media users demanding that Jalaiah receive credit, led to her performing the dance on The Ellen Show and at an NBA All-Star game.

The controversy surrounding Jalaiah's erasure also highlighted a systemic issue. In an interview with ABC News, she was asked, "There's a saying out there: 'If they loved Black people as much as they love Black culture'—and it's because the appropriation of Black art goes back centuries. But how did it feel for you, being an example of this much bigger problem at such a young age?" Her story underscores how Black girls and women have long had to fight for credit in creative spaces. This communal effort to correct the record mirrors the very essence of #BlackGirlMagic—Black women and girls rallying around one another to ensure their contributions are seen and valued. These "magic" moments emerge from deliberate, collective action, yet they are often reduced to mere flashes of brilliance without acknowledgment of the labor behind them. Jalaiah's story is not just about personal triumph.

In addition, Zachery and Harris refer to Ruth Nicole Brown's work with Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) as an example of Black women's efforts in shaping the narrative. Brown emphasizes the role of creative performances, such as spoken word, music, and dance, as transformative acts that center Black girls and women's voices. These performances do more than entertain; they foster spaces where participants can affirm their lived experiences and celebrate their identities. Using Brown as an example, the reading states that such performances "enable the affirmation of the particulars of lived experience" (18). Jalaiah's story of reclaiming her work parallels these embodied acts of resistance. Her choreography, like the work described by Brown, fem serves not only as entertainment but as a political statement. A means of asserting her presence and demanding recognition. By insisting on being seen and celebrated as the originator of the dance, Jalaiah exemplifies the "magic" described by Thompson and Walker: the ability to thrive and create in spaces that often deny Black women credit for their labor. This interplay of invisibility and reclamation creates continuity between Jalaiah's experience and the broader historical and cultural narratives surrounding Black women's creative labor. It becomes clear that these themes are not confined to the digital age but are part of a long tradition of Black women finding innovative ways to resist erasure and claim their rightful place in history.

Jalaiah Harmon's story is not only a tale of reclaiming a viral dance, but a broader commentary on how Black women and girls are continually battling for their rightful place in cultural histories. As scholars like Catherine Steele and the authors of Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag illustrate, Black women have long had to navigate spaces of exclusion, leveraging digital platforms not only as sites for creative expression but as tools for resistance. The readings underscore how Black women's cultural production is often minimized or erased, yet through acts of reclamation and collective action, such as those seen in Jalaiah's story, they demand recognition and challenge dominant narratives. Jalaiah's story aligns with the themes of resistance and visibility discussed by Steele and others, emphasizing how social media platforms, despite replicating existing power imbalances, can also serve as powerful tools for amplifying marginalized voices. As Zachery and Harris assert, hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic and #RenegadeCreator are more than just cultural trends; they are vital forms of resistance that assert the creativity and agency of Black women in the face of systemic invisibility. These readings collectively highlight the importance of recognizing the labor and contributions of Black women in both historical and digital contexts, urging us to reconsider the structures that shape how we understand creativity, credit, and recognition.

Jalaiah Harmon's story highlights both the

challenges and possibilities of Black women's agency in digital spaces. While her choreography initially went uncredited, the visibility gained through social media advocacy opened doors for her. However, Jalaiah's experience is not an isolated incident but part of a broader struggle for Black creators to receive proper acknowledgment. While her dance may have gone viral, the real trend remains the ongoing fight for Black artists to be seen, valued, and credited for their labor.

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HAIR PARADE
by Alicia Edwards

life penalty
by Tina Gurcharan

pick your poison / agent orange / or white phosphorus / before they lock kids up / this is what genocide / looks like / we go online / and see people burn alive / hit repost / on a hopeful quote / everything outside is as sick / as it is on the internet / do you feel like / an activist yet / are you performative / or a visionary / can i count on you / to be there for me

guilty until proven innocent / by exoneration / but i resent them / for the doubt they planted / in my mind about you / i want to know you / from what i see / but i can't trust my sight / because someone else / saw you first / then told me / their lies / and do i name you / poet or martyr / i want to say / Namaste / the divinity in me / recognizes the divinity in you / but what is divine / about a system that murders children / and watches the light / leave the eyes of a Black man / who uses his last moments / to wish for the freedom / of all our souls

how dare they and / what right do i have to cry / when there is no 'post'-traumatic / in Palestine / Lebanon / defending its neighbor / and get your / hands off the Congo / i see you / under siege / Sudan / my Caribbean creed / Haiti / you're revolutionary

woke student / what's it like / to reside on a campus / that glorifies / the kill count / of a war criminal / and every step on earth / is a walk over / a nameless burial ground / so tell me / when do our struggle narratives / become survival / become life

live with me / i need you / don't leave me behind / my cell bars are made of steel / i pay for them / with my blood, sweat, and tears / so i can manufacture my own pain / i am God, laborer, prisoner / jack of all trades / master of agony / so don't you ever stop feeling / live with the hurt / because it is a reminder that / you are alive / don't leave me behind / i am only as free / as the people under our feet / remember their names / hear their pleas / feel for me / and tell my story / you are only as safe / as they make you believe

HAUNTING THE PAGE: READING ITO'S PRESENCE IN ISABELLA BIRD'S *UNBEATEN TRACKS IN JAPAN*

by Victoria Santamorena

In 1878, at forty-seven years old, the traveler and writer Isabella Bird (1831-1904) embarked on her now famous journey through Japan. Bird was recommended to leave home to "recruit [her] health" and seek out Japan as a source of rejuvenation for her severe spinal pain and increasing bouts of neuralgia (1: vii)(fn1). Arriving a little over a decade after the start of the Meiji Restoration, and a year after disaffected samurai revolted against the new government in the Satsuma Rebellion, Isabella Bird encountered a Japan that did not neatly align with the texts she had studied in preparation for her journey or the ideas of Japan already embedded in the Victorian imaginary. While many Victorians viewed the once-distant Japan as a "strange and singular country," as a place "suspended in time" (Sterry 47), Bird's travel account neither sustained this idea of an otherworldly, exceptional place nor denied it. Upon her arrival in Yokohama, Bird was confronted by a country in the midst of monumental socio-cultural, political, and economic change. Almost immediately after setting foot in the "hybrid city" of Yokohama, Bird longed "to get away into real Japan" (1:15, 1:20). With an increasing awareness of the shifts happening in Japanese culture and knowing that the treaty ports were inundated with European visitors and their influence, Bird traveled further north, and further inland, searching for an authentic, timeless Japan – one untouched by the West and its modernity. Japan's modernity represented, on the one hand, an acceptable form of progress which set it apart for Bird and her contemporaries as a "civilized" country, and on the other it was a reminder of an irreparable sense of loss for the old, untouched Japan. Bird, unable to reconcile the conflict inherent to Japan's modernity, cannot maintain the "fairy land" image of her imagination alongside the reality of a growing empire. One image offers up Japan's geography and its people as props for an escapist fantasy while the other proves to be a contender in the global contest for power through its technological and military advancements. Bird ultimately senses that she must exert a form of narrative control over the Japan she encounters to contain its threatening growth and its transformation in the public consciousness from an idealized, aestheticized past to an unreadable present.

The product of Bird's travels, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: An Account of Travels in the Interior, Including Visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrines of Nikkô and Isé*, was published in two volumes by John Murray in 1880. Underlying her narrative is an ever-present ambivalence, the poles of which vacillate between colonial impulses to discover and master Japan, its people, and its geography, repulsion towards the western, the modern, and the strange, as well as personal

desires for companionship, intimacy, and inter-cultural connection with those she encounters, especially her guide and servant, Ito. Bird's ambivalence works to position her as an authority on Japan and disguise those desires which would undermine that authority. Rather than focusing on the paradoxes and ambivalence at the heart of the text or focusing on Ito's near-constant presence, much scholarship on Isabella Bird within the last thirty years has largely approached Bird's work through a feminist lens, examining her as an exceptional woman who escaped the rigid social boundaries imposed on Victorian women by a patriarchal system (Foster 8). However, more recent examinations of Bird's work, and women's travel writing more broadly, have begun to address the uncomfortable reality of Bird's complex relationship with British imperialism, in which she was often complicit. Monica Anderson's Women and the Politics of Travel and Joohyun Jade Park's essay on Isabella Bird's sympathy with Japanese colonial practices, acknowledge Bird's imperial complicity, foregrounding its presence in the uneven power distributions between Bird and those she encounters and the employment of a colonial rhetoric of superiority (fn2). Though these works draw out the paradoxes, complexities, and representational anxieties present in Bird's imperial outlook, they neglect examinations of Bird's relationships with foreign cultures and how these relationships give her narrative both structure and drive. And while Tomoe Kumojima explores the formations of fleeting communities between Isabella Bird, her interpreter Ito, and the indigenous Ainu people in Hokkaido, her work focuses on alternative modes of cross-cultural contact, rather than how that contact constructs Bird's narrative persona or how Ito's presence fits into the larger narrative. The analysis I offer explores Isabella Bird's representation of and relationship with her guide Ito. By reading Bird's relationship with her servant-interpreter, we can get a truer sense of the narrative persona she constructs – a deeply ambivalent persona that oscillates between a desire for connection and a longing for authority – while simultaneously seeing Ito as a disrupting force in the text and a traveler in his own right.

Scholar of travel writing, Katheryn Walchester, in her essay, "The Servant as Narrative Vehicle in Nineteenth-Century Travel Texts about Norway and Iceland" examines the representation of servants in European travel texts by employing a contrapuntal approach, popularized by Edward W. Said. By reading what has been excluded or silenced – by reading the presence of servants in European travel texts – Walchester contends that we can draw out the ways servants shape the travel narratives in which they appear. She argues that servants often play a central role as textual vehicles (156); this role is often carried out in two senses. First, servants' textual representations are instrumental in constructing the traveler's "narratorial identity" (159), often acting as foils for the narrator-traveler, which reinforces the narrator's authoritative identity through contrasting terms and descriptions (159). Second, servants' textual representation contributes to the narrative's progression and shape (158-159). In this sense, servant figures can hold considerable power over narrative personas, narrative structure, and the travel that is being represented. Within *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, Ito can be read in a similar way. While not always serving as a foil to Bird's narrative person, he lingers in the margins, threatening to disrupt her description, narrative, and persona with his presence.

While Isabella Bird presents herself as an intrepid and formidable traveler, she incorporates complications into her narrative which threaten the possibility and safety of her journey. Although Bird prepares by reading guidebooks, reports, and articles on Japan, and although she secures a passport which allows her access to areas usually restricted to foreigners, her research and diligence do not prepare her for the 140 miles of her proposed journey undocumented by maps (1:52); nor does it prepare her for friends who doubt her ability to navigate difficult terrain, like the Tsugaru Strait, her ability to protect herself from the mosquitos of Japanese summers, or the possibility of digesting the "abominations known as 'Japanese food'" (1:51). If Bird can overcome these complications through her own ingenuity and resourcefulness, she can legitimize her narrative, her travels, and her status as an authority on

Japan. Especially if she can surmount the obstacle of difficult and uncharted terrain, she has the potential to legitimize one important facet of the persona she presents in her text: a woman with a deeply imperial desire for a sense of authority over Japan (Kato 87). It is not necessarily a mastery of the geographic for which she longs, but an authority over an entire culture gained through her ability to conquer the landscape and demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the country, its people, and its practices. Through her ability to navigate the geographic and remote, to quasi-discover it, and to write about it, Bird would embody a kind of "monarch of-all-I-survey," one who, through the gaze, comes to "[convert] local knowledges (discourses) into European national and continental knowledges associated with European forms and relations of power" (Pratt 198). In this sense, through acts of mastery, such as the writing of *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, the inclusion of a glossary of Japanese words into her text (1:xxi-xxiii), didactic chapters such as "A Chapter on Japanese Public Affairs" (2:311-347), and appendices which include Ainu words, notes on Shintoism, and lists of Japanese revenue and expenditure (2:348-373), Bird linguistically maps and catalogues Japan for her European audience, translating Japanese cultural and natural peculiarities seemingly by way of her own authority. At the same time, this mastery becomes a kind of personal possession wherein Bird can access that geography and culture whenever she wants, precisely because she appropriated the knowledge of the land and its people through her text.

Paradoxically, this sense of authority can only be obtained through the skills of an interpreter and guide, although Bird's biographer, Anna Stoddart, claims Bird "nearly always conquered her territories alone" (vi). While Bird aims to present her growing authority and competency as products of her own ingenuity, stating, "I had to learn everything from the people themselves, through an interpreter, and every fact had to be disinterred by careful labour from amidst a mass of rubbish" (1:viii), she cannot wholly deny that this mastery is reliant on an outside party with intimate knowledge of Japan's culture, geography, and language. She needs someone who can understand her language and her agenda, and someone who represents Japan and its transformation from isolation to Westernized modernity. Ultimately, the success of her travels depends upon someone who, Bird initially hopes, can blend into the background of her narrative, attempting to portray him simply as a servile figure, who "serves purely as conduit between subject (traveller) and object (country)" (Elliott 268). The interpreter and guide Bird chooses should act as a mediator who renders Japan more legible and her travels viable. While Isabella Bird claims the role of the guide and interpreter for her readers, her eventual interpreter and guide, Ito, serves as the figure through which her authoritative persona in Unbeaten Tracks becomes possible. As Kiyonori Kanasaka argues, it is through Ito's labor that Bird's journey is possible (86), but his textual presence also reveals his capacity as a traveler, and Bird's denial of community.

Ito, depicted as a modern, urban youth from Yokohama, is steeped in the metropolitan, preferring "large towns" to the "unbeaten tracks" (1:313). Changed by the thrust of Japan's westernization and modernization, Ito endorses the narrative of Japan's progress in ways that does not quite fit the guide Bird wants, but she must accept this. Ito haunts the narrative – often "present but unmentioned" (Elliott 269) – manifesting his existence through Bird's ability to access and navigate Japanese spaces. Ito enables her communication with innkeepers, government officials, and locals, and procures horses or vehicles for travel. Often included, yet often unnamed, Ito is present in the third-person subject pronouns through which Bird describes her travels: "We crossed the Shinano, poled up the narrow, embanked Shinkawa, had a desperate struggle with the flooded Aganokawa, wondered at the interminable melon and cucumber fields … and after hard poling for six hours, reached Kisaki, having accomplished exactly ten miles" (1:241). Ito is privy to the struggles, rewards, and wonders as well as the frustrations and disappointments of traveling, but he is not entitled to these in the same way as Bird. For while he helps her navigate

Japan, he is unable to claim the journey as his own or reap its rewards publicly as she does. The relationship between Bird and Ito ultimately reveals a more complicated dynamic: Ito is ever-present but little-discussed, however he is one of the dominant lenses through which Bird views and interprets Japan. She relies upon the skills and care of her interpreter who serves as more than a servant and guide, often vacillating between subservience and companionship (fn3).

The need for an interpreter is not introduced into the narrative by Bird directly, but indirectly, through the insistence of friends, which allows her to maintain a sense of independence in that she is not the one who claims to need a guide. However, it is through her stipulations for a "servant interpreter" (1:47) that Bird reveals just how necessary the position is for the success of her journey. Assisted by her friend Dr. Hepburn, Bird stresses the need for someone who speaks English, has knowledge of northern Japan and Hokkaido and someone who can cook, carry her luggage, and find decent accommodations. Bird's desire to discover an authentic Japan, one untouched by outsiders, can only be met by someone who knows Japan, and who has seen its transformation from the decline of the Tokugawa to the dawn of the Meiji Restoration. A guide who can assist Bird into the unknown and the little explored while remaining subservient, while making her journey possible through his bodily labor (as carrier and cook) and his intellectual labor (language, negotiation, and navigation), is invaluable. The interpreter is more than just a source of linguistic navigation or cultural representation; he performs the tasks Bird cannot, as her spinal pain and age are at times prohibitive. The figure of the interpreter makes the travel narrative possible through translation and exchange, but Ito's role as a servant complicates this, allowing the interpreter figure the responsibility of survival and the chance for companionship and connection. Bird and Ito's companionship and connection arises through the shared experience of traveling and from the necessity of learning from one another, even if the circumstances and outcomes of that travel and education are uneven. His representative status and his knowledge afford him the limited privileges of the expert, as he has the power to shape Bird's perceptions and actions while she travels through Japan and the power to indirectly inscribe his knowledge onto the pages of her book. He often informs her of Japanese folk beliefs and customs, such as the ways in which young lovers declare their affection, explaining that "a lover who has formed a very decided preference fixes a sprig of the *Celastrus alatus* to the house of the lady's parents, and that if it be neglected so is he, but if the maiden blackens her teeth he is accepted, subject to the approval of the parents" (1:318). Bird takes this knowledge from Ito, using it to add to the picture she paints of Japan. Ito's representative role is limited in the power it bestows, as he must submit to Bird's authority in other ways. Ito is her "sole reliance" (1:79) linguistically and culturally, but he relies on her for employment, for his future reputation, for ongoing English lessons, and for the direct inclusion of his presence into her travelogue.

It is with these considerations that Bird's eventual guide, Ito, enters the narrative. In a situation that Elizabeth McAdams remarks as "reminiscent of Goldilocks in the familiar fairy tale" (487), Bird interviews several men for the position, none of whom meets her exact requirements for the role. One applicant, described as a "Japanese dandy," causes Bird to balk at the prospect of asking him for "menial services" (1:48). Another is reluctant to serve a woman, while another seems to hide a controlling nature. In rejecting the "Japanese dandy" Bird ultimately rejects a guide who represents Japan's swift modernization and Westernization, as his "well-made European suit" (1:47) makes him an unlikely candidate to show Bird an authentic Japan. The guide who fears there is no "master" (1:48) cannot possibly be of use to a woman so determined to make something of herself as Bird is. In rejecting him, she admits to her own desire to be an authority figure, one whose power is not predicated on her gender. The final applicant, who Bird almost hires due to his "prepossessing" nature, cannot possibly serve as her guide and servant, as she reveals his charm might have allowed him to "master" her (1:48). The imminent power imbalance between them would become clear, but Bird would not benefit from

such unevenness. In rejecting the previous applicants, and when faced with the choice of hiring Ito, Bird negotiates the conditions created by a modernizing and westernizing Japan, reminding readers of the speed at which Japan transformed from "obscurity to eccentric modernity" (Lavery 16) and revealing what vanished in this process (Williams and Clark 6). Ito, as her final choice, carefully balances the waning but romanticized culture of the Edo Period (1603-1868) with Japan's transition to "globalised trade, industrialisation, Western science, regional colonialism, and Meiji political reforms" (Williams and Clark 7). Underlying this negotiation is the sense that Japan is a growing empire, one with the potential to undermine Western control of territory and culture (Williams and Clark 6; Lavery 30).

Ito, unlike the other applicants, arrives mysteriously and is difficult for Bird to read, garnering her suspicions and inciting her to display her sense of superiority. She judges him, reading his appearance as an indicator of both his cultural inferiority, and his glance as a sign of his concealed intent:

> A creature appeared without any recommendation at all, except that one of Dr. Hepburn's servants was acquainted with him. He is only eighteen, but this is the equivalent to twenty-three or twenty-four with us, and only 4 feet 10 inches in height, but though bandy-legged is well-proportioned and strong looking. He has a good and singularly plain face, good teeth, much elongated eyes, and the heavy droop of his eyelids almost caricatures the usual Japanese peculiarity. He is the most stupid-looking Japanese that I have seen, but from a rapid, furtive glance in his eyes now and then, I think that the stolidity is assumed. (1:49)

The racist, ethnocentric, and orientalist elements of Bird's appraisal cannot be understated. In this introduction to his character, Ito is a spectacle, a specimen to be examined and assessed through Bird's gaze, one which adheres to imperialist practices. She follows the conventions of travel writing, wherein she centers the physical markers of Ito's foreignness, and performs the moves of empire by categorizing and typifying him through objectification and phrenological assessments ((Anderson 33; Kröller 92). Through these conventions, she tries to make Ito, already enigmatic, legible (fn4). In rendering him legible for Western audiences, she highlights his age and size, diminishing his physical appearance and assuring readers of his non-threatening presence. In describing Ito as a "creature," as plain and unintelligent, she distances herself from him, abstracts his humanity, and demonstrates his subservience to her authority. It is through these moves that Bird "naturalizes the unknown 'creature' by placing his height and age within a European context" (Kröller 92). He becomes knowable, but Bird cannot wholly read him, as his "stolidity is assumed" (Bird 1:49). She cannot read every physical attribute, and her interpretations, she acknowledges, may yet be tested (fn5). This description of Ito participates partly in a "textual construction of empire" (David xiii) in that, despite Japan's non-colony status, Bird's desire to discover and appraise the Japan she encounters authorizes her assertion of her perceived cultural and moral superiority through the act of writing, subjugating Ito, and through him the Japanese, by way of text's authority. In other words, Bird's text provides readers with safe and seemingly accurate encounters with information on unknown and unfamiliar subjects, placing the information within the bounds of the knowable, the comfortable, and the accessible, despite Ito's ultimate refusal to be read.

At the same time, Ito's assumed "stolidity," and the cleverness couched in his "furtive glance" (1:49), undercut Bird's previous description and indicates that the persona he presents is constructed. In noting Ito's affect, Bird subtly indicates that he possesses hidden forms of power through a strategic mask. While Bird's initial description of her servant-interpreter appears to debase him and erase his ingenuity, behind Ito's impassivity is a subversive form of mimicry wherein he ironically performs and appropriates British stereotypes of the Japanese. His hidden cleverness, his representative role as a translator, and his relative mastery of English alongside Japanese affords him mobility between cultures and power over Bird, her travels, and her narrative. Additionally, his impenetrable expression undermines Bird's .

authority as a traveler and narrator, making the pretenses and formalities of their interview hollow.

Homi Bhabha's work on mimicry and colonial ambivalence can be useful in understanding the dynamics and subversive power of mimicry (fn6). Bhabha asserts that colonial power is produced through discourse, and colonial discourse is particularly rife with "trompe-l'œil, irony, mimicry and repetition" (122). In this sense the structures built into colonial discourse render colonial power elusive, deceptive, and even empty, especially if these tactics of irony and mimicry are utilized by the Other. Mimicry "emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge," but who benefits from that strategy is unclear (122). It is in the tensions created by this power that its effect becomes visible: mimicry creates a tension between the "demand for identity, stasis" and "change, difference" wherein mimicry "represents an *ironic compromise*" (122). The strain between stability/selfhood and mutability/otherness causes what seems to be an irreconcilable rift between the poles of knowledge and power. It also evidences the colonizer's impossible desire to maintain constant authority and control. The object of colonial desire, the subjugation and domination of those colonized, becomes complicated as this bid for domination involves the colonized subject's adherence to mimicry in the name of submitting to colonial power. In mimicking colonial discourse, the Other actually subverts this authority through "displacement" and doubling, threatening the legitimacy of the discourse by transforming its original meaning and context (123).

Colonial mimicry's initial purpose, to generate "a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" suffers from its own constructedness vis a vis the "*ambivalence*" that underlies its strategy (122). In trying to exert control through contradictory means, mimicry produces an excess which cannot be contained, threatening the structures and dynamics of power through its constant acts of displacement and reversal. As Bhabha notes, "in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference… Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that in itself is a process of disavowal" (122). While colonial powers press the other to embody the systems of their oppressors, they can never be wholly understood as agents and beneficiaries of that authority, as the systems of colonial power are only ever partially enacted (123). The Other can only repeat and undermine these processes by appropriating their incompleteness and their meaninglessness. Because mimicry requires this slippage to function, it affords the colonized other power through subversion. The thin line between mimicry and mockery can be utilized, showing its "*menace*" in "its *double vision* which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (126). In this sense, Ito, in projecting an assumed persona for Bird's benefit, reveals the power he possesses; he can rely on this persona when it suits him. On the one hand, his role as the conduit through which Bird understands Japan, allows him to mediate her perception and conversation in whatever manner he sees fit, as her linguistic limits forecloses direct interaction. In this situation of his "assumed" stolidity, the tensions and contradictions in his role as servant-interpreter evidence themselves through the power of mimicry. He demonstrates the hollowness and meaninglessness of Bird's desire to "manage" him as this presented persona allows him to manipulate the situation in his favor without suffering the consequences of previous applicants: rejection. He undermines her desire to control him in demonstrating, through a process of mimicry, his ability to control her.

Although largely existent in the periphery of *Unbeaten Tracks*, Ito possesses other forms of power in and outside the narrative, such as the keeping of a diary, through which he asserts his agency. His diary does not unsettle Bird's control over her narrative or her travels, but it does allow Ito a space separate from the text to give voice to his own experiences. By the nineteenth century, diary-writing was commonplace in Japan (fn7). Diaries were often kept as records of people's day-to-day lives, written with the intention of revisiting these diaries with family or friends in the future. Reflecting on one's past experiences was communal, and many diaries were meant to be

shared (Keene 2). However, Japanese diaries also served as receptacles for loneliness, as they were a place for people, isolated from home or loved ones, to write out the thoughts and experiences they could not share (Keene 3). Diaries were a way of maintaining a community, or the sense of a social self, even if the reality of such a community was non-existent (Keene 3). Ito, away from his friends and family, keeps a meticulous record of his travels in "both English and Japanese" (Bird 1:311). In this diary, he notes what is "novel" in the northern regions of Japan, keeps notes on the hotels in which he and Bird stay, makes records of bills and receipts, and "transliterates" the names of places into English (1:311). The records of place and price are vital for Bird's own sense of mastery over her travels. They provide a legend with which she can map and plan her journey, both spatially and financially, and Ito holds that key. He shares these notes and observations with Bird, at times reading them aloud to her. This act of reading suggests Ito's desire for community and for Bird's approval. In sharing his observations and experiences verbally, Ito invites Bird to partake in an intimate encounter. He and Bird have shared the physical and emotional experience of travel, and by reading his observations aloud, he attempts to demonstrate their companionship. He manifests the reality of their community through what they share. While both Ito and Bird write of their travels, from Bird's own narration, it seems that only Ito verbally shares his writing and observations with her. She discusses her itinerary with Ito, alongside some minute observations and critiques of his country and manners, but she does not share her personal interpretations, suggesting that she does not wish to openly avow their companionship. She is, however, willing to rely on Ito's intellectual and physical labor.

When Bird first mentions Ito's diary, it is in the context of her perceived purpose of his writing: to maintain and develop his skills as an interpreter and guide. It is through this diary that Bird initially acknowledges Ito's cleverness and his skill, but in the diary's introduction, she mingles praise with an insult, humiliating Ito in the description leading up to that introduction. She does this, not to undermine his cleverness, but to enforce his subservience in and to her narrative, as she must "manage" Ito, before he can "manage" her (1:156). Ito's intelligence and independence often contend with Bird's sense of superiority, her pride, and her goals of discovery or mastery. By humiliating Ito before the diary's introduction, she attempts to undermine the power of a narrative she cannot control. After traveling through a small hamlet in Fujihara, she and Ito stop to rest at an inn in Ikari, where howling dogs, fleas, beetles, lice, spiders and torrential rain cause Ito to approach Bird in the middle of the night, "whimpering" that he has "had no sleep" (1:55). Through his textual proximity to the "noisy" dogs that Bird mentions only two sentences prior to Ito's intrusion, Bird equates Ito, and his whimpering, to these dogs. She labels the dogs as "cowardly," their howls and yelps are similar to Ito's "whimpering," allowing the dogs' cowardice to be transferred onto Ito. He is further related to these cowardly and noisy dogs in that fleas disrupt his comfort and his sleep. Rather than tolerating these conditions, Ito begs her to leave the inn where they are lodging, allowing Bird to demonstrate that she is a more formidable traveler in that she tolerates the discomfort.

From this textual humiliation, she transitions to what Ito might include in a diary before actually discussing said diary – although she does not make explicit the connection between Ito's experiences and the diary's actual content. She reveals Ito's feelings about Fujihara to her audience, and here the textual proximity of Ito's experiences in Japan's interior to the first mention of his diary in the narrative suggests that his observations might be recorded there. While Ito shares his experiences with Bird, she denies him space in the dialogue to share it. Instead, she ventriloquizes his voice, further asserting control over her narrative. She writes, "[Ito] says that he would not have believed that there was such a place in Japan, and that people in Yokohama will not believe it when he tells them of it" (1:55). While Bird has not yet mentioned Ito's diary, by linking his observations of the interior to the tales he will tell his home community, and by introducing the diary three sentences later, she indicates that the diary's pages hold a record of Ito's personal observations. She notes that Ito plans to share his

experience of their travels, much like she intends on sharing her own observations, but rather than publicly publishing his diary, as Bird intends, Ito will share his experience with his community orally. His travel narrative is then more intimate and personal, seemingly unconcerned with contributions to the "sum of knowledge" as is Bird's own text (1: vii). The eventual recitation of the diary's contents, or its verbal dissemination, is a communal act, one in which Ito directly partakes in his community's celebration of his travels. It also connects him with loved ones who could not join him on his journey. Bird's travel text, initially letters to her sister, Henrietta, transforms through publication by making her text publicly available. She does not choose her audience in the same way as her interpreter. Rather than sharing her journey with her friends, family, and neighbors, she opens her work up to the scrutiny of all literate English speakers with an interest in travel or in Japan. But beyond that, Bird seeks a different kind of community, especially a community of female readership, as she dedicates her work to "the memory of Lady Parkes," a "close friend and mentor" (McAdams 483). Despite the differences in their texts' intentions and despite the diversity in audience, Bird indicates that Ito is a travel writer in his own right, and the shared act of recording their journeys is just one of many ways in which the pair build community.

While Bird implicitly represents Ito's diary as a repository of his private thoughts and travel experiences, she also represents it as a communal object and a site of cultural and linguistic exchange without examining the significance of that exchange. It is these underlying purposes, community and language, that allow Bird's audience to grasp Ito's independence, his diligence, and Bird's reliance on his skills. She initially describes his diary as a sign of his dedication to his work as an interpreter and her gratitude towards him:

> His cleverness in travelling and his singular intelligence surprise me daily. He is very anxious to speak *good* English, as distinguished from 'common' English, and to get new words with their correct pronunciation and spelling. Each day he puts down in his note-book all the words I use that he does not quite understand, and in the evening brings them to me and puts down their meaning and spelling with their Japanese equivalents. (1:155)

Bird's introduction to Ito's diary initially acts as a descriptive tool for Ito, portraying him as "a zealous student" (1:55). Through this description, she demonstrates his industriousness, his curiosity, his linguistic aptitude, and his desire to learn and improve. She sees him as indispensable, with linguistic skills "far better than many professional interpreters" (1:155). Through translation, Ito serves as Bird's "mouth as well as her ear" (Kumojima 39), and Bird reciprocates this, allowing the diary to function as an educational site, but only for "*her* English" (McAdams 284). The diary's alternate purpose as a notebook for language acquisition, wherein Ito writes down the meanings of English words and phrases as described by Bird, keeps Ito beholden to her knowledge. But the diary is an object that materially plays out the nature of Bird and Ito's relationship: a reciprocity of culture, of meaning, of seeing, and experiencing. Bird has her own space to do this in the letters and notes that would become *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, and Ito marks his understanding of Bird and the British culture and language she brings along with her onto the pages of his notebook, transforming through translation and bridging their communities.

But the fact that Bird presents the diary as a device which defines Ito's usefulness, especially his linguistic usefulness, suggests that she purposefully misrepresents the diary's significance as an object of personal connection. For Bird, Ito's diary demonstrates that her guide is a "valuable servant and interpreter" precisely because his diary is the site of his improving language skills on which she depends; it is a space where his "vocabulary is daily increasing," and this increased vocabulary allows her to gather accurate information on transportation, geography, lodgings, and food (1:310-11). Apart from focusing on its linguistic utility, Bird largely discusses Ito's diary in terms of its aid to her travels, for in his diary "[Ito] has made a hotel book and a transport book, in which all the bills and receipts are written … and puts down the distances and the sums paid for

transport and hotels on each bill" (1:311). The diary is then rendered as a practical record of their journey, which benefits Bird in planning the rest of her course. Consequently, she only refers to Ito's diary as a diary once out of the four times she mentions it, instead calling it a notebook, glossing over Ito's "painstaking observation" of their travels (1:311). Unlike his lexical entries and list of itineraries, which are described as "valuable," Ito's observations are only "interesting" (1:311). In mostly referring to Ito's diary as a notebook, Bird distances him from it by divesting it of its more personal meaning. She only refers to it as a diary when he shares his observations with her, marking that she sees a difference in the value of the diary's information. She defines the diary via its usefulness to her and therefore defines Ito through his own usefulness. In underscoring Ito's anxieties surrounding linguistic proficiency, Bird concentrates on the aspects of Ito's record keeping that facilitates her journey and therefore her own record of it. She discusses Ito's diary as a point of pride, as if his actions demonstrate that her choice in a translator was correct. She suggests that Ito relies on her to improve, rather than divulging her own reliance too deeply. She ventures to mask her own dependence, albeit it unconvincingly, especially since her narrative relies on someone whom she considers inferior. She misrepresents Ito's diary as a primarily useful or practical object, as avowing its personal nature directly in the narrative would disrupt the dynamic of inferiority/superiority which she strives to maintain. Admitting the more personal nature of Ito's diary would mean acknowledging him as an intellectual equal and acknowledging the community he has shaped through text – a community Ito builds with her through the act of translation and communication.

Bird works to conceal the communal aspect of Ito's diary to protect and maintain her persona of a distant, ambivalent observer, as Ito's opinions sometimes unsettle Bird's conceived sense of superiority or force her to reclaim her text. As Tomoe Kumojima notes, when Ito shares his observations with Bird, his "voice blend[s] with her authorial voice" (40), and sometimes this textual ventriloquizing allows Bird to safely distance herself from critiques of her own culture by making Ito the "mouth" of these opinions. However, moments arise when his perspective bears dangerously on Bird's narrative, forcing her to act against these interjections, as they undermine her desire for a sense of mastery. Often Ito "delights in retailing stories of the bad manners of Englishmen," describing them as "'roaring out *ohio* to every one on the road,' frightening the tea-house nymphs, kicking or slapping their coolies, stamping over white mats in muddy boots, [and] acting like ill-bred satyrs" (1:156). While Bird does not censor Ito's criticisms, she sees the need to mitigate the threats they pose and police them. She acknowledges that these remarks depict fellow Britons unfavorably, but stressing that Ito is the source of the criticism allows her to hide safely behind it. She disguises her agreement, and therefore her sympathy with Ito's perspective, in an appeasing footnote, assuring, "This can only be true of the behaviour of the lowest excursionists from the Treaty Ports!" (1:156). She first distances herself and her audience from a "lower" class of travelers spatially and hierarchically, in an attempt to assure them that Ito only critiques a small and contained group of which she and her readers are not a part. Andrew Elliott argues that this footnote reveals an anxiety regarding Ito's "excess" and that these remarks are "a slippage that cannot be contained in the writing-up alone" (273). While Ito mocks what he sees as a brutish foreign culture, Bird cannot wholly stop that mockery from finding space in her narrative, partially because, through their shared travels and experiences, she begins to understand Ito's contempt.

While Bird's footnote attempts to contain and constrain Ito within the bounds of her text, it also disguises their connection. She cannot avow, at least not openly, that she agrees with him. The footnote's denial of Ito's claims does not hide Bird's agreement, for she describes the treatment of the Japanese by foreign visitors as "brutal" (1:56). However, the note distances her from admitting connection beyond that of a traveler and her guide. She refuses to give Ito's words too much power. She cannot represent the diary beyond its practicality, for if it is acknowledged as personal, she admits to a companionship with Ito

and intellectual equality. Acknowledging their shared experiences and ideas upset her status as an authority. Representing the diary as a symbol of their relationship rather than a sign of her pride in his cleverness unsettles her ambivalence and forces her to maintain a clear position, which she ultimately cannot do because this would disrupt her narrative hegemony. Faithfully representing the diary, and the truth of its contents, such as Ito's criticisms, would reveal that despite the communal aspect behind both its creation and its dissemination, the diary is an object whose meaning remains hidden from Bird. It is a shadow text that she cannot control or deny, and its contents push at the boundaries of her narrative, reminding readers that without Ito, her journey as well as her text's production would be impossible.

Other than Bird's dependence on Ito's ability to navigate Japan and to linguistically facilitate her access to its remotest spaces, such as Hokkaido and the indigenous Ainu population residing there, Bird heavily relies on Ito for a sense of companionship, despite her attempts to disguise their intimacy in the narrative. Out of her seven months in Japan, Bird most of that time alongside Ito, sharing the joys and frustrations of travel, but does not want to fully admit to the comfort his presence offers her. She downplays the importance of his companionship while foregrounding the necessity of his skills, again defining him through usefulness rather than personal connection. As she travels deeper into Japan's interior and further away from tourist cities, she reveals, "I am entirely dependent on Ito, not only for travelling arrangements, but for making inquiries, gaining information, and even for companionship, such as it is" (1:156). Ito's companionship, while a reprieve from the solitude of travel, is depicted as inferior to other forms of connection. It is a companionship, Bird implies, that arises from necessity, from their near-constant togetherness in daily travel, and not from the closeness built through shared experience. Instead, she includes companionship in a list of tasks Ito performs as her servant and guide. It is one of his duties rather than a connection of choice, for if he and Bird did not have some kind of familiarity or connection, his presence on her journey would be a hindrance. She refuses to acknowledge their connection outside the bounds of their professional relationship. But that companionship develops into something more than a necessity of their journey. As they continue north, Bird looks to Ito for entertainment, for sympathy, and for someone to share in her struggles. He shares his diary with her, his stories of home and his new experiences, and he regales Bird with tales of his failures. In a letter from July 24, 1878 Bird writes, "Ito amuses me nearly every night with stories of his unsuccessful attempts to provide me with animal food" (1:313). While it seems as though her focus is on Ito's failures as her servant, and on the lack of meat in the northern towns, Bird reveals the ways in which Ito keeps her company and drives away the loneliness of their travels. He makes himself the object of her amusement, and her laughter, sharing in the humor of his difficulties so that they can connect over these moments. He allows Bird reprieve from their hardships at his expense.

Perhaps this is why, when Ito departs from the text in Hokkaido, Bird reflects on a sense of loss. While Ito was invaluable to her in his ability to explain Japan, he was also a companion who shared his time with her, his observations, and his stories. In his departure, Bird loses the legibility and the connection Ito provides. When leaving the text, Ito awakens something in Bird's narrative persona, an admission of connection which she tries to disguise:

> When Ito woke me yesterday morning, saying, 'Are you sorry that it's the last morning? I am,' I felt we had one subject in common for I was very sorry to end my pleasant Yezo tour, and very sorry to part with the boy who had made himself more useful and invaluable than ever before. (2:153).

Ito physically wakes Bird, bringing her into the realization of their farewell. He admits his reluctance to say goodbye, that he will miss her, even if it is not said directly. Both Bird and Ito seem to dwell on the sorrow in leaving behind shared time and place, but underpinning this sense of loss is the regret of leaving each other. Tied to place is the memory of their connection, their travels, and their companionship. But Bird tries to conceal this connection by focusing on the loss of his utility. She refuses to admit that he has

meaning beyond what his skills provide her, and although he is the cause of her emotional awakening, for the sake of her control over her narrative, she will not admit that her sense of loss is bound up in her personal connection to Ito. She carries on her tour without him, returning to the familiar sites of Tokyo and Kyoto, feeling that she no longer needs her guide.

The unresolved tensions in Bird's travelogue reveal the instability of her narrative persona and make manifest the ways Ito haunts the travelogue's pages. Trapped between the realization of connection and its offering of escape, and the achievement of authority, which Bird cannot claim in the absence of connection, *Unbeaten Tracks* struggles towards narrative cohesion. The text, while the product of knowledge collection, cannot deny that the existence of the knowledges Bird reproduces is reliant on Ito's presence, intellectual labor, and companionship. While Ito offers Bird with opportunities to indulge in new communities and intellectual companionship, she denies herself entry into that partnership. Her entrenchment in an imperial system does not allow her to avow her desire to escape that system, and thus she rejects the possibility of freedom offered in difference.

NOTES:

fn1: While Bird states her motives for traveling were health-related, the veracity of these claims is up for debate. See Monica Anderson Women and the Politics of Travel, pp. 81-83, pp. 203; Lorraine Sterry Victorian Women Travellers in Meiji Japan pp. 240.

fn2: For more on Isabella Bird and imperial complicity, see Laurence Williams's "'Like the ladies of Europe'? Female emancipation and the 'scale of civilization' in women's writing on Japan, 1840-1880," (pp. 17-32). For more on the connection between Victorian women's travel accounts and imperial rhetoric, see, Sara Mills's Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism (pp. 27-122).

fn3: Fictionalized accounts of Isabella Bird's travels and her relationship with Ito, such as Nakajima Kyōko's Itō no koi [Ito's Love] and Sassa Taiga's manga series Fushigi no Kuni no Bādo [Isabella Bird in Wonderland], suggest a certain level of intimacy or romance between the pair that may or may not be supported by Bird's original text. Laurence Williams and Steve Clark also suggest there may be romantic underpinnings to Bird and Ito's relationship in "Isabella Bird, Victorian globalism, and Unbeaten Tracks in Japan (1880)". See pp. 11-12.

fn4: In "First Impressions: Rhetorical Strategies in Travel Writing by Victorian Women," Eva-Marie Kröller notes that Ito, in his entry in the Unbeaten Tracks index, becomes a "classifiable specimen" simply through the ways in which he is inscribed on the page. See pp. 93.

fn5: While Bird's description reads as though she appraises an animal, her choice to represent Ito in this way may also stem from desires for public approval. Lorraine Sterry reads Ito's description as one meant to maintain propriety: "After the publication of her Rocky Mountains adventures, [Bird] had been concerned that she would be publicly censured for being a lone woman in the company of men; in Japan, she ensures that her relationship with Ito... could not be construed as anything other than that of mistress/servant" (248). While Sterry notes that Bird's reputation is at stake for perceived instances of indecency, she misses the dangers present in Bird's relationship with a non-white man.

fn6: While Japan was not a colony of European powers, Bird's own agenda of discovery and knowledge production can be read along imperial lines. In addition, her approval of missionary work, and her desire for Christianity's spread in Japan does not wholly exclude Japan from the nexus of imperial and Western influence, despite Japan being a growing imperial power itself. In this sense, Bhabha's discussion of colonial power can map onto Bird and Ito's relationship due to the power imbalances present.

fn7: For more on Japanese diary-keeping see Donald Keene Modern Japanese Diaries: The Japanese at Home and Abroad as Revealed through their Diaries and Marvin Howard Marcus Memoirs, Diaries, and Personal Reflections from Meiji-Taishō Japan (1868-1926): A Selection Of, and Commentary Upon, Literary Miscellanies of the Kindai Period.

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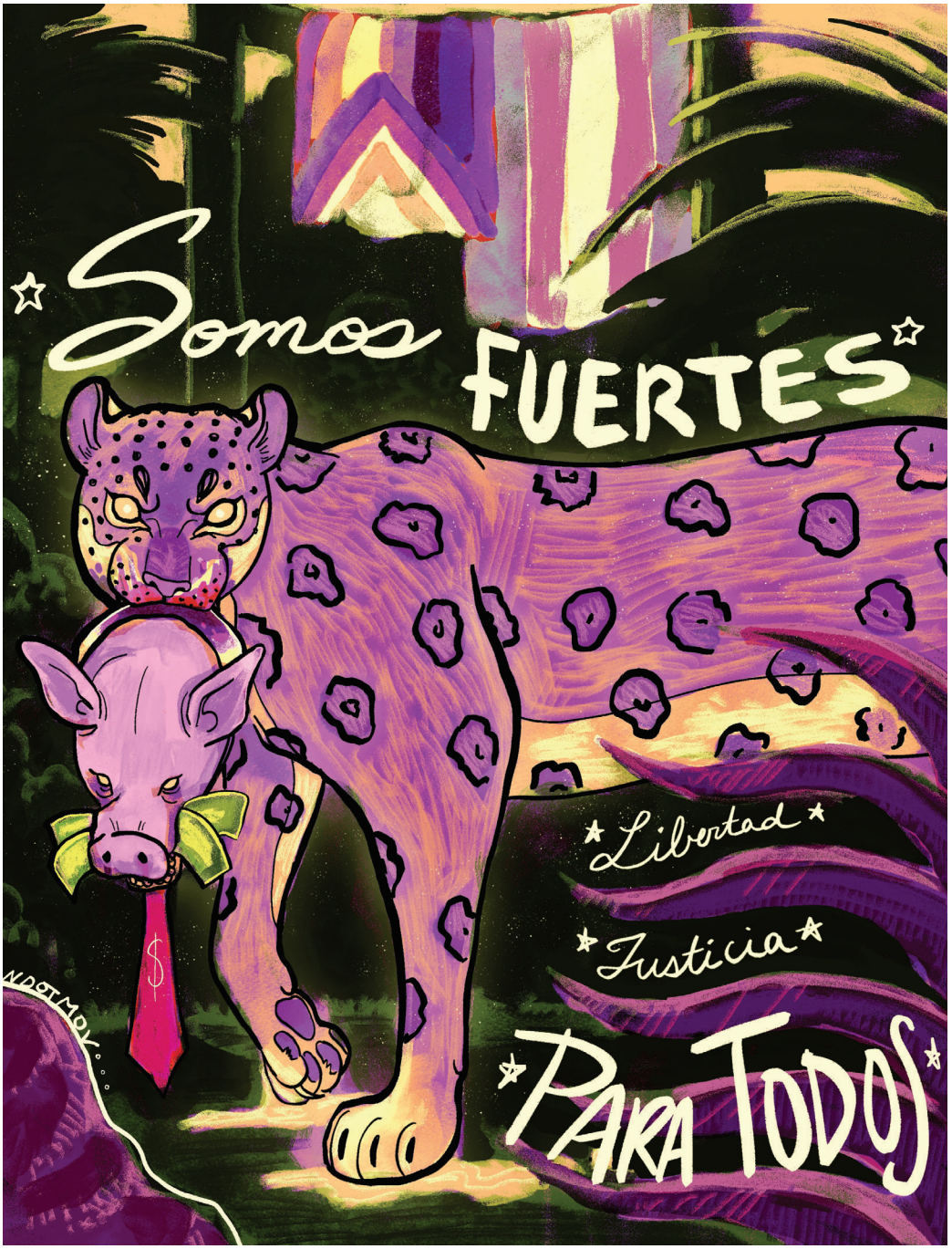

SOMOS FUERTES (First Version)
by N. Orengo Vera

As implied in my artist bio, my work is truly an extension of myself; it's a device I use for processing complex emotions and situations. Being a young, queer latine that hails from a family of hardworking immigrants, I was mortified by the Orange Man's onslaught of ICE deportations, and quite frankly, rapid approval of anti-American, inhumane legislations. Not only was I mortified, but after days worth of listening to news stories of U.S. citizens being profiled and detained, my family members started to routinely triple-check if they had various forms of IDs on them, despite everyone here being born a legal U.S. citizen. With the widespread campaigns of terror, I knew I had to exercise my First Amendment rights for those unprotected by the Constitution.

"SOMOS FUERTES" is a direct reaction to the January 20th, 2025 presidential inauguration. I was watching the rather uncanny inauguration and felt a disturbing shock of anxiety rattle my core--the realization that we were rapidly descending into an open, oligarchical dictatorship. As a history buff opposed to the exploitations of capitalism, I understood what my role was as the artist. The disjointed phrases "LIBERTAD", "JUSTICIA", and "PARA TODOS" have a dual purpose; one that expresses bitter irony and the other that intends to inspire hope through reclamation. I made an initial illustration on January 22th, but as I started experimenting more with my artistic style and voice, I leaned more towards bold, expressive, and quirky forms to reflect who I am as both a person and artist. I also took inspiration from propaganda-style posters, which tend to include eye-catching colors and symbols. I removed the forest imagery from the initial draft because I wanted to truly highlight the importance of protecting and recognizing not only my fellow latines, but fellow queer and trans folk that have been actively discriminated against.

"SOMOS FUERTES" is also a continuation of "LATINOS AGAINST FASCISM" (available to view on social media under the handles @ndotmov), which was created when the Orange Man "won" the election with the help of his Neo-Nazi Musk.

Once again, I'm exercising my First Amendment rights protected by the U.S. Constitution for those who cannot.

N. Orengo Vera

piano lesson.
by Dana N. Livingston

bloody bludgeoned fingers float
in a moment of found freedom
on pilfered ivory
strikes rampant
beating
hands on me, hammers on keys
sustained vibration
a continuum
whiteblackwhiteblackwhiteblackwhitewhite
animal - man
when poached
we bleed the same blood
.
when i rest my fingertips
on weathered keys
i feel the press of fingers past against mine
digits rubbing against ground grooves
prints aligning like puzzle pieces
nail beds creating valleys
for rivers of blood and tears
i know the stories of those carved into this wood
the notes i play bear a weighty echo
filled with voices — grunts and groans, mournful moans
pangs of pain felt yet not rendered against me
draw past and present ever together
voyeuristic vagrants beyond the vastness of the Veil
but in the dark, the ancestral call is the one that sustains me
pains past meet present in a cacophony of sound
our symphony, anachronous
folklore, legend, legacy.

CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS AND EMPOWERMENT: LITERACY, IDENTITY, AND DECENTERING DOMINANT NARRATIVES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

by Ghuoshuai Zhang

Since the mid-20th century, Asian American immigrants have reshaped U.S. cultural landscapes, yet their experiences remain marginalized within dominant assimilationist narratives. Literacy—often framed as a neutral tool for upward mobility—becomes a contested field where cultural identities collide with Eurocentric educational paradigms. Since the 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, successive waves of immigrants from South and East Asia have been subjected to what Edward Said termed "the cultural apparatus of imperialism" (Said 7). This colonial legacy manifests in intergenerational conflicts over literacy, where first-generation immigrants' native knowledge systems conflict with their American-born children's negotiation of dominant cultural codes. When first-generation immigrants face struggles with language and cultural differences, the second-generation Asian Americans find it hard to balance their cultural background with the need to fit into mainstream American society. This tension is especially clear in literacy practices as a bridge for cultural exchange and personal growth. In a diverse country, the mix of cultures creates challenges and opportunities for literacy development, especially for those trying to navigate multiple cultural identities for "literary activities are embedded in the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they occur" (Li 399). This deep connection makes the literacy practices of second-generation Asian Americans, particularly their navigation of heritage languages and colonial Englishers, a critical site for decentering dominant assimilation narratives.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* offers a radical intervention in this discourse by portraying Gogol Ganguli's layered identity. Gogol's rejection of his Bengali name - itself a misappropriation of Russian author Nikolai Gogol's legacy - reflects what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha identifies as "the disjunctive temporality of the nation-space" (Bhabha, 1994:148). When Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil, he unwittingly re-enacts the colonial renaming rituals his father Ashoke survived in the 1961 train crash. This intergenerational rupture exposes the false binary between "heritage literacy" and "dominant literacy."The novel's multilingual texture - blending Bengali kinship terms with American teenage slang - performs the translingual practice, subverting the monolingual ideology of mainstream literacy education.

This dynamic is shown in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, which questions this tension through Gogol Ganguli, a second-generation Bengali American whose literacy practices reflect the struggle to navigate intersecting axes of race, class, and intergenerational *expectations. This novel tells the story of Gogol Ganguli's struggle*

with identity and belonging. His refusal to accept his Bangladeshi surname and contact with his language heritage shows that literacy can be used as both an empowerment tool and an obliteration mechanism. By resisting his father's literary heritage and refusing to read Nikolai Gogol's works, Gogol applied a way of avoiding tradition, which reflected how the mainstream literary model put assimilation above cultural protection. Therefore, this novel shows that literacy is a struggling process in mainstream places, not a smooth adaptation.

This paper examines Gogol's journey through the lens of Guofang Li's cultural pedagogy and Paulo Freire's critical consciousness theory, arguing that decolonizing literacy involves confronting racialized assimilation and the intersecting gendered and class dimensions of immigrant identity formation. Li's framework positions literacy as a cultural and social practice, particularly for Asian English Language Learners, emphasizing pedagogical approaches that foster cultural reconciliation and translation. Similarly, Freire challenges traditional education models that treat learners as passive recipients of knowledge, advocating instead for developing critical consciousness—a process that enables individuals to actively engage with and transform their realities.

Through these theoretical perspectives, *The Namesake* explores the relationship between cultural identity and literacy. Gogol Ganguli's journey is shaped by key literacy events that reflect his ongoing negotiation between his Indian heritage and American upbringing. These moments define his identity and influence his engagement with broader social and cultural landscapes. Lahiri's novel serves as a compelling case study for understanding how literacy can function as both a tool for self-discovery and a catalyst for societal change. It emphasizes the necessity of educational practices that are culturally responsive and critically engaged, moving beyond the narrow definition of literacy as mere reading and writing. Instead, literacy is portrayed as the ability to interpret and navigate the cultural symbols that shape one's identity and sense of belonging.

By centering Gogol's experiences, *The Namesake* challenges the mainstream Western literacy model, revealing how immigrant narratives remain marginalized, unseen, and ignored within dominant educational frameworks. The novel highlights the transformative potential of literacy practices in bridging cultural divides and promoting personal growth among Asian Americans navigating identity struggles and cultural pressures. Lahiri's work critiques the limitations of assimilationist paradigms and re-imagines literacy as a site of empowerment and cultural preservation.

LITERACY AS A SITE OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the complex lives of its characters as they navigate dual identities shaped by their immigrant cultural family background. Gogol Ganguli struggles with the cultural differences between his family's Bengali traditions and the American social norms he faces. His literacy practices, especially his connection to Bengali culture and language, explain the tension between resisting and reconnecting with his background. Gogol's ambivalence toward his Bengali heritage exemplifies Li's assertion that literacy practices are "embedded in the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they occur" (Li 399), highlighting how literacy becomes a contested space for cultural negotiation.

In her article "Understanding English Language Learners' Literacy from a Cultural Lens: An Asian Perspective" (2006), Guofang Li provides a cultural perspective from Asia to understand how family expectations, cultural conflicts, and assimilation pressure influence Asian Americans' literacy habits. "Since English language learners often cross between two or more languages and cultures, we must understand how culture plays a role in their literacy and living at home and in school in order to understand their literacy learning and development" (414). Li confirms that culture and family play an important role in shaping the literacy practice of English language learners (ELL) with Asian backgrounds. She argues that

for Asian ELLs, literacy is not merely a technical skill but a process of navigating cultural conflicts and reconciling identities. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's literacy journey illustrates this process. From childhood, he is caught between the expectations of his Bengali heritage and the demands of his American environment. His resistance to learning Bengali reflects the broader devaluation of immigrant cultures within dominant educational frameworks. At the same time, his eventual reconnection with his heritage—symbolized by his return to Bengali literature—shows literacy's potential to bridge cultures. Gogol's experiences embody Li's insight that ELLs' literacy practices are shaped by the need to mediate between conflicting influences, familial expectations, and identity formation. The novel reveals how literacy practices can both alienate and empower, serving as a site where cultural identity is negotiated, contested, and redefined. By centering Gogol's struggles, *The Namesake* challenges educational models to recognize and value immigrant students' diverse cultural knowledge.

In *The Namesake*, the cultural tensions experienced by characters like Gogol explain the decentering of dominant cultural narratives, particularly through the lens of immigrant identity. Li discusses the dilemma faced by Asian learners caught between their heritage and mainstream cultures, emphasizing the psychosocial stress and identity crises that arise from this cultural clash: "To conform or to reject family histories is also a matter of how to deal with cultural conflicts between the heritage culture and the mainstream culture" (418). This struggle is reflected in Gogol's experiences as he navigates the expectations of his Bengali heritage against the backdrop of American society. By choosing whether to accept or reject his family's history, Gogol's journey embodies the broader struggle of decentering traditional narratives, thus highlighting the challenges faced by Asian immigrants in reconciling cultural expectations with personal identity.

Gogol's childhood exemplifies this cultural negotiation. From an early age, he is caught between the traditional values of his parents, Ashoke and Ashima, and the American cultural norms surrounding him. His discomfort with his name—a symbol of his family's history and cultural identity—epitomizes this conflict. Early in the novel, Ashima reflects on the cultural significance of names within Bengali tradition, noting that she "never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (Lahiri 9-10). This passage emphasizes the intricate ways cultural norms shape personal and familial relationships, particularly within the Bengali context. Ashima's insistence on these traditions highlights the lasting influence of heritage culture, even as her family navigates life in a different cultural landscape.

By examining Ashima's behavior through a cross-cultural lens, the novel reveals how deeply cultural norms influence identity formation and interpersonal dynamics. Gogol's rejection of his name—and, by extension, his heritage—reflects the broader struggle of second-generation immigrants to negotiate their identities within the competing frameworks of tradition and assimilation. This tension not only shapes Gogol's journey but also serves as a microcosm of the challenges faced by immigrant families in preserving their cultural heritage while adapting to a new societal context.

As Gogol matures, he experiences the psychosocial stress that arises from cultural conflict, leading to an identity crisis common among children of immigrants. His rejection of his name—integral to his family's history—illustrates this struggle: "There is a reason Gogol doesn't want to go to kindergarten. His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name" (Lahiri 58). For his parents, Nikhil is "a perfectly respectable Bengali good name" (Lahiri 58). This reflects the tension between Gogol's desire for acceptance in American society and his

connection to his heritage, creating a sense of dislocation.

As Gogol's formal education begins, he gradually recognizes the importance of his family history and cultural narratives in shaping his identity. This journey towards self-acceptance highlights the ongoing process of cultural intersections and empowerment, aligning with Li's perspective on trans-cultural literacy learning. Li emphasizes the role of culture in literacy and identity development, noting that it occurs when students understand "how culture plays a role in their literacy and living at home and in school" (Li 414).

Gogol resists his Bengali ancestry throughout childhood, particularly in language and culture classes. "In Bengali class, Gogol is taught to read and write his ancestral alphabet… They read handouts written in English about the Bengali Renaissance… Gogol hates it because it keeps him from attending a Saturday-morning drawing class" (Lahiri 66-67). This ambivalence towards his heritage is significant when viewed through Li's lens, which stresses the importance of cultural context in literacy and identity formation among immigrant children. Li argues that Asian ELLs should examine "their interactions with others and the larger context" (Li 422). The description of the Bengali alphabet and Gogol's disinterest emphasizes his linguistic and emotional distance from his heritage. His preference for "American" activities like ballet or softball practice reflects his cultural clash. Ana notes, "Gogol wants to conform and belong as a typical American teenager… among his Euro-American classmates" (Ana 237). This supports Li's argument about immigrant children's struggle to reconcile competing cultural expectations, often leading to disconnection from their heritage.

Li emphasizes that cultural backgrounds and personal experiences deeply influence literacy development among English language learners. For Gogol, the literacy skills from Bengali class go beyond language; they are connected with his identity and family ties. However, he believes this education is a barrier to engaging in activities that align with his American identity, reducing his value on these literacy practices. This shows the the need for educators to acknowledge the cultural identities of immigrant children, and create an environment where they can appreciate their heritage while confidently navigating their current cultural setting. Gogol does not read the book his father gave him on his fourteenth birthday, which symbolizes his resistance to his cultural heritage, as he fears that reading it means accepting his namesake and cultural roots, which he is not ready to do. This internal conflict reflects the broader challenges faced by many Asian American students, as Gogol's escape represents a common struggle amid "cultural clashes between the old and the new" (Li 427), leading to "psychosocial stress and identity crisis."

Gogol's decision to hide the book reflects his struggle with cultural identity, a theme Li identifies as central to the literacy development of Asian American students. Karmakar explains why second-generation immigrants like Gogol often reject their cultural roots: "The second- and third-generation immigrants certainly do not feel any proximity towards India… It is merely a mirage created by their parents" (Karmakar 83). For Gogol, India is not a tangible reality but an idea inherited from his parents, which he rejects. His experience emphasizes the gradual disappearance of his connection to his parents' cultural world and the pressure to assimilate.

Furthermore, Gogol's heated discussion with his parents about changing his name illustrates his internal conflict: "'What's done is done,' his father said…'It's too complicated now,' his mother agreed" (96-97). Bhalla discusses how recognition in reading involves both personal understanding and a desire for social acceptance: "in reading practice, recognition denotes a self-directed, personal moment of understanding, whereas it also implies a social desire for public validation" (Bhalla 108). This idea of recognition reflects Gogol's struggle as changing his name to "Nikhil" symbolizes his effort to fit in with his classmates and assimilate into mainstream American culture, highlighting his internal struggle with self-identity.

Gogol's decision to change his name symbolizes the psychological and social pressures

stemming from the "cultural clash between the old and the new" that many Asian learners experience. This tension aligns with Li's observation that "many are pressured to assimilate at the expense of their own cultural heritage or withdraw from and reject interactions with the mainstream or act out and become apathetic to preserve their cultural identity" (Zhou and Bankston, in Li 418). The novel illustrates this dynamic and how cultural intersections shape identity formation and literacy practices. Gogol's rejection of his name—a marker of his Bengali heritage—reflects his struggle to reconcile his dual cultural identities, highlighting the broader challenges faced by second-generation immigrants.

Intergenerational expectations further complicate these cultural conflicts. Li emphasizes that the gap between immigrant parents' traditional values and their children's integration into mainstream American culture often leads to psychosocial strain. As Cheung and Nguyen note, "Conflicts between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born or U.S.-raised children are also an important factor that influences the children's psychosocial well-being" (Li 418). These conflicts arise from fundamentally different lived experiences: Gogol's parents, as first-generation immigrants, remain deeply connected to their Bengali heritage, while Gogol, born and raised in the United States, gravitates toward American cultural norms. This divergence is exemplified by Ashima's attachment to her Bengali lifestyle. A notable moment in the story shows this: "Ashima looks up from a tattered copy of Desh magazine that she'd brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her. She's read each of the short stories and poems and articles a dozen times" (Lahiri 13). In contrast, Gogol's assimilation into American society creates a cultural rift between him and his parents, a phenomenon Li terms "bicultural conflict."

The intersection of gender roles and academic expectations further shapes the dynamics of immigrant families. Li observes that "the parents' gender adaptation has shaped the expectations of their sons' and daughters' behavior and academic achievements. The elder daughters are often socialized into the double roles of their mothers while the older sons into those of their fathers" (Li 420-421). In *The Namesake*, Gogol, as the eldest son, is burdened with the responsibility of upholding his family's cultural legacy. His name, chosen by his father in honor of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, symbolizes this expectation. Ashoke's gift of Nikolai Gogol's book to his son shows his hope that Gogol will embrace his cultural heritage. However, Gogol's rejection of his name and his father's literary legacy reflects his resistance to these imposed expectations.

Academic success is another site of intergenerational tension. Ashoke, a PhD graduate from MIT, envisions a similar path for Gogol, urging him to "join the math team and maintain his A average" and to pursue engineering, "perhaps at MIT" (Lahiri 90). This pressure reflects a broader trend among Asian immigrant parents, who view academic achievement as a means of securing socio-economic stability and protecting their children from discrimination. As Lee notes in "Racialization, Schooling, and Becoming America: Asian American Experiences," immigrant parents often guide their children toward elite universities and specific majors to ensure "they are better protected from subjective evaluations" (Lee and Zhou 58). While this strategy is rooted in a desire for security, it often places immense psychological pressure on children, forcing them to prioritize their parents' aspirations over their own dreams. Gogol's struggle to navigate these expectations highlights the complex interplay between cultural heritage, familial duty, and personal identity in immigrant families.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND DIALOGIC RUPTURES

Li's article delves into the cultural conflicts and intergenerational tensions within Asian immigrant families' literacy practices. In contrast, Paulo Freire's "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom and Education and Conscientização" views reading and writing as tools for critical reflection. Li sheds light on

the cultural differences and family pressures faced by second-generation immigrants like Gogol, offering insights into their struggles. Freire provides a framework to understand how individuals like Gogol can actively navigate these challenges through literacy practices, rather than passively succumbing to cultural conflicts. He asserts, "the literacy process, as cultural action for freedom, is an act of knowing in which the learner assumes the role of knowing subject in dialogue with the educator. For this very reason, it is a courageous endeavor to demythologize reality, a process through which men who had previously been submerged in reality begin to emerge in order to re-insert themselves into it with critical awareness" (557).

Freire's concept focuses on awakening individual consciousness. Gogol's choice to change his name to "Nikhil" symbolizes his courage to embrace a new identity, reflecting his attempt to assimilate into American culture while distancing from his Bangladeshi roots. Although this change indicates personal awakening, Gogol initially struggles with the deeper significance of his name and its familial connections. A key moment occurs after his father's sudden death, which propels Gogol's maturation. Initially perceiving his name as a barrier to American integration, he begins to investigate its meaning post-tragedy, reading Nikolai Gogol's works for the first time. This marks the evolution of his critical consciousness as he starts to appreciate the layers of meaning his father intended.

Gogol's repeated name changes show his internal conflict between rejecting and embracing his heritage, ultimately symbolizing his reconciliation with a dual identity. Chakraborty argues, "The very birth and naming of Gogol, therefore, establishes 'home' - especially the social and cultural heritage to which the older Gangulis can lay claim - as already plural" (Chakraborty 612). By reading Nikolai Gogol's works and embracing his name, Gogol acknowledges this multifaceted identity, reflecting a deeper comprehension of his cultural heritage and personal history.

Freire emphasizes the role of dialogue in literacy practices. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's lack of dialogue with his parents shows the cultural and intergenerational tensions obstructing his grasp of traditional culture. The differences in culture, language, and environment between generations make initiating meaningful dialogue challenging. Freire observes, "the difficulty lies rather in the creation of a new attitude — that of dialogue, so absent in our own upbringing and education. The coordinators must be converted to dialogue in order to carry out education rather than domestication. Dialogue is an I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two Subjects" (561).

In the novel's beginning, the conversations between Gogol and his parents are ineffective. His parents' efforts to maintain Bangladeshi traditions often feel imposed as they struggle to comprehend the cultural conflicts Gogol faces at school. As the text notes, "For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust" (66). Gogol frequently rejects their efforts to connect him with cultural traditions, expressing, "He didn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world" (120). This suggests the need for a more dialogic approach in their relationship. Their interactions resemble a hierarchical dynamic rather than the "I-Thou relationship" Freire advocates.

Freire posits that literacy encompasses not only reading and writing but also understanding, describing this as "an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation" (559). Gogol's path to self-transformation begins with his father's death, forcing him to confront his heritage. He participates in the mourning ceremony in Bangladesh and starts reading the books his father had given him. Through this process, Gogol begins to reconcile his dual identity, balancing his American identity with an appreciation for his cultural roots. He becomes more involved with Bangladeshi culture, attending family gatherings with his mother more frequently. He also returns to view his father's photo at their home, acknowledging it as

"the closest thing his father has to a grave" (176). This transformation embodies Freire's idea of self-liberation through critical consciousness. Gogol's acceptance of his traditions and name signifies his acknowledgment of a complex identity. He learns to navigate the conflicts of his dual cultural background. The evolution of Gogol's critical consciousness marks the onset of his self-transformation.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POLYPHONIC LITERACY

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the intricate relationship between cultural identity and literacy, particularly within the Asian American experience. As Fishman notes, "becoming literary is a part of becoming acculturated in one's sociocultural worlds" (Fishman 143). Through the lens of Guofang Li's cultural pedagogy and Paulo Freire's critical consciousness theory, Gogol Ganguli's journey reveals that literacy extends far beyond the mechanics of reading and writing; it encompasses the negotiation of cultural influences that shape one's identity and sense of belonging. Gogol's struggles with literacy are not merely personal but reflect systemic issues embedded in mainstream educational models. Ramirez highlights the dominant 20th-century assimilationist perspective: "Assimilation is a linear and inexorable process. Immigrants arrive and never look back. They change their names, learn English, acquire capital, and participate in mainstream institutions and culture. Within a couple of generations, their descendants blend in" (Ramirez 8). The Namesake challenges this reductive narrative by portraying Gogol's resistance to Bengali literacy as a critique of the Western-centric education system. His refusal to engage with his heritage language emphasizes how mainstream literacy practices often marginalize non-Western epistemologies, positioning them as obstacles to assimilation rather than valuable cultural resources.

Gogol's experiences illustrate how traditional literacy narratives erase or marginalize those outside the mainstream. The Western education system typically frames literacy as a tool for integrating individuals into dominant cultural frameworks, reinforcing the notion that success requires adopting mainstream language and values. This assumption alienates minorities whose cultural literacies diverge from Western norms, excluding them from dominant narratives. Gogol's rejection of Bengali literature and his eventual acceptance of his father's book symbolize the transformative potential of literacy as a site of resistance and self-definition. His reluctance to engage with Bengali texts stems from an internalized belief that literacy is synonymous with Americanization—a belief that leads him to avoid Bengali classes, despite his name, and reject his father's literary gifts.

However, Gogol's eventual embrace of his father's book marks a key moment of self-discovery. This act is not merely about reading but represents a profound reclamation of his cultural identity. As Anzaldúa argues, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (81). Gogol's journey reflects this entanglement, as his delayed acceptance of his name and heritage literature signifies a rejection of assimilationist literacy models. The Namesake thus decentralizes mainstream narratives, reframing literacy as a fluid, contested process rather than a linear path to assimilation. Lahiri portrays literacy as a dynamic practice shaped by power, history, and personal struggle, urging readers to move beyond the notion of literacy as a neutral, universal skill.

Ultimately, Gogol's story shows that literacy should not be reduced to a tool for assimilation but understood as a continuous process of self-doubt, discovery, and resistance. By situating literacy within the contexts of immigration, identity, and power, Lahiri challenges us to rethink its role in shaping cultural and personal narratives and urges educators to re-imagine literacy as a polyphonic practice—one that amplifies marginalized voices while interrogating the gendered and classed hierarchies embedded in "neutral" education. As Gogol learns, reading and writing are not merely skills but acts of cultural survival. In a multicultural society, recognizing the cultural dimensions of literacy is crucial for empowering individuals to navigate multiple identities. *The Namesake* not only

illuminates the challenges faced by Asian Americans but also emphasizes the transformative potential of literacy and critical consciousness, inviting readers to consider how cultural intersections can foster personal growth and a deeper understanding of identity.

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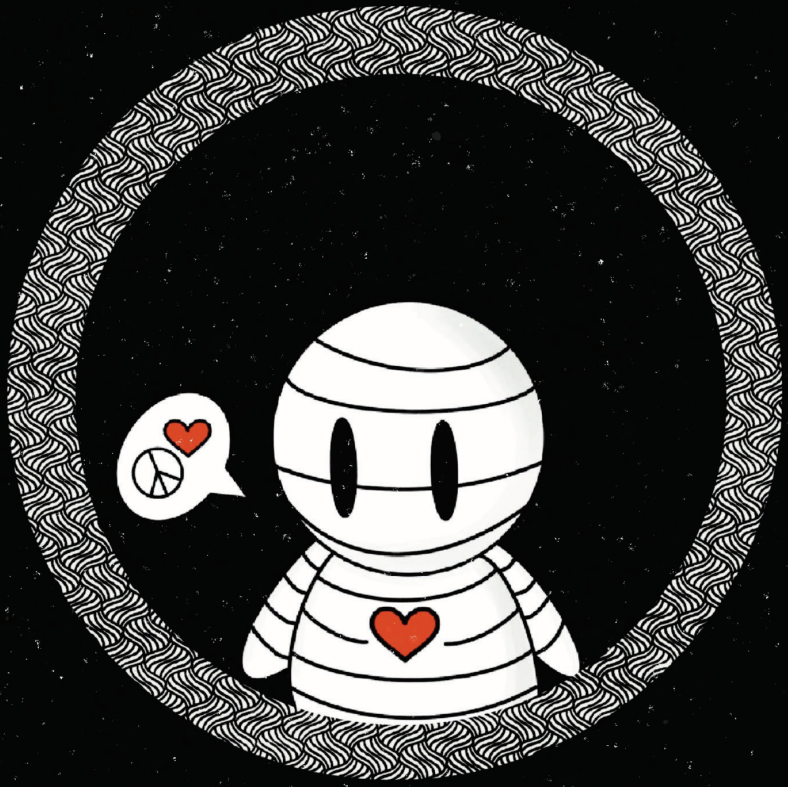
LIVING IS RESISTANCE
by Anjeanette Ang

BEFORE READING

CONTENT WARNING: THIS COMIC CONTAINS DISCUSSIONS OF BIPHOBIA, LGBTQIA+ DISCRIMINATION, NON-CONSENSUAL OUTING, RACISM, MISOGYNY, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, AND ONLINE ABUSE. IT ALSO INCLUDES MENTIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND EMOTIONAL TRAUMA. READER DISCRETION IS ADVISED.

YOUR WELLBEING MATTERS!



THE WEIGHT OF EXISTING
by Gabi Lopez

ROCKY BEGINNINGS

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, I NEVER THOUGHT MY STORY WAS WORTH TELLING. MAYBE IT'S IMPOSTOR SYNDROME, OR MAYBE IT'S FEAR--FEAR OF BEING VULNERABLE IN A WORLD THAT OFTEN REJECTS PEOPLE LIKE ME.

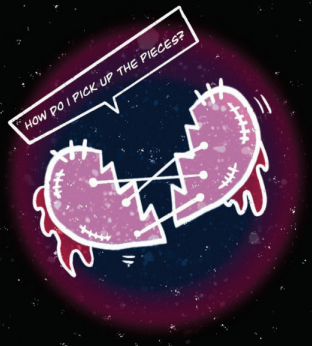
BUT I KNOW THAT SHARING OUR STORIES MATTERS. IF I HAD SEEN MORE PEOPLE LIKE ME IN MEDIA, MAYBE MY JOURNEY WOULDN'T HAVE FELT SO LONEY. IT'S IRONIC--I CRAVE REPRESENTATION, YET I NEVER FELT MY OWN STORY WAS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO SHARE.

I HAVE MY DAYS WHERE I'M PROUD OF WHO I AM, BUT I OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH TAKING UP SPACE. SINCE THERE IS A TINY VOICE IN MY HEAD THAT I AM BETTER OFF KEEPING QUIET.

WHEN I FIRST CAME OUT, I DIDN'T GET THE CHANCE TO DO IT ON MY OWN TERMS. I WAS OUTED BY AN ADULT WHO KNEW BETTER, BUT DIDN'T CARE. MY AUTONOMY WAS RIPPED AWAY, AND I'VE NEVER FORGOTTEN THAT.

IT STILL STINGS WHEN I HEAR ABOUT LAWS TRYING TO OUT TRANS AND LGBTQIA+ KIDS IN SCHOOLS. MY EXPERIENCE WASN'T SOME ISOLATED INCIDENT--IT WAS A PTA MOM WHO THOUGHT MY FEELINGS DIDN'T MATTER, CRUSHING MY SENSE OF SELF-WORTH FOR REASONS I'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND

GROWING UP IN A SMALL TOWN, FAR FROM MY BRONX ROOTS, I ALREADY HAD PLENTY STACKED AGAINST ME--CUBAN, PUERTO RICAN, SPANIARD IN A MOSTLY WHITE, SHELTERED SCHOOL WHERE I NEVER TRULY FELT ACCEPTED.



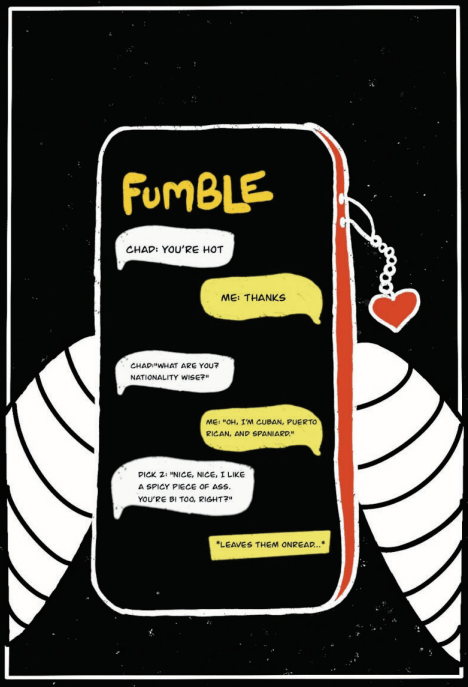
I WAS OFTEN SEEN AS THE "LESS THREATENING" TOKEN SPANISH KID. AND ON TOP OF THAT, I WAS STRUGGLING WITH MY GENDER IDENTITY, NOT EVEN KNOWING THAT NONBINARY WAS A THING. I ALWAYS FELT BROKEN. ACTING OUT OF DEFIANCE OR TAKING UP SPACE WASN'T AN OPTION--UNLESS I WANTED TO FEEL EVEN MORE LIKE AN OUTCAST.

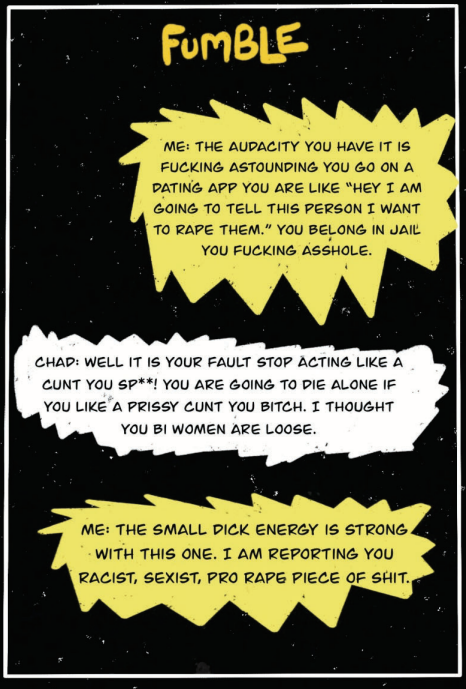
ONLINE DATE HELL

I USED TO BURY MY EMOTIONS, THINKING IT WAS EASIER THAN DEALING WITH THEM. BUT OVER TIME, THAT NUMBNESS GREW INSIDE ME. IT'S LIKE I WAS STUCK BETWEEN DEFIANCE AND FEAR, NOT SURE WHERE ONE ENDED AND THE OTHER BEGAN. I'D TELL MYSELF I WAS FINE, BUT THE TRUTH WAS, I DIDN'T FEEL WHOLE. I WAS JUST... SURVIVING.

MY DATING EXPERIENCE WAS MOSTLY ONLINE. GROWING UP UPSTATE, BEING DIFFERENT MEANT DATING WASN'T EVEN ON THE TABLE. BUT MOVING BACK TO THE CITY WAS OVERWHELMING--ATTRACTION MIXED WITH DESPAIR. I WAS NAIVE, UNPREPARED FOR CONFLICTS, LET ALONE HARASSMENT.

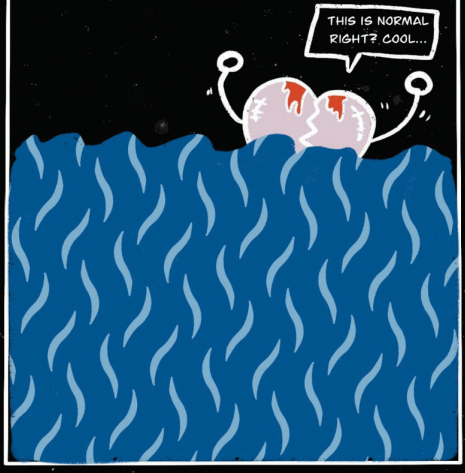
ONLINE DATE HELL





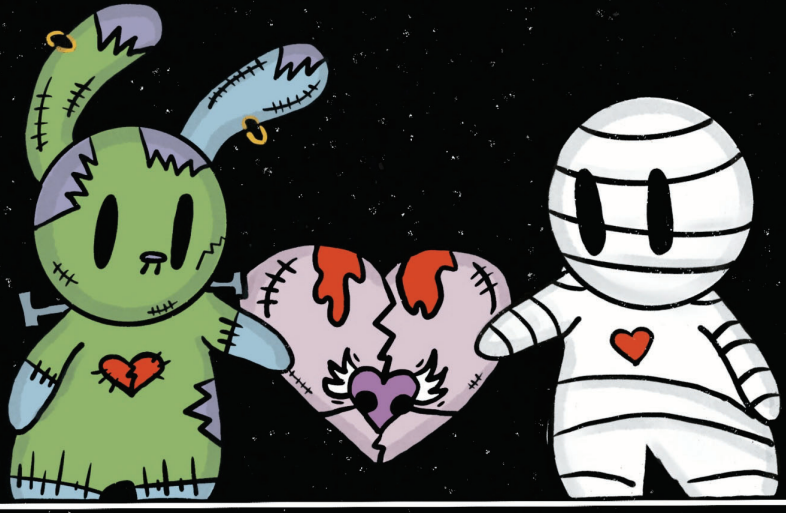
WHAT'S NEXT?

FOR YEARS, I SUPPRESSED MY EMOTIONS, FEELING NUMB. WHEN IT CAME TO STEREOTYPING, I DIDN'T ALLOW MYSELF TO FEEL--BECAUSE WHEN IT HAPPENED SO OFTEN, LETTING ANY EMOTION CREEP IN FELT LIKE DROWNING. FEELING, AT THAT POINT, WAS A LUXURY AND A PRIVILEGE I COULD NEVER AFFORD.



NOW, I TAKE TIME TO PROCESS HOW I FEEL, BUT I CAN'T SHAKE THE FEAR. I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S A COPING MECHANISM OR SOMETHING DEEPER. THE TRUTH IS, MY STORY DOESN'T HAVE A NEAT ENDING. LIKE MANY IN MY COMMUNITY, I STILL CARRY UNCERTAINTY. THERE'S NO CLEAR RESOLUTION, JUST THE COURAGE TO KEEP GOING, EVEN WHEN IT'S HARD AND REST WHEN I NEED TO.

EVERY STORY IS IMPORTANT. WHEN SHOW UP FOR ONE ANOTHER WE CAN WORK TOGETHER TO HEAL



LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION AS A PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS: AN ATTEMPT TO MITIGATE THE VIOLENCE UNIVERSITIES ENACT ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

by Jenn Lebowitz Patel

Content warning: this piece discusses topics of mental health/trauma, oppression, suicide, and harm reduction

As a longtime learning specialist and more recently an adjunct instructor, I have seen brutal and significant suffering amongst college students for almost two decades. I see the source of this suffering as a nexus of academic practices, mental health, and oppression. This shows up in students' grades and graduation rates, as well as the prevalence of mental health issues in academia on campuses. Abundant research supports my observations. In 2021, the Healthy Minds Study out of the University of Michigan showed that more than 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health problem. In 2023, another study found that more than 40% of students were considering dropping out in the previous six months, and most cited mental health and emotional stress as the reason. Lastly, only one in four students in our classrooms will graduate within four years. I believe that abolitionist liberatory harm reduction and critical literacy in our pedagogy provide a path forward, a way through this world of hurt. They require a process of confronting dominant perspectives and normative modes .

We all internalize dominant perspectives through normative ideologies by which we are conditioned – often without even realizing it. A well-known story that illustrates this concept comes from a commencement address by writer and English professor David Foster Wallace:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the hell is water?'" (Wallace par. 1)

While Wallace's "immediate point of the fish story is that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about" (par. 1), for the purposes of this essay, the water we're swimming in is ideology. We drink in dominant perspectives often without knowing other perspectives are available. As in the discipline of English, the fields of critical literacy and social epistemic rhetoric would have us understand.

In Higher Education, we live and breathe dominant perspectives that harm students. These ideologies must be demystified and shattered. In this essay, I invite us to learn from abolitionist organizers, particularly Transformative Justice practitioners' understanding of abolition, for how we may attempt to unsettle these normative modes and beliefs. I propose we consider liberatory harm reduction – as part of a larger project of abolition – in our pedagogy as a

driver of transformation. This pursuit speaks to a larger question rooted in Paulo Freire and bell hooks' theories of critical literacy and critical pedagogy: how can we use education as a practice of freedom when schools are sites of oppression? Dominant perspectives I aim to decenter in this piece include:

1) The idea that schools are spaces that value and prioritize learning. On the contrary, as David Stovall and other abolitionist scholar-activist-educators assert, we must "clearly delineate the difference between 'school' and education" (51); this is "because 'school' in its current form seeks to impose the assumed beliefs and cultural values of White, Western European, protestant, heterosexual, able-bodied cis-gendered males as the normative standard" whereas education would practice "the rejection of the aforementioned" (52)
2) When students don't do well academically, or when students experience mental health issues in college, we tend to believe this is an issue with the individual student. In other words, we locate the source of the problem in the student. On the contrary, we need to be clear that mental health, which often includes the effects of trauma, is inherently tied to systems of oppression but is not often seen nor addressed as such in academia.

In my various academic support and teaching roles in universities and colleges, it's my experience that Higher Education exacerbates these realms of harm structurally and interpersonally. At one university where I worked, several students per week attempted suicide, and 1-2 students died by suicide each year. This is harrowing, and devastatingly, not unique to that institution. The National Education Associated recently reported that "rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation on college campuses have never been higher" (Flannery). It is both despicable and unsurprising that this occurs so often in Higher Ed when you consider that, "From inflicting emotional neglect to acting as a financial predator, the university regularly enacts… a wide range of forms of violence against students" (Gaeta par. 5). The connection to oppression is clear: "Students of color, poor students, disabled students, and queer and trans students… are subject to even grosser forms of abuse and more likely to suffer the consequences simply for existing as themselves". Clearly at schools across the country, we are surrounded by a blatant, catastrophic mental health epidemic. But as much as it's lamented, mainstream discourse locates the mental health epidemic in students' personal "issues" as opposed to societal conditions. This frames the epidemic as ahistorical, depoliticized, and individual, as if it was a mysterious problem with no context or solutions. In reality, "universities enable the same trauma and exploitation that [university mental health services] claim they seek to prevent and heal" (Gaeta par. 2). Troublingly, this makes complete sense when we acknowledge that "schools are in fact microcosms of the societies in which they're embedded" (Winn ix). Liberatory Harm Reduction applied to our critical pedagogical practices can help decenter these harmful dominant perspectives and, to paraphrase Transformative Justice abolitionist adrienne maree brown, instead help us practice the world we want to create.

WHAT IS LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION?

To provide praxis-based underpinnings for the theory that grounds this essay, I turn to abolitionist liberatory harm reduction practitioner Shira Hassan, author of *Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction*. In it, she shares a collection of liberatory harm reduction histories, interviews, essays, and more, which, pertinently, was formed in collaboration with many other longtime practitioners. Tourmaline, a contributor to Hassan's work, first establishes that liberatory harm reduction "isn't a single organization, or even one set of stable beliefs" (xvii). This makes it hard to define, and it's noteworthy that Hassan expects its definition to change as it evolves – which exemplifies a praxis-based approach. For our purposes I will frame liberatory harm reduction as a fluid, dynamic belief system that includes principles, practices, and philosophies that understand how life necessarily involves risk and harm, contextualizes

the root causes of these conditions, and supports individuals' agency and autonomy in the process. It comprises radical, transformative community and culture work and involves "acknowledging that we live inside intersecting systems of egregious harm" (xiii), at "the intersections of structural violence" and "forces such as institutional racism, settler colonialism, ableism, capitalism, misogyny, Islamophobia, homophobia, fatphobia, and transphobia" (2). The act of naming this social, historical, material context serves to decenter yet another dominant perspective, one that sees harm as an individual experience or event, as well as harm reduction as a public health model.

Liberatory harm reduction is not to be confused with mainstream harm reduction. Many people attribute the origin of harm reduction to public health, but in fact, the latter co-opted the movement. A distinct difference between mainstream harm reduction and liberatory harm reduction unconditionally prioritizes "true self-determination and total bodily autonomy". Conversely, as Hassan explains, "honoring people's self-determination is not the point of public health" (32) – nor is it the point in schools, prisons, or any institutions rooted in oppression either. Shira Hassan establishes that "the history and creation of harm reduction as a liberatory strategy… was developed by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who were sex workers, queer, transgender, using drugs, young people, people with disabilities and chronic illness, street-based, and sometimes houseless" (1-2). Any conversation about liberatory harm reduction must include "a clear distinction between [liberatory] practices of harm reduction and the ways that public health and [carceral, as opposed to abolitionist] social work have co-opted their messages and meaning" (Hassan 2). And yet this life-saving and transformative work is often attributed to institutions that co-opted it, as "even those who know that harm reduction did not start in departments of public health largely credit white male needle users with the invention of these principles" (17).

It's likely you practice some form of harm reduction regularly, even if we don't recognize it as such. Everyday actions we take to mitigate harm or decrease our risk of harm such as recycling, wearing a seatbelt, and washing our hands are all examples ("7 Ways" 1). Many industries and disciplines can benefit from a harm reduction model; the one that I focus on here is Higher Education. But there's a difference between harm reduction and liberatory harm reduction, and the latter is tricky to practice in institutions, which I'll illustrate later. Hassan defines liberatory harm reduction as "a philosophy and set of empowerment-based practices that teaches us how to accompany each other as we transform the root causes of harm in our lives" (29). Notably, she elaborates on the paradox that "the inclusion of harm reduction inside public health and social work is a necessary, critical strategy to reduce the combined impact of the deadly medical-industrial complex (MIC), the prison-industrial complex (PIC), and the treatment industry on the lives of people it claims to serve with dignity and respect" (3). But for harm reduction to be liberatory, it must be abolitionist. As Hassan explains, "public health must own that it cannot practice a Liberatory Harm Reduction inside those dehumanizing, ableist, and death-making systems, and it must admit that it did not create, grow, or honor the roots of this praxis" (3). The same is true for universities. Higher Education is a dehumanizing, ableist, and even death-making system, so we can only attempt to practice liberatory harm reduction if we are also working towards abolition.

TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE AND ABOLITION

If harm reduction is only liberatory if it is abolitionist, it is important to get clear on what we mean by abolition. There are various forms of abolition, and many wide-ranging approaches and beliefs that fall under the term, so to be clear, I study abolition in the lineage of Transformative Justice (TJ). TJ is "a political framework and approach for responding to violence, harm and abuse. At its most basic, it seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence" (Mingus par. 3). This requires abolishing, not reforming, systems such as prisons

and schools because the systems themselves perpetuate violence. This delineation is important, and invokes another principle of TJ abolition, which is to build systems that actually meet the needs that prisons and schools purport to meet but actually obstruct, such as justice and learning respectively. TJ abolition doesn't deny that we need systems to address societal needs, but it's honest about what our current systems actually do. For example, TJ seeks "to create responses to violence that do what criminal punishment systems fail to do: build support and more safety for the person harmed, figure out how the broader context was set up for this harm to happen, and how that context can be changed so that this harm is less likely to happen again" (Kaba 59). Notably, like liberatory harm reduction, it is "a community process developed by anti-violence activists of color, in particular" (59). Relatedly, the term "prison industrial complex" (PIC) is widely used in abolition; as the abolitionist organization Critical Resistance explains, it is used "to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems" (par. 1). This is important because it speaks to the reality of the PIC as a profiteering enterprise rather than its supposed (but not factual) claims to provide rehabilitation or justice – another dominant perspective we must decenter.

I'm elaborating on the prison industrial complex and PIC abolition because it is a necessary foundation for any attempt to practice liberatory harm reduction, particularly in education systems. Critical Resistance defines prison abolition as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance, and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment" (par. 3). One stark example that illustrates this is Danielle Sered's research on violence, which explains that "violence is driven by shame, isolation, exposure to violence, and an inability to meet one's economic needs — factors that are also the core features of imprisonment" (5). While the PIC claims to seek justice, it actually perpetuates violence and injustice. PIC abolitionists, on the other hand, work to create systemic conditions where achieving repair, rehabilitation, accountability, and justice are possible. As the authors of *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice* explain, "Abolishing prisons doesn't mean letting violence go unfettered but rather establishing systems of justice that hold the entire community accountable for the traumas that induce such violence" (Marya and Patel 334).

Because we are taught to connect prisons with rehabilitation or justice, people often find the idea of ending schools and prisons jarring. This is understandable, but it's crucial to recognize that Transformative Justice abolition is about creating alternatives to achieve the goals that these harmful systems pretend to address but actually worsen (like prisons with justice or schools with education). In *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, Mariame Kaba fleshes out the definition: "While some people might think of abolition as primarily a negative project – 'Let's tear everything down tomorrow and hope for the best' – PIC abolition is a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need: food, shelter, education, health, art, beauty, clean water, and more things that are foundational to our personal and community safety" (2). This is a root-cause approach to addressing societal problems that accurately locates sources of problems in structures and systems, not individuals.

What does this have to do with universities? There are direct connections between the PIC and universities across all levels. Tufts University Prison Initiative of Tisch College breaks this down in Figure 1.

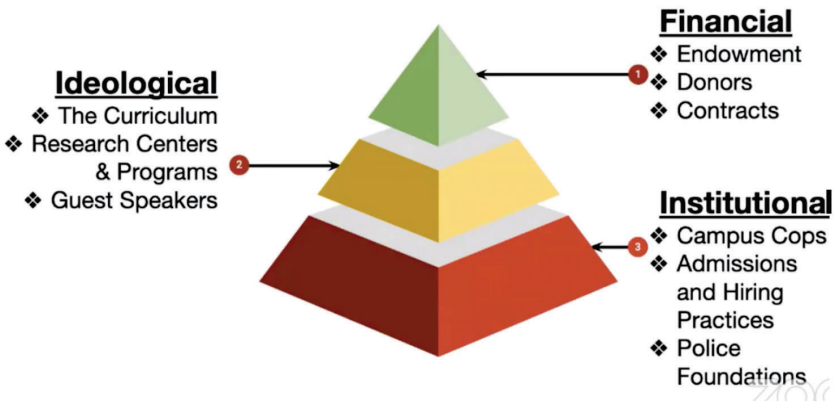


Fig 1.: Illustration of the relationship between the Prison Industrial Complex and Higher Education in the United States. Tufts University Prison Divestment, website.

It's important to understand how universities are complicit in the prison industrial complex. As Figure 1 illustrates, universities support and/or replicate the PIC across various levels: financially, through investments and endowments; structurally, through admissions policies and hiring practices; and ideologically, through our curricula, our research, and our pedagogy. This connection to the PIC exists across all levels of the university, meaning that we can practice abolition across all of those levels, which can look a lot of different ways, so there's innumerable possibilities. Ending these systems and structures is going to take a long time, but in the meantime, suffering and harm continues. So how do we mitigate or reduce that harm and suffering? That's where liberatory harm reduction comes in.

Connections Between Abolition And Critical Literacy

Like abolition, critical literacy's potential to transform our lives is deeply related to its ability to increase our notions of what is possible, both in schools and society, which is helped by a decentering of dominant perspectives. Borrowing from Valerie Kinloch, a concise yet profound definition of critical literacy is "acts, practices, and events in context" (7). Contextualizing literacy is akin to the abolitionist practice of contextualizing school as part of the school-prison nexus, as abolitionist educators do. Contextualizing literacy enables it to be "transformative, reciprocal, and emerging" (Kinloch 45), because context always takes history into account, and therefore is never apolitical. Such contextualizing makes literacy a site for reflexive study and analysis, and critical literacy has long facilitated the work of decentering dominant perspectives. Paraphrasing Friere, Kinloch provides another definition of critical literacy as empowering "people to critically analyze, synthesize, and question information, and read, write, and critique words and the world" (9). With this framing, "education can help transform the socio-material conditions of existence" (Alvarez 20). In this way, critical literacy and abolition expand notions of what is possible by way of necessarily political, analytical practices that question dominant perspectives. Critical scholar-educators show the inextricable link between reflection and action, or in other words praxis, that comes with critical literacy – as well as abolition.

Kinloch illustrates how Freirean literacy practices help us "re-imagine the purposes and functions of schooling" (169). This reimagining

shows another parallel between critical literacy and abolition by way of creativity. Abolitionists certainly employ creative critical literacy practices, even if they don't necessarily call them that. Kaba explains that abolition is "a positive project of creation as much as it's a negative project of dismantling" ("Steps to End Prisons & Policing") because we must imagine new systems and new ways of being to replace our current, extraordinarily harmful structures and processes. We see similarities in Freire, and the connection between creativity (by way of art) and a pedagogy that makes space for freedom when he asserts that "the teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves" (Horton 181). Reimagining systems and our roles within them in ways that increase personal and collective agency are as central to critical literacy and abolition as they are absent from our school systems.

These critical literacy and abolitionist approaches to education, rather than prescribing what students should do, opens up possibilities for students' own self-actualization or conscientization through problem-posing of our normative modes or dominant perspectives. Even though it's not referred to as critical literacy, we see how university abolitionist scholars practice problem-posing to create new possibilities for society via education when they explore how "abolition… offers the occasion for thinking about the university in ways that the institution itself might otherwise render impossible. And in doing so it may offer an occasion to trouble the institution as we know and inhabit it – and as it inhabits us" (Boggs et al. 2). Problem-posing as a literacy practice inherent to abolition is a helpful foundation from which we can understand and use liberatory harm reduction to address the egregious state of Higher Education.

The alignment between critical literacy and abolition speaks to both the problems of, and the problem that is, the university. It also invokes ways we internalize and enact oppression (i.e., how the institution "inhabits us"). This returns us to the essay's underlying inquiry: how do we use education as a tool of liberation when schools are sites of oppression? Critical literacy scholar-educators and abolition theorist-organizers provide generative sites from which to explore that question, which necessarily involves decentering dominant perspectives and unsettling normative modes we've been conditioned into using often without our knowledge or consent. This is all too prevalent in common pedagogical practices in universities.

APPLYING LIBERATORY HARM REDUCTION IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

Given these conditions, what might a praxis of liberatory harm reduction in Higher Education look like? I propose it's a potential response to the status quo conditions Tourmaline describes in writing that we are "reliant on systems that extract value from us without offering anything in return" (Hassan xvii-xix) and in these systems, we can be among those "who figure out what needs to be done to make one another's lives more livable, and who proceed to do it". I believe practicing critical literacy with an abolitionist harm reduction lens is not only worthwhile, it is perhaps the only ethical option. This lens can help us see where educators may already have this praxis, how we can sustain it, where we can increase it and further support it, and maybe make more ways for us to be in community with each other. Liberatory harm reduction is only possible to practice in universities if we are working to replace our current versions of 'school.' Those of us in English departments may be particularly well-suited for this
work, given critical literacy's prevalence and accessibility in our field (depending on the department, of course).

Illustrating Liberatory Harm Reduction: An Example, Not A Blueprint

But First, Caveats

Several caveats are necessary before I share a concrete example of liberatory harm reduction in universities. One is that this is all praxis, not a universal nor ready-to-use suggestion. Second, I

would only use this method in some courses and not others, depending on what kind of assessments make sense for what purpose. For example, when I teach courses on academic success strategies, the grading method I'm about to introduce works for me, as it shows me how a student is progressing in developing their skills in time management and study strategies. This is highly personalized, contextualized subject matter. If, however, I was teaching someone to become a licensed nail tech, for example, then this grading system would not work because it doesn't tell me whether or not the student learned what they need to know to perform that job safely. Obviously, I grade differently depending on what is needed to facilitate how students will achieve the learning outcomes specific to each course, and the type of information I need to know from assessments to see if they are learning or not. In an abolitionist sense, this is a way to address the specific need or goal of any given system and work toward actually achieving that with non-carceral, purpose-oriented logic, as well as creating conditions conducive to those outcomes.

My third and final caveat is that harm reduction is not the end goal itself, and it is praxis. (Praxis meaning the model of change established by Freire and shaped by bell hooks; it is a continuous process of putting theory into action and reflecting on it, towards ever-progressing iterations). Since, as Rodriguez asserts, "even 'radical' pedagogies… are capable of even remotely justifying, defending, or tolerating a proto-genocidal prison regime" (8), we must be vigilant about using harm reduction not as a standalone pedagogical tool, but as part of a larger project of transformation. The example I provide here can therefore serve as what he calls "rigorous experimentation and creative pedagogical radicalism," which is "the very soul of this praxis" (14). This spirit of disciplined experimentation and collaboration is one in which I share this example.

Grading as a Practice of Liberatory Harm Reduction

Grading is a pillar of how we perpetuate harm in schools. While research shows that "grading does not appear to provide effective feedback that constructively informs students' future efforts" (Schinske and Tanner 161), it continues to anchor our entire school system, despite the fact that "little has changed" since the "letter grades used now gained widespread popularity in the 1940s" (CTL and annemaiello par. 2). Boise State's Center for Teaching and Learning explains that "not only are grades problematic for students (e.g., by dampening motivation to learn and creating an adversarial relationship with their instructor)… [but also] traditional grades bear little relationship to learning. Perhaps most importantly though, traditional grading schemes can reinforce historic and continuing inequities in higher education" (par. 4). For educators, "the time and energy spent on grading has been often pinpointed as a key barrier to instructors becoming more innovative in their teaching" (Schinske and Tanner 165). It is well-documented (if perhaps under-acknowledged in practice) that grading hinders learning, particularly grades derived through summative feedback where the primary focus is the score. Formative assessments, however, have been shown to promote learning through the use of process-oriented feedback. As educators rushing through an unreasonable number of tasks and responsibilities (another consequence of oppressive, inequitable, structural harm within education), it can be easy to conflate these two forms of assessment. This disconnect is a critical space to interrogate and clarify our methods for assessing students and for what purposes. It is an opportunity to imagine new perspectives on grading and new practices to enhance student learning and well-being.

These and many other insights from literature on grading means that rethinking how we grade is a way to decenter normative modes. While there is significant discourse about alternative grading methods such as contract grading and "ungrading," the framework of liberatory harm reduction applied to grading is a worthwhile addition to this exploration. Using the abolitionist

practice of identifying the needs we are trying to meet, and being clear about the root causes of our current conditions and problems, we might start by asking, what is the purpose of grading in my class? This may seem like too obvious of a question. Of course, we want our students to learn and we want to be able to measure their learning. We also are required to give grades. Knowing that academic performance compounds mental health issues and is rooted in systems of oppression, what could a grading policy that confronts this intersection of harm look like?

Figure 2 shows a grading policy I was lucky to inherit at an organization called Fountain House, which used to run a program called College Re-Entry. It served individuals aged 18-30 who had dropped out of school for mental health reasons, and were now attending this program to prepare to return to college. I taught a class called "Student Skills," which, to put it simply, is a classroom version of what I do in one-on-one sessions as a learning specialist. For context, as a learning specialist, I help students develop an ecosystem of skills, habits, and strategies that are required to do well in school, but are not typically taught in school. This includes time management, organization, study strategies, note-taking, effective reading methods, as well as dealing with mental and emotional components of academic work, like procrastination, motivation, perfectionism, and more. The example below is the grading policy we used in the Student Skills course at College Re-Entry.

3/3 = Assignment submitted on-time, and complete
2/3 = Assignment submitted on time, and partially complete
1/3 = Assignment submitted late (anytime after due date)
0/3 = Assignment not submitted

Fig. 2: Grading policy adapted from Student Skills Course, College Re-Entry at Fountain House

My purpose in facilitating this grading policy was to use it as a version of formative feedback. Carnegie Mellon University's Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation explains that "the goal of formative assessment is to monitor student learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning" (University par. 1). Notably, "formative assessments are generally low stakes, which means that they have low or no point value" (par. 2). While my grading system did have point value, the acquiring of the number grade was relatively low stakes in what it took to achieve the full credit of 3/3.

I see this grading system as a way to reduce harm and decenter dominant perspectives such as "grades define you" – a common sentiment raised by my students in a unit about dominant narratives that harm us – as well as the dominant perspective promoted by the universal ubiquity of grading, that grades the end-all be-all, for multiple reasons:

1) The points are earned based on whether a student completed the assignment and submitted it on time, no matter the "quality" of the content. (Remember my caveats that this is not applicable in every course, and glean what you can from the process/thinking behind this approach.) For example, I encouraged students to answer a question with a "non-answer answer" such as "I'm having trouble responding to this and here's why" or even "I don't know". This was extremely pertinent and useful in the context of the program's purposes – we were working on getting work submitted in full and on-time, not looking for exemplary responses. That's not to say students didn't turn in brilliant assignments – they absolutely did. I observed that when students knew their work would be graded on completeness and punctuality, and they "merely" needed to submit the assignment in full and on-time for the equivalent of an "A" (or 3/3), they're able to complete work with less pressure and, typically, more consistently and productively.
    a) This is also where context comes into play, because this approach often sheds light on a broader array of challenges students are facing – the existence of which academia often ignores, denies, or takes for granted (i.e. financial, social,

students are facing – the existence of which academia often ignores, denies, or takes for granted (i.e., financial, social, cultural, psychological, and structural conditions that pose challenges to submitting assignments). And if it is content-related, that becomes clear through this process as well. This grading practice helps illuminate issues we might not see otherwise.

2) Decreasing the pressure of being "good enough" – particularly in systems where "good" is metric saturated with subjectiveness, inequity, and bias – allowed us to focus on this adjacent but also significant skill set. It can be understood as a form of scaffolding or support.

3) How a student achieves full credit, albeit numerical, counters summative assessments where high-stakes grading centers the score and, as aforementioned, decreases learning.

4) Often, students shine when the pressure of content is removed; students who previously handed in work chronically incomplete or late find themselves submitting work on time and getting As (sometimes for the first time). These wins give students an embodied experience of "doing" school in a new way, providing a somatic and fully realized experience of success. This provides a new narrative about themselves as students, and is completely legitimate based on the scoring system

If this is not a grading policy you can adopt in your class – that's understandable, and that's also not the point. The real question is: where might you take an abolitionist stance in your pedagogy? What can you provide that addresses root causes of problems, or look to change the conditions that create harm? How might you decenter grading and center learning? You may find you already practice forms of liberatory harm reduction. Lastly, and importantly, where can you practice abolition internally, so to speak?

No matter what kind of grading systems we employ, to think we are only turning our attention to grading is reductive. PIC abolitionists make the need for internalizing abolition clear: "When we say abolish police. We also mean the cop in your head and in your heart" (Tourmaline). We must interrogate ourselves thoroughly – the personal inner perspectives driving our practices, which go deeper than the tools we use. Why? We embody and inflict ideologies we've internalized not only through our thoughts, actions, and systems, but also incredibly personally, through what perhaps makes us most human: our emotions. What may not be obvious in the context of academia where we often live "from the neck up" is that change work is intensely emotional work. In discussing the seemingly instinctive desire to punish that arises in us when someone commits serious harm, Angela Davis explains, "we often fall back on what our impulses, conditioned as they are by ideologies, make us feel. And, there's a way in which these notions of justice have become inscribed on our very emotions" (Sawyer and Kuebrich 56). This means not only our ideologies but our feelings must be addressed if we are going to do abolitionist work. It might be easier to think about these ideas in theory or "out there," because seeing how we ourselves are part of the problem can be more than humbling, it can be deeply disturbing. Interrogating ourselves is difficult, humbling work. I say this as someone with almost twenty years of experience in Higher Education and I know the pain of recognizing, again and again, where I might be complicit in systemic harm. Those moments of recognition are an opportunity to decenter what a harmful if traditional practice, and make a new choice. The work of decentering what we were taught to do or grew to do is hard emotional labor.

The skillset or muscle-building it takes to do difficult emotional labor is crucial in terms of analyzing how we are implicated not only structurally by our participation in institutions that are complicit in the PIC, but in recognizing where we have personally, albeit likely unintentionally, employed the "cop in our heads" in our classrooms? We can look at grading policies and practices as potential sites of punitive justice, even if subconsciously. Our grading policies are, of course, political. They are also personal. It may feel ugly to admit, but it takes emotional labor to address issues like incomplete assignments or significant absences in a more creative and expansive way than traditional punitive measures, the ones we likely

experienced as students and learned to use as educators. Practicing university abolition means we work to address the realms outlined by the Tufts diagram (illustrated in Figure 1), including the ideological, financial, and institutional ways universities are connected to the PIC – but it also requires the deep, inner work of seeing how we are enacting cop-like behavior in our teaching. It's easier to point to an institution doing things inequitably, it's harder to see how we are, in fact, "doing the work of the state through our own emotions" (57). The work of deconstructing harmful ideologies we've internalized is rigorous, emotional work. We typically think of emotions as such personal and small-scale things, but as adrienne maree brown asserts, "small is all" and "the large is a reflection of the small" (*Emergent Strategy* 41). So these seemingly minute and "individual" interventions are very real and significant ways to practice liberatory harm reduction in our corners of the world, as we also work to achieve abolition structurally and financially. A crucial task then is to confront ideologies we inherit to decrease student suffering while contributing to abolitionist movements and directions in Higher Education, not only in theory but also in practice – which requires decentering dominant perspectives around and within us.

CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE ORGANIZERS TELL US WE MUST PRACTICE THE WORLD WE WANT TO CREATE

Liberatory harm reduction is "the work and practice of staying alive together" (Hassan 09:32-09:36). This is particularly poignant as Higher Education is in multiple full-fledged crises, some of which are literally life-and-death. But if you think about the context in which universities exist, these crises are not new. We live on unceded Indigenous lands where what's now called the United States has driven multiple forms of genocide over centuries. We have never existed without extreme, systemic violence, and "we've always been in crisis" (Kynard 133). Dehumanization is the status quo caused by neoliberal, imperialist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal cultures of domination, in which Higher Education is not only steeped but plays a fundamental role. This status quo is hidden by false ideologies, such as schooling is the same as learning, or the state of our mental health is rooted in individuals rather than society. Since universities inflict violence against students across all four levels of oppression – what Bree Picower refers to the "Four I's": ideological, interpersonal, institutional, and internalized oppression (11) – in order to address mental health issues on college campuses, and to stop systematically harming our students, we must clarify the root causes of these conditions by decentering prevailing paradigms about schools and students. While of course students bear personal responsibility for their learning and wellbeing (including coursework and healing work), we won't achieve the structural transformation we direly need if we interpret these issues as individual versus societal. Where this leaves us as educators is to center seemingly radical paths like abolitionist harm reduction.

As I've discussed in this essay, however, institutionalizing liberatory harm reduction is not possible in the academy as we know it, because the system is antithetical to it. So our application of harm reduction in schools can only be liberatory if it is abolitionist. As Dylan Rodriguez explains,

> There is, in the end, no teaching formula or pedagogical system that finally fulfills the abolitionist social vision, there is only a political desire that understands the immediacy of struggling for human liberation from precisely those forms of systemic violence and institutionalized dehumanization that are most culturally and politically sanctioned, valorized, and taken for granted within one's own pedagogical moment. (14)

If our use of liberatory harm reduction is anything but abolitionist, we are merely keeping the oppression machine going. We don't practice liberatory harm reduction to make the brutality a little more bearable, we practice liberatory harm reduction because abolition will take a significant amount of time to achieve, and in the meantime we need to mitigate violence. Paradoxical as it may seem, I am saying that

e1) it is not possible to implement liberatory harm reduction structurally in universities, and 2) it is our responsibility to embody humanizing, abolitionist practices within the personal and collective "pedagogical moment" in which we live, and which we must transform. Our students' lives depend on it.

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DECENTERING THE HUMAN: THE NATURAL WORLD IN *NORTH WOODS*

by Abigail Davis

American nature writing reveals a continually changing relationship between humans and the land. From early explorations when landscape was seen as a commodity, to nature writers feeling a strong sense of connection to the land, the way Americans have viewed and interacted with nature frequently shifted. Thus, the New England landscape, during the period of intense colonization and after, experienced significant transformations. The diverse ecosystems that once existed were altered to accommodate people and industry. Daniel Mason's novel, *North Woods*, offers a unique glimpse into this history as it follows the numerous inhabitants of a cabin in the north woods of Massachusetts over many centuries. However, readers don't learn about the shift in landscape solely through human storytelling or the human perspective. Instead, Mason decenters the human as much as possible and gives agency to non-human material to describe the way the New England landscape changes over time. His human characters interact with the non-human, but human interaction and dialogue are not the main sources of information to depict changes in the land. Mason uses various material forms, such as case notes, letters, insects, weather, and art to reveal transformations in the north woods landscape and to create unique moments of preservation that differ from not only ecological investigations, but also novelistic treatments of nature. Whether it's the fine details of a painting or the dramatic adventure of a spore traveling in the wind, readers experience the changes in the north woods through a unique perspective that offers a new way of understanding how landscape has changed and also how it's alive and interactive, both with humans and because of humans. As a result, Mason resists the typical perspective of humans as dominant over nature, and more importance is placed on the interconnectedness between the human and non-human.

North Woods focuses on the complex relationships between nature and humans. The novel works well with the emergent discourse of material ecocriticism, which explores the ways the human and material world are enmeshed and continually working together to create new narratives and stories. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, argue, in their book Material Ecocriticism, that "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies" and they refer to the "material 'mesh'" in which "human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (2). Nature is no longer passive material, and instead becomes an agentic object. Iovino and Oppermann create a space where new materialist and ecocritical thinking merge to discuss the intra-action between material and meaning, the

ehuman and the nonhuman. Just as the field of environmental humanities seeks to reframe our thinking of environmental problems and solutions, Iovino and Oppermann point out that by breaking down the anthropocentric views of agency and the binary between the human and the nonhuman, we can better understand the web of interaction between humans and nonhuman (3). In turn, this can produce new ways of understanding these connections and ways to adapt to living in a world where we look at things "dis-anthropocentrically" (8). These "nonhuman players" can be any material object: an animal, a plant, a rock, a house, and even a book. These material objects are in constant engagement with the human and break down already established categorical hierarchies and assumptions.

Material ecocriticism is a critical context to Mason's project. In a 2023 interview with Waterstones, Mason comments on the issue of agency when he explains the connection between the presence of both nature and human nature:

> The natural world was central to this book. Previously, I had mostly thought of the natural world as setting only; this time, I wanted to write something in which the non-human was treated with the same importance as human—not just setting, but plot and characterization. And the more I wrote the more I recognized how much plot and character was present in the natural world. This was not just the juicy stuff (though there is more than enough sex and violence in nature), but also extraordinarily complex relationships. ("An Exclusive Q&A")

Mason's mention of the non-human agency helps eliminate the assumption that non-human structures are passive or motionless. His ability to artfully construct his novel such that nature is the main character, plot, and setting makes evident the complexity between the human and the non-human. In this case, the non-human can be interpreted as not only nature and landscape in the novel, but also the novel itself. As characters in the novel engage with the north woods, readers engage with the text, seeing the transformation of the landscape through Mason's writing and the characters' experiences.

Given Mason's unconventional approach to novel writing, it is not surprising that his greatest influences may have been two environmental historians. In particular, Mason was influenced by William Cronon's Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (1983) and Tom Wessels' Reading the Forested Landscape (1997). Cronon offers what he calls an "ecological history of colonial New England" that discusses the reasons for the change in the New England landscape and the ways that both Native Americans and English colonists shaped the land (xv). His writing was influential during a time when nature was seen as more of a commodity than a space to be protected, and as a result, Cronon emphasized the importance of the human-nature relationship: "writing a history of such relationships inevitably brings to center stage a cast of nonhuman characters which usually occupy the margins of historical analysis if they are present in it at all" (xv). He places emphasis on nature, showing its important role in changes that take place in the natural world, and these changes are often, but not always, linked to human action. It is difficult to separate humans from the natural world, thus anticipating material ecocriticism and its understanding that all material objects are enmeshed in ways that make that it "arduous for humans to declare their agentic independence in a hybrid, vibrant, and living world" (Iovino and Oppermann 3). Though Mason has written a genuinely unique novel, he is participating in and furthering a discourse of ecological history and contemporary environmental theory.

Wessels's *Reading the Forested Landscape* explores what he describes as "varied forest patterns of central New England" and helps trace the history and reasons for these ecological changes (15). Mason mentions Wessels's book when discussing the influences for North Woods and says that Wessels "taught me how to begin to see the past in the forests today" (John Murray Press). Similar to Cronon, Wessels wants people to understand nature in a larger sense than they're used to, hoping they can learn from the way various events and encounters, both from nature and from humans, have affected the patterns and made changes in the landscape.

Cronon points to the importance of understanding these changes by explaining that "The great strength of ecological analysis in writing history is its ability to uncover processes and long-term changes which might otherwise remain invisible" (vii). Mason does exactly this and uncovers various histories of the New England landscape, but instead of writing historiography as Cronon and Wessels do, Mason represents the natural history of the north woods through the artistic structure of his book and the various stories he tells.

One of the best representations of how Mason shifts perspective to the non-human is through landscape paintings: they act as a form of preservation while decentering the human and documenting changes in the landscape. In a letter to his friend and author Erasmus Nash, the fictional painter William Henry Teale discusses the aesthetics of landscape paintings and explains his desire to paint in a way that causes dissolution between man and nature or "a oneness with the world" (144). Rather than paint a landscape that appears to be through "man's eyes," Teale wants to capture the perspective of "beast as seen by beast, tree as seen by tree" (144). He points out painter Thomas Cole's inability to decenter the human in landscape paintings, referencing *The Oxbow*, in which Cole actually paints himself into the landscape and disrupts the ability to cohesively connect with the work of art. Teale's desire to portray nature as accurately as possible, but not through an idealized view, challenges the aestheticization of nature, typical of both landscape painters and novels. By decentering the human, he is capturing a more realistic and accurate sense of the landscape. Teale's desire to preserve something in its more natural state is seen in other letters to Nash when he cannot bring himself to clear any of Mary and Alice's clutter saying, "I haven't quite yet gotten up the nerve to wipe them from the earth" and when he describes the snow-covered ground and writes, "Walking through her felt an act of violation. All day I wished that I might erase my tracks" (135). This mindset is what ultimately leads to Teale's paintings becoming a source of preservation and an opportunity to see the New England landscape as it existed previously, both for future readers and characters.

Teale's landscape paintings ultimately act to preserve the New England landscape. This preservation is seen at the end of the novel when Nora, a modern day botanist, mentions how impactful Teale's paintings have been to her professional work. Initially, Nora has little interest in viewing Teale's paintings since she believes landscape painters often create "impossible juxtapositions, the imagined trees, the meadows of flowers that would never be found together" (349). She discovers that she shares Teale's views of how nature should be presented. Indeed, once Nora views Teale's paintings, she realizes they are "photographically precise and seemingly intent on recording exactly what he was seeing, rather than composing something pleasing to the eye" (349). Here, Nora acknowledges Teale's ability to do exactly what he mentioned in his letter to Nash—paint in a way that does not commodify nature. He succeeds in this endeavor and Nora points out the way his paintings accurately document nature:

> She could identify at least a dozen species in every work, down to his clubmosses, and his way of painting in the same spot across the years and seasons gave a window into the lost landscape of Western Massachusetts where she had done much of her work. It was as if she had traveled back almost two hundred years to make a species survey of the same kind she made from lake cores and surveyors' books. (349-350)

Because of Teale's success in removing the human subject from nature in his work, his paintings become another guide or manual to the natural history of the area. From Teale's paintings, Nora gains the same kind of knowledge she would from her own scientific work. However, instead of using tools to survey the actual landscape, she can find some of the same information in Teale's art.

Mason also uses forgotten film reels, that sort of mirror late 20th-Century landscape paintings, to uncover what the north woods landscape once looked like before natural and human impact. Robert, a character suffering from schizophrenia, creates films that capture the change in the New

the pasture" (103). However, Mason notes that the pasture in the north woods is not necessarily quiet once the sheep are gone, and instead there is an "irruption of a strange, besieging army that has been lying in wait" and that this is the result of an "invasion" from Yarmouth near the Isle of Wight (103). The language used in this initial description conjures images of battle and war, emphasizing the invasiveness of the non-native species he's about to describe. At Yarmouth, a ship's hold was loaded with ballast to help it stay balanced during its voyage, and it contained seeds that were "uncountable, scattered in the humid load: red clover, groundsel, spurrey, trefoil, meadow fescue, dandelion, hedge parsley" (104). These seeds will be introduced to New England, and Mason uses the arrival of these species to show how quickly they take hold of the land. Most seeds are airborne, but Mason depicts the ways that seeds can uniquely be deposited through human contact with nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the two. Seeds can travel by "the felted boots of a young girl," "in a hemp sack, dropped by a Dutch settler," "in the cracks of an old shoe, and the hem of a skirt" (104-105). The simplest interactions between humans and the land allow for these seeds to easily spread and germinate. At the end of the footnote, Mason returns to the cabin in the woods after noting how the landscape there is about to look different than before the arrival of new plant species: "one by one they nestle in among the native grasses, some so swiftly that it will seem like they have always been there (for it is hard to imagine there was a time before dandelions, before thistle). Others creep up the valley slowly, field by field, until they reach the yellow house" (105). Mason again avoids cliché in using the absence of sheep to examine how easily invasive species can thrive.

A final example of the agency of nature is Mason's depiction of the blight spore, a balance of destruction and beauty, and it offers readers an uncommon perspective of the harmful impact of blight upon chestnut trees. He describes a scenario ideal for blight, beginning the chapter with a quick recap of how the landscape around the Osgood house had already begun to change since the "pasture gave way to bramble, bramble to brush, and brush to birch and pine, while oak and beech and chestnut rose from the nuts abandoned by the squirrel killed one winter morning by the owl's strike" (207). He establishes a list of changes that inhabitants have already witnessed over the years and then jumps into the journey of a blight spore. Similar to the description of the ballast, he uses threatening imagery to describe the spore, referring to it as "one of these bullets" from fruiting bodies that "gun their ammunition into the wind" (208). Beginning with this kind of description emphasizes the violence that blight does to the forest, yet the imagery quickly changes as Mason describes its departure. It travels through the air, described as someone leaving home for the first time on some sort of grand adventure: "the spore has never left its host tree" and "release, therefore, when the west wind comes sweeping sheets of spores off of the ruined forest, bring about a transformation that is nothing less than ecstasy. Loose, tumbling, it rises above the death around it, departs its host's crown, skims the canopy, swirls through the tugging eddies of a wavery summer pine, and is sucked to the sky" (208). The spore's movement is described in detail, and it's a blissful movement that takes it away from a dead forest to a new location full of life. As the spore continues to rise even higher, the feeling of bliss is increased: "for a blessed moment, it seems as if it might dissolve into the air or soar so high it won't come down again. Briefly, the pleasure—for what else can we call such chemistry?—is almost unbearable, until, within a cloud, it strikes a gathering raindrop" (208). From here it clings to a dog, is shaken into the air, and unfortunately lands on a chestnut in the north woods in a part of the forest currently untouched by blight. The spore's journey lands it in the north woods, where the chestnuts "are thriving when the inoculum sets down" (209). Mason juxtaposes the spore's emotionally rich journey with the destruction that will ensue. In viewing this destruction from the spore's perspective, instead of through the eyes of a scientist or another human, Mason demonstrates a radically de-aestheticized nature.

Mason's novel works to extend the

England landscape. After Robert's death, his sister Helen arrives at the cabin and finds numerous film reels that Robert created to try to record his hallucinations. Although he wasn't successful in recording the voices of Alice, Mary, or the other "Soul Heirs" listed on his tapes, Helen sees documentary-like footage of the north woods landscape. She recognizes the "beech and birches, and now the old, weathered trees, their new shoots full of blushing fruit," she is puzzled by "a brown bird, unknown to her," and she watches "a bed of moss and lichen, beetle lumbering across the frame" (296-297). Helen sees species that are foreign and familiar to her and trees that have aged and are sprouting new growth, all depicting years of change. Although Robert recorded these moments to capture the voices he heard, there are no voices or people in the actual footage. Instead, what remains is nature. As was the case with Teale's paintings, the human subject is removed from the films, and instead there becomes a documented history of the shift in the north woods over all four seasons. Because Helen is watching these long after they were recorded, her recognition of what has changed or remains the same demonstrates alterations that the north woods have already experienced.

Mason also gives agency to specific creatures within the nature he depicts. In a moment where Mason focuses on the impact of invasive species, he vividly describes the mating process of the bark beetle to create a natural history lesson. The chapter begins with a newlywed couple traveling to the north woods, picking up a few extra pieces of wood from the roadside. One of the logs contains a dormant invasive beetle. After a brief summary of the couple's sexual escapades in front of the fireplace, Mason dismisses them from his narrative with the banality of, "They also went skiing" (235). Such little attention is given to the couple's romantic involvement; however, multiple pages are dedicated to the beetles' sexual encounter. Mason's detailed description of a violent but humorous encounter between two mating beetles becomes a way to represent how detrimental bark beetles have been to the elm tree species. The chambers carved into wood by the beetles are described as "an exquisite work of art," "nothing short of masterpieces," and as having "such symmetry, such grace!" (235-236). Mason encourages the reader to admire the beetles' talents and abilities, despite how destructive they are. Mason employs humorously grandiose language to describe the intense encounter between two mating beetles. For the male beetle the female scent is "overwhelming—it was as if he'd walked inside her genital chamber itself. He purred and dipped, so befuddled he nearly mated with a mite" (236). Despite this attraction, the female aggressively rejects him: "she threw him off, smashed him against the wall with such aggression that the peeping mites went scurrying in fear. Puzzled, he cowered in the corner of the scented room…But why? How? Her smell!" (237). A battle of two lovers must ensue before they agree to mate and she lays her eggs. One of these eggs has hatched and will soon leave the log in the cabin to destroy the elm trees. The story shifts back to the cabin, where the beetle smells the elm outside and "lubricant spreads over her mouthparts. For the first time in her short life, she has an inkling of the appetite of which she's capable" and soon enough she encounters "a great tree, nearly two hundred years old. It is a short flight to the spreading canopy, where she pauses, bids goodbye to daylight, and begins to eat" (238-239). Mason is creative in providing an entertaining story that also touches upon invasive insects and their harm to the environment. There is devastation in losing a two-hundred-year-old tree, but this is part of the importance in tracking the natural history of the area. Mason neither romanticizes nor laments that these beetles have destroyed forests. Instead, through a beetle's point of view Mason investigates one of the reasons for Dutch Elm Disease and the disappearance of many elm trees in the New England forest.

Another way Mason creatively depicts the change in the north woods landscape is through a descriptive footnote that provides a realistic representation of how unintentional, yet easy, it was to introduce various species to new areas. The footnote is the bulk of the chapter, with the only other text being a one-line proverb: "When the sheep are gone, comes the quiet of the

conversations put forth by past nature writers to encourage a better understanding of the natural world. In an interview where Mason was asked about his hope for the readers of *North Woods*, he said, "that people come to a new or renewed appreciation of the woods like I did while working on the book" ("North Woods: Interview"). This hope is seen throughout the novel but most keenly in the characters of Helen and Nora. Helen thinks about what her sons will do when they find the film reels after she dies. She believes this will be a time when "the small beech had grown, and the lumbering beetle had turned to glittering dust, and the ruined apples had finally given up their ghost" (298). This description depicts yet another passage of time and additional shifts in the flora and fauna, an image of the future where aspects of the landscape have disappeared or no longer flourish like they used to. Helen's sons would "watch the screen light up before them—robin, sapling, eternal beetle—the images stripped of all their prior meaning, signifying nothing but the gentle motions of a forest that no longer was" (298). By the time Helen's sons watch the films, she imagines that what's left of the landscape and species that currently exist in the film will no longer be there. Because the images will be stripped of meaning, she seems to gain a great appreciation for what the forest previous was: "She had never been drawn to the woods as Robert was, but now, in the shambles of her old home, the same forest, flickering upon the cracked plaster beneath the stairs, seemed rich with meaning" (297). The reels leave Helen suspended between past and present, allowing her to more deeply connect to the forest from her past and think about how drastically different it is from the forest of the present.

Similarly, Nora represents Mason's hope for renewed appreciation in the way she is both fascinated and overwhelmed with the truth of how the forest existed centuries ago. Teale's paintings were so impactful that they were displayed in the Museum of Fine Arts and a virtual-reality installation was created where people could immerse themselves into what the north woods landscape would have been like, based on Teale's paintings. Nora was able to see, "a grove of beeches unblemished by beech scale, hemlock unmenaced by the adelgid, ash before the borer" (350). The sound of the forest in her headphones was almost too loud, though she realized that this is what the forest would have sounded like before many of the bird species disappeared. It is in this moment of complete immersion that Nora "found herself confronted by the mounting evidence that she was losing the very thing that had saved her. Standing in the museum and looking skyward, she realized that even she had never really grasped how astonishing these forests were" (351). This is one of Mason's strongest examples of how greatly the landscape has changed in New England, showing the rich diversity before so many changes took place. This description of drastic change is intentional, and Mason even comments on the way history is revealed through change in an interview about the passage of time in his novel: "I think that one of the particular joys of writing the book was seeing the natural world in a different way. Instead of a static, beautiful and inspiring sort of place, I wrote it as a place very much determined by history. Every tree is there because of past trees, fungi, and animals. It seems in some ways so simple, but I hadn't thought about the forest that way, as something that has developed over time and changing, constantly changing" ("North Woods: Interview"). Nora's dedication to preserving the land and working to document the natural history of the area serves as a reminder of what Mason hopes his readers can take from the novel.

Mason gives minute descriptions of the forest throughout the historical span of *North Woods*. He creatively documents blights and invasive species through humor and poetic language. He artfully constructs a way for his characters to engage with nature, and in doing so creates his own story of natural history through this human/non-human entanglement. As a result, Mason's novel works to preserve the history of the north woods. Mason appears to be using Teale's views to represent his own approach to writing his novel. The decentering in Teale's paintings is obvious, but Mason's version of this is more subtle. Obviously, human characters populate his

novel; however, the house and landscape remain a constant subject as people come in and out of view. Significant events, such as slavery and the Revolutionary War, are briefly touched upon, but Mason's sustained focus is on the area's ecology. Humans are more acted upon than actors in this novel. Just as Cronon and Wessels worked to educate others on the history of the natural world and the ways both nature and humans impact each other, Mason does the same through various creative ways to reach his audience. Mason's writing strives to document the Western Massachusetts forest on its own terms with minimal regard for aestheticization or entertainment.

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CONTRIBUTORS

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N. ORENGO VERA

She/They

N. Orengo Vera (b. 2003) is a visual and literary artist based in New York, NY. Her work explores identity, the human psyche, and the surreal. Growing up amid chaos, art became her refuge—a space to deconstruct and process herself and the world. Through illustration and storytelling, she wields bold imagery to navigate selfhood and society's complexities. Influenced by Pop Art and Surrealism, her exaggerated forms capture attention and evoke reaction. As a queer Latine artist, she rejects the stigmatization of difference. She is currently creating and working on her "Lorraverse" book series.

ELIZABETH KAUFMANN

She/Her

Elizabeth Kaufmann is a BA/MA student at St. John's University finishing her final semester in the graduate portion. Her work focuses on what it means to exist in the digital age, capturing the human experience in a technology-based era. Hoping to continue her career as a professor in theory and/or creative writing, Elizabeth was given the opportunity to serve as a graduate assistant for Student Communications at St. John's, running the @StJohnsNow social media pages. In this role she hopes to gain further insight into literacy and perception in this cyberage. Elizabeth is a Long Island native. This is her second time being published to the St. John's *Humanities Review*.

ALICIA EDWARDS

She/Her

Alicia "mer_raki" Edwards is an illustrator rooted in storytelling with ideas elevated in imagination. She's fascinated with contrast in familiarity, driven within fantasy, establishing adventurous tales. Reality begets fiction, an aspect brewing things beyond her imagination.

In practice, she enjoys pulling from aspects of nostalgic media and new discoveries into her process of design. Riveting video games, captivating books, and engrossing shows leading her places far and wide. With new discoveries, it's exhilarating. That nature of discovery connects the world, like a ticket for the next flight. So come along! It's a grand tour where the pages are the essence.

MOREN MAO

She/Her

Moren Mao was born in China and grew up in New York, she received her BBA in Accounting from Pace University, Lubin School of Business. At Pace, she devoted herself to researching the relationship between Chinese rock music and non-violent activism. For her thesis project, she co-authored a paper with Dr. Joseph Lee of the Pace Global Asia Institute, titled "Navigating Censorship: Latest Trends in Chinese Rock and Roll." Moren intends to pursue a master's degree to further her knowledge of Asian culture, language, and politics. She is looking to connect with her cultural roots through exploring and documenting Chinese music, art, literature, and film.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KIARA MAPP

She/Her

Kiara Mapp, a writer and scholar, began her literary journey at SUNY Plattsburgh, where she earned a bachelor's degree, double majoring in English Literature and Writing Arts, along with a Professional Writing Certificate. Now in her final semester of her English MA at St. John's University, Kiara's work graces publications such as *The Humanities Review*, *HerCampus*, and *Sequoya*. From Queens, NY, she draws inspiration from African American literature, the debate of Nature vs. Nurture, and the lyrical beauty of fiction in verse. She dreams of becoming a publisher and editor, amplifying underrepresented voices and shaping stories that challenge conventions.

TINA GURCHARAN

She/Her

Tina Gurcharan is an English Master's student at St. John's University. She is a Guyanese-American poet and writer from New York, residing on the unceded territories of the Munsee Lenape and Lekawe (Rockaway) peoples. Her research areas include Creative Writing Studies, Caribbean Studies, and Third World Studies. Tina currently works as a Graduate Assistant and Writing Consultant at the St. John's University Writing Center and an Editorial Assistant for the academic journal, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

VICTORIA SANTAMORENA

They/Them/Theirs

Victoria Santamorena is the Processing Archivist for Special Collections at Teachers College, Columbia University. They earned a Master of Science in Library and Information science from St. John's University and a Master of Arts in English and American Literature from New York University. Their research interests include travel literature, postcolonial theory, environmental humanities, and archival theories and practice. Victoria's scholarly work has appeared in the *Humanities Review* and the Gottesman Libraries Blog. Their poetry was published in *Impossible Archetype* and by *Cathexis Northwest Press*.

DANA N. LIVINGSTON

She/Her/Ella

Dana Livingston, MA, RYT-200 is a current English Ph.D. student at St. John's University. Serving as the Director of Vincentian Service and Social Justice within the University's Institute for Vincentian Impact, Dana utilizes theories of literacy, social change writing, and justice-oriented theoretical frameworks in her daily operations, namely in her management of the University's relationships with Community-Based Organizations. An eco-spiritualist at heart, Dana uses her role to guide communities on the path to total wellness – the cultivation of the mind, body, and spirit – through care for the world community and for Creation itself. A writer, a yogi, and a tea connoisseur, she roots her spiritual direction on freedom of expression, self-care, and care for our Common Home.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GUOSHUAI "DAVID" ZHANG

He/Him

Guoshuai Zhang is a first-year student in the English PhD program at St. John's University. His main research interest is Asian American literature. He holds that these fields reveal the dynamic and significant contributions of Asian American culture and literature, which are sometimes underestimated in today's broader academic discourse.

In 2019, Guoshuai Zhang earned a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Washburn University, which was succeeded by a Master's degree in English from Temple University. His master's thesis focuses on the works of Walter Scott, where he undertook a comprehensive analysis of the intricate relationship between the formulation of ethical identity and the mutable nature of moral boundaries.

ANJEANETTE ANG

She/They

Anjeanette Ang (angOra) is a Filipino-Chinese-American artist who loves her rich cultural roots, loves to research fervently, and loves most of all to create beautiful pieces. Primarily working in ink, watercolor, or printmaking, this piece is unique in being fully digital and emulating that traditional art texture and feel.

Each stroke of the brush is permanent but well-informed with as much research as she can fit in, without compromising the natural harmony of the work to appeal to all viewers, regardless of their ability to relate to cultural elements or symbolism. Inspiration ranges from master artists to the latest animanga, and she attempts to channel the chaos into complex, emboldened artwork. She completed her BFA at St. John's University and is currently pursuing her Museum Administration MA there as well.

GABI LOPEZ

They/Them/Theirs

Mx. Gabi Lopez is a Latine artist from the Bronx specializing in digital illustration, paint, and ink. Their work often delves into themes of queerness, cultural identity, and navigating the complexities of existing in a world that tries to define us before we can define ourselves. Gabi is best known for Muz the Mummy, a nonbinary character who embodies resilience and quiet defiance while addressing social inequality. Muz appears in "The Weight of Existing," a deeply personal comic exploring Gabi's own experiences with queerness, stereotypes, and emotional resilience. Through bold storytelling and unfiltered honesty, they create work that speaks to those who have ever felt unseen.

JENN LEBOWITZ PATEL

She/Her

Jenn Lebowitz Patel (she/her) is a Ph.D. candidate in the English program and adjunct instructor at St. John's University, having taught Literature in a Global Context and Intro to Liberal Studies. She is also Weill Cornell medical school's first learning specialist. Her work lives at the intersection of academic support, mental health, and community organizing for justice and equity. Her interests include critical literacy, social epistemic rhetoric, university abolition, and transformative justice. She believes a better world is possible and we can't get there without each other.

ABIGAIL DAVIS

She/Her

Abbie Davis is a PhD student in the English program at St. John's University. She is interested in environmental humanities, specifically early American travel narratives and ecocritical theory. Abbie is currently an adjunct professor and the Director of Academic Success & Advising at Centenary University.