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completed papers (July 1)

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completed papers (August 1)

Winter Issue:  
abstracts (July 1),  
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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

## Article Publishing

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There are no submission or page charges, and no colour charges.

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## Editorial

By Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Robert Burton once famously claimed that “We can make mayors and officers every year, but not scholars” (305). However, the second annual Early Career Researchers issue of *gender forum* highlights the potential of another group of young academics and their keen interest in gender studies. This year’s articles focus on gender in the context of sociology, literary studies, film studies, and cultural studies, bringing together a wide variety of critical thought on a complex and continuously engaging topic. Gender forum is proud to provide early career researchers with a platform to share their ideas, and to connect with scholars of similar interests.

2 This year’s issue opens with Jessica Rose Corey’s article ““My sister went to Steubenville, OH and all I got was this lousy shirt””: Composing Feminist Activism with The Clothesline Project”. Against the backdrop of the current discourse about sexual violence on US university campuses, Corey’s article examines the The Clothesline Project as a form of feminist protest. The Clothesline Project, which invites survivors of sexual violence (and those commemorating them) to communicate their experiences via text and illustrations on tee shirts hung on a clothesline in a public space, addresses politics involved in issues of violence against women, especially on college campuses. Corey’s research extends the prevailing notion that “the personal is political,” and demonstrates how activists balance personal investment in social change with public arguments that may influence such change. Finally, it shows how paradoxical notions like ‘silence speaks’ allow for subversive communication in material, visual, textual, ‘spoken’ and ‘unspoken’ forms.

3 In “On the Curious Case of a Black Slave Owner in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*—or a Queer Reading of Black Abjection and Autonomy”, Joseph Kai-Hang Cheang explores the queer dimension in African-American literary imagination. Cheang offers an alternative reading of the novel that sees Henry's slave owning status as a manifestation of his reciprocated affection for his former master. It is clear that there is a sub-surface affection between the white slave owner and his erstwhile slave in an era when the races were so deeply segregated. In thinking through what Cheang calls a "queer apprenticeship" between Henry and William, this essay posits interracial relationships as a site of ambivalence.

4 Hyo-seol Ha also examines gender relations in African-American literature. “I should have gone to Mary’s”: Filling the Void in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” examines the

complex relationship between race and sexuality in Ellison's novel. The male characters in Ellison's novel blindly pursue the same ideal masculinity, which is defined by social power and sexual prowess. In the novel, African-American and Caucasian male characters collectively create an ideal 'Man' by exerting oppressive power over African-American women. Focusing on the perspective of the narrator, Ha's article examines how African-American and Caucasian men give chase to each other in search of an ideal masculinity and thus overshadow female African-American characters. Ha's essay thus presents a reading in which these doubly oppressed women fill a void in the novel left by the male characters struggling to reach a perfect masculinity.

5 Tegan Zimmerman's essay focuses on "Transnational Maternal Genealogies in Contemporary Canadian Women's Historical Novels" and presents a sustained analysis of these genealogies in contemporary Canadian women's historical novels. In contrast to conventional historical novels which privilege the lives of men, women's historical novels centralize women's lives. Zimmerman's article concentrates on the creation and expression of transnational maternal genealogies in an increasing number of contemporary historical novels by Canadian women. Beginning with Joy Kogawa's seminal novel *Obasan*, published in 1981, Zimmerman traces the trajectory of this gendered genre to recent times with Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*. According to her reading, transnational maternal genealogies differ from other dominant trends in the genre such as masculinist mainstream historiography and "historiographic metafiction". Furthermore, transnational female characters challenge "traditional boundaries of historical fiction". Despite the critical acclaim, many Canadian women novelists have attracted little scholarly attention, thus this article partakes in the critical work which can and should be done to remedy this gap.

6 The final article of this year's Early Career Researchers issue takes a critical look at the presence and use of sex toys in contemporary culture. Olga Tchepikova's "The Power of Pleasure Devices: Sex Toys and Dominance in Society and Pop Culture" investigates the role of sex toys in the sex industry and beyond, signalling not only their high popularity but also a fundamental demand for these products. Sex toys thus become relevant for the discourse about the distribution of sexual power relations. According to Tchepikova, the role of sex toys in the construction of hierarchy ultimately depends on the user's subjective perception of pleasure, which however is shaped by numerous factors that have an impact on building this subjectivity. Those are, among others, perceptions of sex toy usage shaped by the dominance of heteronormativity and further, particular attitudes towards sex toys reflected in society and text productions in popular culture. This is explained by Tchepikova with reference to a

variety of contemporary TV shows and films with regard to their treatment of sex toys in a heteronormative setting.

7 *Gender forum* is proud to give these five early career researchers a platform for their engaging and thoughtful research and looks forward to continuing this yearly tradition of showcasing promising scholars in 2015.

### **Works Cited**

Burton, Robert. *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Ed. Holbrook Jackson. New York: Everyman Library Edition, 1932. Print.

**“My sister went to Steubenville, OH and all I got was this lousy shirt”:**

## **Composing Feminist Activism with The Clothesline Project**

By Jessica Rose Corey, Kent State University, Ohio, USA

### **Abstract:**

This research extends the prevailing notion that “the personal is political,” and demonstrates how activists balance personal investment in social change with public arguments that may influence such change. Additionally, this work accounts for how the researcher’s own experiences of trauma mediate research. Finally, it shows how paradoxes like “silence speaks” allow for subversive communication in material, visual, textual, “spoken” and “unspoken” forms. More specifically, these dynamics are examined in the context of the international activist event, The Clothesline Project, which invites survivors of sexual violence (and those remembering victims) to communicate their experiences via text and illustrations on tee shirts that are then hung on a clothesline in a public space. In doing so, the Project addresses politics surrounding violence against women, especially on college campuses.

1 This article explores relationships between literate artifacts (documents and materials) and psychosocial compositions (cultural narratives that influence one’s actions) as they relate to feminist activism. According to Holland & Skinner, activism has focused on the promotion of literacy at the expense of understanding how literacy carries out activism (849). In other words, movements advocate literacy acquisition as a means of social, intellectual, and economic betterment. But the reading and composing practices that take place *within* movements contribute to activism’s “potential to effect social, cultural, and political change” (850). Moreover, with increased interest in rhetorics of silence, researchers have explored and called for further attention to subaltern forms of composing (Houston & Kramarae 1991) as “poetic world making, resisting the exclusionary norms of critical-rational discourse and creating a space for performative, affective, and situated meaning making” (Higgins, Long, & Flower 29). My work, then, explores subaltern compositions produced during The Clothesline Project (CP), a feminist activist event. Moreover, my work examines those compositions as situated within larger cultural narratives—how writings and graphics produce, and how they are products of, social narratives. Findings of this study suggest that, even when provided the opportunity for uncensored and anonymous expression about experiences with assault, female participants in the CP shy away from deeply personal, emotional accounts. Instead, they produce short, general statements that appeal to a loosely defined audience. This approach suggests that participants understand their literate practices as operating within social narratives that dichotomize personal and public identities.

2        Though various scholars have long researched and advocated the use of literacy for democracy, civic engagement, activism, and social change, these ideas warrant further investigation (Cushman; George; Higgins, Long, & Flower; Addison; and Lieblich). For example, Higgins, Long, and Flower used their term “community literacy” to conceptualize literacy as more than an ability to decode words, but as “the public act of writing and taking social action” (9); to support this notion, they examined “venues for deliberation and inquiry and how the literate practices that structured this activity reproduced certain values, norms, identities, and relationships”; for example, they examined community meetings and their resulting minutes, reports, and proposals (14-15). Other researchers have also looked at texts as embedded within ideological, hierarchical social constructs and possibilities for use of such texts to maintain the status quo or change reality (Bazerman; Bremner). Specifically, examining creation of “new realities” via texts (309), Bazerman argued that texts create “social facts [consisting of action through language or speech acts][...]carried out in genres[...]which arise in social processes of people trying to understand each other well enough to coordinate activities and share meanings for their practical purposes” (311 & 317). Additionally, after analysis of the creation, description, and reception of texts, Bremner concluded that “goal-oriented” texts remain intertwined with institutional exigency, thereby influencing what and how writers write (20). Finally, Holland and Skinner, as referenced above, argued that “social movements often organise activities around the use of written forms, but these literacy events and practices have received little attention for the roles they play in effecting social, cultural and political change” (849).

3        I identify two forms of literate practices that organize activities: literate artifacts and psychosocial compositions. Literate artifacts refer to documents or materials, such as those produced during social action events (protest signs, listserv sign-up sheets, exhibits); psychosocial compositions refer to social influences on one’s ideology and actions, for example, how literate practices and cultural discourse affect individuals’ participation in and reception of civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> The culture is an input and an output of the event; so, psychosocial compositions refer to an intertwining relationship. I further understand literate artifacts and psychosocial compositions in terms of how texts mediate trauma and recovery by way of media that allow the individual to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct narratives related to identity in various times, places, and relationships (Pennebaker; Anderson &

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<sup>1</sup> The larger study from which this article originates also examines literate artifacts and psychosocial compositions as they relate to the CP’s planning committee.

Maccurdy; Rose; Smyth, True, & Souto; Lepore & Smith; Fiandt; Sharma-Patel, Brown, & Chaplin; Lieblich; and Anderson & Conley).

4 My work here focuses on literate practices in the CP, an event held by college and community organizations since 1990 which provides temporary catharsis to survivors of sexual assault while raising public awareness about violence against women. As an international activist event, the CP invites survivors of sexual violence (and those remembering victims) to communicate their experiences via text and illustrations on tee shirts which are then hung on a clothesline in a public space. This project is especially important now, due to current politics regarding sexual violence against women. As of October 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 35% of women worldwide experienced either intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. In the United States, the “National Crime Victimization Survey, 2008-2012” revealed that an average of 237, 868 people (age 12 or older) are raped or sexually assaulted each year; this number translates to approximately one act of sexual violence every two minutes (RAINN). An April 2014 *New York Times* article reported that the White House recently issued guidelines to “increase the pressure on universities to more aggressively combat sexual assaults on campus” (Steinhauer). These guidelines follow President Obama’s recent creation of a task force to address the problem; this task force reported that 20% of female college students had been assaulted, though only 12% of these students reported the crime (Steinhauer).

5 With the current political situation in mind, I turn to the literate artifacts and psychosocial compositions of The Clothesline Project in order to re-examine “literacy as a lived experience” (Addison 136-51) and develop the idea that rhetoric and writing are agents of social change (Cushman; Parks and Goldblatt; George; Daniell; Higgins, Long, & Flower; and Lieblich). Furthermore, my study contributes to work that addresses how composing “revise[s]” individuals (Rose 164) and social narratives which remain “wholly dependent on [one another] for their existence” (Fiandt 571). For instance, Julier argues that artists may “re-vision” personal blame as a social issue (“Private Texts” 253), while Payne further notes that abuse survivors “have lost confidence in a stable, knowable reality. Signifiers and signified constantly shift; thus, reality and one’s sense of identity are deconstructive texts” (Payne 151). But women involved in the CP “seem to see that language can be amended to reshape experience” (Julier, “Voices from the Line” 373), to rewrite—deconstruct and reconstruct—themselves. On a larger scale, Thiongo asserts that “our pens should be used to increase the anxieties of all oppressive regimes. At the very least the pen should be used to

‘murder their sleep’ by constantly reminding them of their crimes against the people, and by letting them know that they are seen” (221).

6 The writing and art of the CP, rather than trying to squelch oppressive regimes, aims to serve as a political act by providing honest accounts of violence to real people (Escobar 249). Choosing and engaging with images [and words] instills a sense of autonomy, even over past events (Peacock). In other words, writing *can* change power structures (Bremner 420). From this perspective, CP participation helps individuals better understand their subject positions as survivors in the larger society; in particular, CP writers and artists gain such an understanding by addressing their own healing process; addressing fellow survivors; engaging in remembrance of victims; and producing messages, either written or visual, directed at offenders or sexist cultural attitudes.

7 Addressing such painful experiences challenges activists to balance personal and public identities. Designers of the CP understand the discomfort many survivors experience when identifying themselves publicly as such. Accordingly, the CP allows survivors to “have their say” in an alternative fashion, through writing and art, and joins other activist efforts in this approach. For example, Take Back the Night, LGBQ’s National Day of Silence, and The Silent Witness National Initiative all ground their work in a belief in the power of visual argument (in written words or images).

8 Visual arguments operate with particular importance in relation to rhetorics of silence, since these images often replace the act of speaking audibly. Furthermore, Fiandt suggests a propensity for the use of aesthetic appeal in social action; specifically, she claims that “just as healing intentions spur art, socio political activist intentions spur art[...] Every vital social movement immediately begins to generate art, songs, poetry, posters, murals, novels[...] So, while writing demands action, action can, simultaneously demand art” (581-82). Before Fiandt, Edelman claimed that art and literature exemplify social action which stems from “personal or collective planning or plotting [...] psychopathology, or [...] emotion” (9). From this view, writing and art (or writing as an art) offer responses to social and personal experiences. Indeed, people adopt ideologies based, in part, on the visual representations they encounter (Felshin 20-22). “Mundane” images, in particular, play a role in transforming ideologies; because such images lack shock value, people can more easily relate to them (Weber 45). For example, the AIDS Quilt exposes viewers to covert, transformative ideas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A product of The NAMES Project Foundation, the Quilt originated in 1987 and consists of panels dedicated to victims of the AIDS virus (The Names Project Foundation). “Today there are NAMES Project chapters across the United States and independent Quilt affiliates around the world.” (The Names Project Foundation).

As a common household item, the quilt raises awareness of a deadly disease, but also raises associations with home and intimacy (bed or bedroom); therefore, the quilt connects the disease with people who think it has no relation to them (Elsley 189). Similarly, some artists have used clothing to offer messages about gender, as empty clothing can provoke ideas about androgyny and gendered stereotypes, and does so “visually, silently, continuously” (Felshin 20-24 & 29). The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the use of tee shirts in the CP connect the familiar with the unfamiliar, the comfortable with the uncomfortable. In this way, the quilt, the CP, and the activist events mentioned earlier support “symbolic communication [occurring in] a host of nonverbal forms” (Carroll Smith-Rosenberg qtd. in Elseley 189). These connections to the community allow the CP to serve as “text” and “event” (Julier 250).

9 CP participants reach out to the community as first-hand witnesses of violence who then use their shirts to witness *to* others. The personal experiences they share, however, implicate larger social problems. Silence, for instance, remains a significant factor in trauma, resulting activist efforts, and the discourse of trauma and activism. For example, the perpetrator silences the victim (or survivor) during the crime, and often makes threats to ensure the survivor remains silent after the crime. Friends and family often silence the survivor (intentionally or unintentionally) by avoiding conversation about the experience or even blaming the survivor for the crime. The survivor may practice silence as a way of (seemingly) asserting power over her perpetrator, knowing she could go public about the crime at any time. The survivor may also practice silence as a means of private healing, internally processing one’s thoughts and feelings and perhaps externalizing them in ways other than sharing with others. The survivor, then, may also decide to ‘break silence.’ Finally, silence provides anonymity, a form of protection, by eliminating the demand for use of an identifiable voice. In each case, literacy can mediate these dynamics; it allows for various forms of enclosure and public and private disclosure. For instance, people can write letters (sent or not) to offenders. They can engage in practices like name burning ceremonies, during which survivors of crime write names of, or messages to, offenders and then burn these messages. They can write official, signed testimonies. They can create abstract or explicit forms of literature or art pertaining to their experiences. They can read self-help books or materials from organizations or support groups. They can journal their experiences or participate in writing therapy groups.

10 Examining how silence is manifested in CP tee shirts sheds light on participants’ choices when writing or illustrating their trauma. Field-Belenky, for instance, discovered that women describing their personal development navigated toward metaphors of voice: feeling

deaf and dumb, being silenced or really heard, and perceiving words as weapons (18). I look for the same types of knowledge construction. As Bruner suggests, I remain mindful of the ways in which CP participants' accounts fit into particular social contexts; similar to what Weber suggests about mundane images, going too far astray simply leaves us abandoned in our efforts. Lastly, Houston & Kramarae discuss ways in which women have been silenced ("via ridicule, familial hierarchies, anti-woman education policies, and male-dominated media") and ways in which women have navigated these silences through "trivial" discourses like graffiti, sewing, and journals; through women-centered support groups and presses; and through naming problems that never before had a name, like "sexual harassment," and the idea that women should physically take up little space (389).

## **Methods**

11 My work addresses the following research question: How can we understand the literate artifacts of continued activist events in terms of composing and revising social narratives? To respond, I examined shirts produced by 12 participants in Kent State University's 2013 Clothesline Project. Eleven participants signed consent forms for their work to be included in this study; I was the other participant. As of 2013, these twelve shirts comprised approximately 20% of all tee shirts created by and collected from participants of KSU's Clothesline Project. I obtained photographs of each tee shirt (front and back, when relevant) and inductively completed a rhetorical analysis (Leach 220-26), based on the tee shirts as expressions of deep or vivid personal experiences versus general, public appeals. The rhetorical analysis, then, examines the writers' content, audience, and use of pronouns.<sup>3</sup> Rhetorical analysis aids the exploration of how writers and artists position themselves in relation to their purpose, audience, and the larger rhetorical context. Specifically, to examine shirts' overall message, I consider who the writers or artists address with their composition and what pronouns they use; these criteria allow me to evaluate the degrees to which their images are personal or public.

12 I chose the CP to better understand how current conceptualizations of 'active participation' as 'speaking out' remain overly simplified and, in some ways, unjust. Furthermore, participating in the project myself served two purposes. First, it allowed me to disclose my own experiences anonymously, during a time when I wished to avoid publicly identifying myself as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Such public identification

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<sup>3</sup> For shirts with words and images, I also conducted a semiotic analysis, as discussed by Silverman (330); here, I have space to address only the rhetorical analysis.

compounds complications of navigating other defining markers faced by women, such as age, gender, appearance, and professional status.<sup>4</sup> The CP offers one outlet where women can identify as survivors without risk of marring public identities. Second, my participation also means that I applied reflective feminist practices in my analysis, making clear that, though I participated in the project, I avoid speaking for other participants. My analysis stems from my role as a viewer of the event (except when talking about my own shirt) because, while participants received my contact information and the link to an anonymous survey about their experiences as a participant, only one CP participant in this study took the survey. Therefore, to respect the extent to which they desired participating in this study, certain types of information and arguments cannot be asserted. Nonetheless, a critical, rhetorical analysis from the viewers' position, which normally would exclude personal communication with tee shirt creators, offers valuable insight into the CP. The CP and efforts like it set out to meet survivors where they find themselves in their journey, and do so in a sensitive, respectful, and just manner. The complex rhetorical and psychological terrain these efforts tread make them worthy of further intellectual investigation. My work aims to serve as one contribution to such endeavors.

## **Results**

13 Tables 1 and 2 present photographs of each shirt, the audience the shirt addresses, and the pronouns used. More specifically, table 1 includes shirts with messages that, for the most part, address the general public without personal pronouns (with one shirt addressing fellow survivors). In contrast, table 2, presents shirts which address the general public with the use of personal pronouns.

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to exclude male survivors of sex crimes or suggest that they do not face some types of discrimination that women face. The majority of CP participants, however, are women; therefore, I use gendered pronouns in this article.

**Table 1**

| Participant | Shirt   | Audience       | Pronouns |
|-------------|---|----------------|----------|
| 1           |    | General public | N/A      |
| 2           |   | General public | N/A      |
| 3           |  | General public | N/A      |
| 4           |  | General public | N/A      |

|   |   |                  |     |
|---|---|------------------|-----|
| 5 |  | General public   | N/A |
| 6 |  | Fellow survivors | N/A |

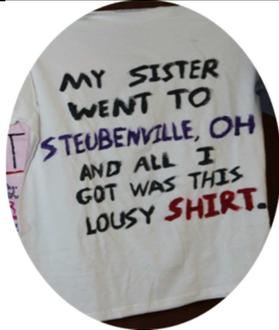
14 The shirts in table 1 contain brief messages which anyone, survivor or otherwise, could have created. Though the last shirt communicates that its creator is a survivor, I include it in this table because the use of a statistic suggests a rather impersonal, common approach to gaining the public’s attention. These shirts, then, resemble bumper sticker messages, quite easily mass produced without severe loss of the writers’ or artists’ ‘signature,’ the details that connect the text or art to a particular author or artist, even if anonymous. The shirts provide an opportunity for expression without censorship,<sup>5</sup> for participants to address themselves, their offenders, specific survivors or victims, or people who have contributed to their process of coping with their circumstances. The CP participants in this study address a broad, undefined audience. Of the 12 shirts, 9 have no clearly defined audience, 2 address survivors in general, and 1 addresses men (for this I assumed that the perpetrator was male). Regardless of their composing process, the artists do not identify a clear audience, such as survivors of rape or a particular offense, personal relationships related to their journey, particular groups or media perpetuating gender stereotypes or acts of violence, etc. Participants speak to the notion that ‘the personal is political,’<sup>6</sup> and they do so by choosing to leave out their personal

<sup>5</sup> The only restriction on participants’ content is that they cannot reveal an offender’s full name unless the offender has been convicted for the offense.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Hanisch’s “The Personal is Political” (1970) discusses meeting with women to discover patterns in their responses to questions about their lives. She claimed, “One of the first things we discover in these groups is that

experiences. For example, only 5 of the 12 shirts use first- or second-person pronouns, (two include “my”; one includes both “my” and “I”; one employs “we”; and one uses “your”) (see table 2); and even these shirts practice self-censorship, or silence, to the extent that they avoid detailed, emotional accounts of personal experiences and place a great deal of distance between themselves and their audience.

**Table 2**

| Participant | Shirt   | Audience       | Pronoun |
|-------------|---|----------------|---------|
| 7           |    | General public | My      |
| 8           |  | Men (implied)  | My      |
| 9           |  | General public | My, I   |

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personal problems are political problems [...] There is only collective action for a collective solution” (Hanisch).

|    |  |   |      |
|----|--|---|------|
| 10 |   | General public, perhaps offenders in particular | We   |
| 11 |   | Fellow survivors                                | Your |
| 12 |  | General public                                  | N/A  |

15 Of the four shirts using first-person pronouns (shirts 7-10, table 2), only one attempts to offer the audience some of her experience; the designer who wrote “Does no mean no when my hands are here” (shirt 7) represented the body fighting off an offender, and provides a glimpse into a very personal moment. The participant who wrote “My eyes are up here” with an arrow pointing from the chest area upward (shirt 8), communicates how many people objectify certain body parts. The shirt that says “My sister went to Steubenville OH and all I got was this lousy shirt” (shirt 9) refers to the 2012 rape of a high school girl from Steubenville, Ohio. Captured by peers via electronic devices and posted on the internet, the rape raised awareness of the violent acts committed by offenders, but also of the unjust acts of those committed by bystanders. Shirt 9 also fosters a personal relationship with the writer and her sister and a well-known violent sexual act. But the message remains unclear to some

extent. Is the writer commenting on Steubenville or a specific experience which her sister had with sexual assault while in Steubenville?

16 One shirt uses “we” (shirt 10), a more inclusive pronoun than “My” or “I.” Again, it only notes that the artist is a survivor, proclaiming that “we will not be silenced,” signing with the signature “survivors.” But the artist offers no details about what she recalls of her experience. This artist uses silence, first, in censoring her message through the elimination of personal details, but also by making herself part of a collective; though the voices of many in unison may be loud, it also drowns out the individual for the sake of presenting a united front. Another shirt (shirt 11) uses “your” to divulge personal information. This writer and artist at least provides a glimpse into her past and present psychological state after her assault; she asserts that she is “bent but not broken.” She presents a list, “#1 was a friend #2 was an acquaintance #3 was a stranger,” which may communicate the relationship between her and offenders, or the relationship between her and other survivors she has met. This lack of clarity, then, accounts for her silence. She tells us about these relationships, but withholds information about them that would allow us to truly make sense of them. At the same time she silences her story (to some degree), she encourages other survivors to tell their stories. Finally, she turns to a baking analogy that seems to shed light on her attitude toward her experience, or worldview; she claims that “Bruised bananas make the sweetest banana bread,” suggesting that she has found some purpose in her experience, that she can do or be more, or better, after surviving her ordeal.

17 Finally, my own shirt excludes the use of a personal pronoun but attempts to communicate part of my personal experience, with the story acting as a pseudonym for my own. The shirt reads, “A light came in from outside until two worlds existed in which a girl, still a single unsplit personality, walked readily from one world to the other by day and by night... [front] without anyone observing the invisible boundaries she passed” [back]; this quote was taken from Loren Eiseley’s *The Night Country* (196).<sup>7</sup> The idea of light from the outside triggers memories of my abuse. The single, unsplit personality refers to my ability to view myself as ‘whole’ even in brokenness. I also have an ability to “walk from one world to the other, by day and by night,” the fortitude to traverse whatever circumstances I encounter. But who I am in one world, people in the other world will inevitably misunderstand. I have a way of existing in which nobody really recognizes me. I enter and exit intellectual and emotional spaces and challenges and victories that only I will ever know and decipher. Like

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<sup>7</sup> I changed “he” and its varying forms to “she.”

other artists, I too utilize silence; I silence my own experiences and instead find the words of others easier to use. I disclose, but with imagery and a degree of mystery. I offset my emotional yet censored appeal with the use of a statistic, making it more accessible (and less personal) for viewers.

## **Discussion**

18 Initially, I viewed the CP as a bridge between the public and the private, serving as a means to circumvent calls to ‘speak,’ regardless of the difficulty introverts or those dealing with mental health issues may face in trying to meet such a demand. Specifically, the CP allows for, in Malchiodi’s terms, “telling without talking,” telling without the loss of anonymity or pressure to censor for the sake of protecting personal or professional identity. But the shirts in this study suggest that participants adopt a different understanding and experience of the CP. As it turns out, the women approached their task with particular ideas of who constituted their audience and how those audiences should be addressed. Audience members, like CP participants, have worldviews embedded in narratives of sexual liberation, virgin/vamp dichotomies, governmental initiatives and policies addressing (or failing to address) the issue of sexual assault, and colloquial language for sexual acts. In a situation we might think of as relatively ‘free’ or ‘liberating,’ the women revealed very little about their personal experiences. They make short, declarative statements addressing the general public rather than more detailed narratives about personal journeys and relationships. They forgo gut-wrenching accounts of their own suffering and healing, or that of someone close to them. Even if participants choose this approach, in part, based on the convention of tee shirts having less rather than more text, they could still choose to include more explicit or graphic words or images. Participants’ more impersonal approach, however, is as significant as those communicated with more detail. As with much writing, the difficulty comes not in knowing what one wants to say but in struggling to say it, struggling with how to say it, and struggling with the consequences of sharing thoughts and feelings—with others and, in my case, with myself. Again, without additional data, I am unable to assert that other participants in this study experience such difficulty; I draw only on my own experience and conversations with fellow survivors, some who plan and observe the event. Nonetheless, I offer this explanation as one possible theory.

19 Lifting some of the burden of people’s private lives by sharing experiences also means acquiring new burdens about what it means to self-disclose and how to do so as effectively as possible with each individual or group of people. After all, once one discloses

to one person or group of people, the individual relinquishes some control over how experiences get told and retold in the future and in different contexts. This struggle between autonomy and compliance demonstrates empowerment as inherently “paradoxical” (O’Connor 785-86). The anonymity offered by the CP fails to simplify the harsh reality of trauma that, when put into words, still affects an individual’s thinking, writing, and presentation of those words and experiences to a public audience. The words with which an individual expresses herself, whether publicly or privately, externally or internally, reveal life-altering effects of the trauma. In the case of the CP, participants create and then, to some extent, relinquish these expressions to a collective narrative (the Clothesline collection) and a varying audience.

20 Personal stories can have a powerful emotional effect and, therefore, lend themselves to activist efforts. We see this with recent television campaigns warning young people to avoid texting while driving (“From One Second to the Next”). We’ve seen it in campaigns against drinking and driving (“Every Face Tells a Story”), and in efforts to bring awareness to the dangers of eating disorders and bullying (“Stories of Hope” and “‘I Choose’ Anti-Bullying Campaign”). But if the personal seems ‘too personal,’ artists risk alienating viewers unable to relate to artists’ experiences. Therefore, avoiding potentially risky disclosure, as well as avoiding disclosure because of fear of alienating an audience, involves decisions related to the public and the political status quo. Similarly, though the writers and artists surely could speak of trauma and despair, they lean toward communicating healing, informing, calling for action, and providing cultural commentary.<sup>8</sup>

21 Shirt 2, for instance, presents the argument that violence leaves invisible, internal scars as much as it sometimes leaves visible, external scars. This creates a complex representation in which the experience of violence involves a force on a physical body and psychological life that includes physical and psychological alterations. The survivor has become uncomfortable in her own body, in her own mind, and in her own life. External and internal suffering and healing remain in a dynamic relationship. Shirt 11 shows the survivor declaring that she is “bent but not broken” and that “Bruised bananas make the sweetest banana bread.” As noted earlier, this suggests the survivor’s sense of empowerment, giving meaning to tragedy and, therefore, gaining some sense of healing.

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<sup>8</sup> Though I sort shirts into these categories, texts usually do more than one thing. Categorization refers to what seems to be the primary purpose or more explicit purpose of the shirt, in this case, either healing or informing, calling for action, or providing commentary.

22 Shirts 4, 6, and 12 inform, primarily with the use of statistics. On shirt 4, where the artist refers to people, she avoids words and instead uses numbers and symbols, perhaps serving the purpose of emphasis. The symbols and words, in combination with their presentation in a contrasting color to the less important words in the message, draw our eyes to important subjects and dynamics. Interestingly, the artist avoids letting the word take precedence, or resorting to the common call to use words (in a verbal sense) to communicate a message; instead, she allows word and image to add to one another in a way that provides a complete message. Additionally, though they often have their faults, statistics have a particular way of getting people's attention, lending perceived merit to messages. The artist here seems to recognize this, as she tells us that one of every two women will be involved in a violent relationship. The artist of shirt 6 presents the statistic that 75% of battered women attempt suicide. Combined with her demand to "stay strong," the statistic seems to both inform the general public but also warn fellow survivors of the depression that may befall them. The writer provides a sort of foreshadowing knowledge which, it seems, she hopes may change how survivors deal with their violent trauma. Finally, my own shirt provides a statistic about childhood sexual abuse, which I included because I wanted to make sure that at least one element of my shirt would gain attention; I thought that many viewers might skip reading the longer narrative. In this way, I found the statistic to make the shirt more accessible, to inform in a more memorable way than the story component.

23 Shirts 3 and 5 call for action, with shirt 3 making commands to "stand up and speak out," specifically against sexual violence. Here, the artist calls for using the body to combat people using others' bodies in inappropriate, disrespectful, and harmful ways. While the artist recognizes the valid use of the body in support of a cause (standing up), she still supplements the use of the silent body with that of "speaking." Speaking remains a common, if not favored, form of 'doing,' of creating change. This shirt shows a commitment to such a philosophy, whether consciously or subconsciously. Similarly, shirt 5 asserts that "words are powerful." Even using the written word, she seems to favor the spoken word in her call for others to speak.

24 Finally, shirts 1, 7, 8, 9, and 10 provide cultural commentary (some more overtly than others). Shirt 1 asserts that men who ask permission and, therefore, refuse to force themselves (in this context, physically) upon women have character as genuine males. Those men who fail to ask permission of women suffer a flaw that undermines their existence as a particular sex and gender. Rhetorically, the shirt appeals to the ethos of what it means to be a man. Therefore, it may appeal to one's ego and sense of self; generally speaking, one avoids

feeling like an imposter of a particular role, and the alternative to being a ‘real’ man is being a ‘fake’ one. There’s a push to define or redefine what it means to be a man in current culture.

25 The artist of shirt 7 uses painted hands to represent a woman fighting off her attacker. Interestingly, she poses a question without punctuation, indicating a statement or request for action, often with an expected or obvious answer. The fact that the artist needs to ask the question, to literally *paint a clear picture* implies a lack of intelligence or a flaw on behalf of the perpetrator. In this case, it seems as though the artist makes a demand for society to understand both voiced and silent embodied resistance. Many women’s voices are silenced during an attack (via the use of items like duct tape or via the threat of weapons). The argument here is that speaking “no” is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for expressing one’s decision.

26 The designer of shirt 8 also provides commentary about current culture. On a very basic level, identity gets constructed, in part, through a connection between name and face. By referring to the face (“My eyes are up here”), the artist suggests that she wants viewers to communicate with the parts of her that make her an individual person who can reciprocate communication.<sup>9</sup> The author of Shirt 9 seems to make a statement about how Steubenville’s reputation has been reduced to this particular event and become a cultural icon. The ‘take away’ (figuratively and materially) is the realization of violence and its emptiness (“all I got was this lousy shirt”). Shirt 10 simply states that survivors will not be silent about their experiences; in particular, they will forbid others to silence them. This shirt, then, implies the writer’s understanding of the ways in which survivors become silenced, intentionally or unintentionally (as discussed earlier) in current culture.

27 The way in which these writers and artists position themselves or their work also speaks to social narratives about sexual assault (for example, see Garvey). Miller and Bowden argue:

civic tradition in rhetoric and moral philosophy was programmatically political in its effort to teach citizens how to draw on received values to address public problems. While the politics of the civic tradition were often sexist, elitist, and ethnocentric, a critical reappraisal of the civic virtues of "the good man speaking well" can help us assess the opportunities for historical transformation in prevailing ideologies precisely because the civic tradition was so concerned with the craft of translating "shared" values into political action. (593)

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<sup>9</sup> This analysis and others are based on an understanding of the tee shirts as representing embodiment, being understood as if embodied at the moment of viewing.

What CP participants choose to disclose, and how they choose to disclose it, sheds light on the relationship between literacy, rhetoric, and activism. The tee shirts demonstrate that the writer or artist imagines a particular audience of the CP. In doing so, the tee shirts contribute knowledge to how those in oppressed subject positions—those who occupy subject positions that may conflict with those of the audience—use literacy publicly and subversively to create social change, whether that change occurs on an individual level or a larger scale. In other words, this study shows literate artifacts as they produce, reproduce, and become products of various and competing social narratives; I refer to this process as literate artifacts contextualized in psychosocial compositions.

28     Though many scholars have focused on the CP (such as Julier, Hipple, Gregory et al., Bex Lempert, Goodnow, and Droogsma), they have not taken a rhetorical approach in the same way that I have. To that end, my study looks at literate practices in terms of rhetorical strategies which represent alternative forms of ‘speaking’ and civic engagement. My results reveal that, although given the opportunity for uncensored expression, CP participants chose to address a seemingly large, undefined audience by excluding appeals to ethos and pathos via graphic, personal accounts of their experiences. Though the nature of sexual assault, for many people, inherently involves some element of pathos, and CP participants in this study address it via notions of healing or empowerment, they avoid feelings of despair, exhaustion, and confusion. Similarly, participants appeal to ethos simply from their positions as survivors or people who identify with the cause of ending violence against women. As discussed, many of these writers and artists also appeal to ethos via the use of statistics. Interestingly, however, they avoid gritty details that really make them the experts of the topic they address. And without the use of citations, statistics suggest little credibility on the part of the person using them.

29     The opportunity to ‘tell without talking’ anonymously seems not to lead to expression of catharsis or liberation on CP tee shirts. This suggests that larger social narratives inform the narratives of women’s experiences of assault, and as such call for continuing efforts to serve survivors, activists, and the broader public. Certainly, my study does not speak for all CP shirts. Nonetheless, my study has identified that activist communication exists on a spectrum. Such knowledge aids activism in its efforts to help women express themselves in an effective manner—for themselves and, at times, others. Such knowledge also, then, sheds light on cultural narratives that inform such dynamics and ways in which narratives call for revision.

## Conclusion

30 This study draws attention to forms of literacies that attempt to break down the division between the personal and public/academic. Although many scholars have discussed this issue, (for example, Foxwell, Ruggles Gere, and Payne), they have not fully addressed the line between one's right to privacy, advocating disclosure as part of research as a *human* endeavor, and the consequences of disclosure. Royster and Kirsch assert:

With patience and quiet as salient features, the goal with an ethics of hope and caring is to learn to listen and speak, not just with our heads but with our hearts, backbones, and stomachs, thus making feminist rhetorical action a fully embodied experience for both the subjects of research and the researcher (146).

Following Royster and Kirsch, this research extends the prevailing notion that “the personal is political,” and demonstrates how activists balance personal investment in social change with public arguments that may influence such change. Additionally, this study accounts for how the researcher's own experiences of trauma mediate research. Finally, it shows how paradoxes like ‘silence speaks’ allow for subversive communication in material, visual, textual, ‘spoken’ and ‘unspoken’ forms. It remains important to investigate how oppressed groups use literacy to assert agency, cope with traumatic experiences, and seek justice. Such investigations call for understanding how people ‘speak’ rhetorically in various forms of activist composing.

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## **On the Curious Case of a Black Slave Owner in Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*—or a Queer Reading of Black Abjection and Autonomy**

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### **Abstract:**

This exploration of the queer dimension in the African-American literary imagination will focus on Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer winning historical novel, *The Known World* (2003), in which a fictional black slave holder, Henry Townsend, maintains a curious intimacy with his former owner, William Robbins, during and after his enslavement. An alternative reading of the novel which this essay will offer is that Henry's slave owning stature is a manifestation of his reciprocated affection for his former master. This reading may first appear to be wishful, but if we look more closely at the favors that William does for Henry after he is emancipated, including purchasing Henry's first slave on his behalf and securing customer retention for Henry's business, it is clear that there is something more than friendship in the relationship between a white slave owner and his erstwhile black slave in an era when the two races were so deeply segregated. In thinking through what I dub a "queer apprenticeship" between Henry and William, this essay ultimately posits that interracial relationships are a site of ambivalence – on the one hand, Henry becomes the locus that orientates white subjectivity; but, on the other hand, since their affective tie is undergirded by William's fetishism for the structure of slavery, it in turn re-articulates black abjection.

1 Unlike many recent historical fictions set in the antebellum South, the primary emphasis of Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer Prize winning neo-slave narrative *The Known World* (2003) is not the gruesome violence that chattel slavery inflicted upon black individuals and families. Instead, by presenting the case of Henry Townsend, a fictional black slave owner, Jones's novel explores the ways the moral degradation of slavery and the political economy of the plantation corrupted social relationships among African-Americans within an apparently homogeneous community. Black slave owners are not unheard of in the historical archive of slavery, but they are certainly uncommon. Readers are reminded of the rarity of such instances by Henry's first slave Moses's difficulty in processing the fact that his master's skin is lighter than his. The novel exaggeratedly states that it takes Moses two weeks "to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made" (8-9). Henry's improbable journey indeed forces readers to question how it was achieved. It is this "unspeakable" secret of the mysterious slave owner that this essay aims to unravel.

2 *The Known World* begins with the premature death of Henry, who is survived by his wife, Caldonia, 33 slaves, and 50 acres of land in Washington County, Virginia. Henry was born a slave on William Robbins's plantation and was set free by his father's purchase;

thereafter, he financed himself by making boots and shoes, which eventually earned him a sufficient amount of money to own his first slave, Moses. It is worth noting that Henry, as a slave owner, is known for his benevolence — he never lynched any of his slaves except for a rare occasion in which he hired a Cherokee patroller to chop off one third of a misbehaving slave's ear. But of course one may ask if Henry was that sympathetic to his slaves, why would he participate in the cruelest trade of all?

3 The novel never addresses such question. A peripheral clue which readers are left with is Henry's aspiration to be "a better master than any white man he had ever known" (64). Despite his good intentions, Henry after all is still a black slave owner who enslaves his kinsman for personal gain. Because of it, it is not hard to imagine the waves of controversy that such a contentious character had triggered in the African-American community when the novel was first released. In an interview with Maryemma Graham (2008), Jones recalls how two African-American men verbally harassed him during a commercial break in a radio program to which he was invited in Philadelphia. These two men scathingly censured *The Known World* as a dangerous book which displaces the responsibility of black slaves' sufferings from white supremacy to black complicity, suggesting to Jones that the novel won the Pulitzer prize because it "makes it easier on the white people" (429).

4 Given the unfavorable attention the novel received in the mass media, it has achieved relatively little critical consideration. Consistent with the public's avoidance of the novel's theme of intra-racial subjugation, there is a conspicuous silence in the existing scholarship of the novel where Henry's slave owning stature is concerned. The majority of scholarly work focuses on the ways in which *The Known World* structurally revises and challenges the blueprint of a traditional slave narrative. Susan V. Donaldson's "Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South" (2008) is an example, in which she claims that *The Known World* is a postmodern slave narrative which disrupts history by "allocating" subjectivity to the "enslaved people" (271). The analysis commits the fallacy of conveniently equating African-Americans to the enslaved, overlooking that there were black slave owners in Africa who facilitated the slave trade in its heyday. With this in mind, Henry's story is not exactly a subversion of history by imagining the counterfactual, but a transparent conduit which allows us to see the white capitalist motive resting at the heart of slavery which rewards Africans for selling their own kinsmen.

5 A more straightforward discussion of the problems germinated by slavery within and beyond the African-American community can be found in John Vernon's review of *The Known World*, "People Who Owned People" (2003) published in *The New York Times*.

Vernon speculates that Henry's desire to purchase his kinsmen, despite his father's violent resistance, was prompted by his ambition to demonstrate his free-man status, and in the antebellum South, this was achieved by possessing black slaves. Vernon's conjuncture about Henry's slave owning decision is a starting point to engage in the inter and intra racial sociopolitical dynamics that *The Known World* represents. Building upon Vernon, this essay will read Henry as a double-edged character who is both subjugated and empowered by the slave trade. In order to fully understand how Henry's abjection oscillates between the positions of the agent and the recipient of power, a queer reading is in order.

6 Abjection, as Julia Kristeva theorizes in *Powers of Horror* (1980), is a fearful feeling that an object produces in us, which renders us abject. In other words, abjection emanates from the horror-inspiring, border transgressing, disordered object, or the deject, because it reminds us that our bodies, too, can transgress borders, or become disordered. To illustrate with one of Kristeva's examples, a corpse is an eerie spectacle which makes us feel abject because its resemblance to life reminds us of the imminence of death. The half-cold-and-half-warm body that lingers between the border of life and death causes abjection because it reifies a body's fallibility. On our part, the necrophobic feeling is a self-protective mechanism generated in reaction to confronting death; the phobia is a denial that severs us, the abject, from the horrific corpse, or the uncanny object, guarding our consciousness from the disturbance of discomfit. In his groundbreaking monograph *Extravagant Abject* queer theorist Dariack Scott applies this Kristevan account of abjection to gender and race studies, appropriating it as a descriptor of a "historical legacy" and a "social condition" "underlined by a defeat" (17). A distinctive feature that distinguishes Scott's formulation from that of his precursor is its investment in the survival possibility that comes with and in abjection. Following Leo Bersani's observation on s/m culture, which conceives powerlessness as a powerful position, Scott reclaims abjection as a necessary experience in an object's transformation into a subject. He argues that:

Abjection established itself in the development of subject-object relations: the subject is produced by relation with objects, as the two mutually bring one another into being. Abjection is experienced in the realm where the development of object relations is belayed or strays — thus preventing, even if only transiently, the subject from making its normal appearance. (15)

Scott's formulation of inter-subjectivity is illuminating in this discussion not only because it aptly summarizes the interdependence between Henry's and William's subjecthoods, but also because it charts the trajectory of Henry's status escalation from being a servant to a free man. All this to say, Scott's queer interpretation of abjection opens up an alternative reading of *The*

*Known World*, one which understands abjection as a structure of feeling which enables Henry's and William's mutual affection for each other to flourish in the form of slave and master relationship. This reading may first appear to be wishful, but if we look more closely at the favors that William does for Henry after he is emancipated, including purchasing Henry's first slave on his behalf and securing customer retention for Henry's business, it is clear that there is something more than friendship in the relationship between a white slave owner and his erstwhile slave in an era when the two races were so deeply segregated. In thinking through the affection between Henry and William, this essay problematizes Scott's reading of inter-subjectivity by positing that interracial relationships are a site of ambivalence — on the one hand, Henry becomes the locus that orientates white subjectivity; but, on the other hand, since their affective tie is undergirded by William's fetishism of the structure of slavery, it in turn re-articulates black abjection.

7 Even though the queer sub-text in *The Known World* may not be speaking as loud as its neoliberal fore-text, it is definitely available. The queer buzzword sodom makes a brief appearance when it is used to compare William's annoyance caused by his visits to Richmond, in which the narrator says "He often had to go to Richmond but he thought it as bad as Sodom"(115). Sodom, here, is significant in our understanding of *The Known World's* queerness not because it demarcates Richmond as a place where homosexuals congregate, but because it informs us that what the world inside the novel considers as queer is not quite the same as that in the world inhabited by the novel's readers.

8 According to the Old Testament, God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because the Sodomites violate the courtesy of hospitality out of lust, raping the two angels for whom the kind hearted Lot promised to provide shelter. I am not trying to allegorize William as Lot or one of the promiscuous sodomites with this biblical etymology, but to suggest that the likening of Sodom to Richmond is symbolic of how the depiction of (non)heteronormativity is bound up with space in the novel. Richmond recalls the biblical Sodom in Robbins's mental cartography because it is a site of disruption which puts the tranquility of the Robbins plantation at risk. The vice that wrecks havoc in the Robbins familial fabric is not homosexuality, but miscegenistic extra-marital relationship. Behind the back of his wife Ethel, William sustains another family with his black mistress Philomena Cartwright, who he bought when she was sixteen. With her, Robbins rears two mulatto children, namely Dora and Louis. At a young age, an older slave, Sophie, presented an idyllic picture of Richmond to Philomena. Even though Sophie has not been closer to Richmond than a peripheral countryside called Goochland, she is certain that Richmond is a city of

honey and milk where slaves are so sufficiently provided for that they can afford to have their own slaves. This fantasy about Richmond ceases to fade in Philomena's mind when she grows up, and she is most compelled by the urge of moving there when she felt William "is not treatin' her right" (116). When Dora was eight and Louis was six, Philomena decided to run away with them to Richmond. Philomena's extended distance away from the Robbins plantation is actually the tip of an iceberg, underneath which rests *The Known World's* plan of stratification mapped out in accordance with racial hierarchy: relationships that perpetuate white kinship are posited close to the center of the plantation, with the white nucleus family composed of William, Ethel and Patient Robbins at the radius, black servants in the peripheral, and Philomena as well as her illegitimate children lying outside of the domain of the plantation.

9 A caveat to note is that deviant relationships are able to stay inside a plantation if they appear as non-threatening to the purity of white lineage, and *The Known World* shows that queer relationships between two men might slip through the plantation's homophobia. Given the frequent inter-class and inter-race interactions taking place within its boundary, the plantation is, as a matter of fact, equipped with the potential to be what Jack Halberstam calls a queer space. Dissimilar to a place, a space does not necessarily occupy a tangible location; it is more of a "place-making practice" (Halberstam 6), a creation of an evanescent habitus which emerges and dissolves. I contend that a plantation is conceivably a queer space because of its homophobic surveillance, which is so caught up in prosecuting non-reproductive relationships that it fails to read beyond the apparent heterosexuality of some homosexual relationships. A particular form of queer relationship that transpires and unexpectedly flourishes in the homophobic plantation culture is that between a black slave and a white master, whereas other male-male queer relationships which do not accord with the black-and-white, slave-and-master structure — such as that between two slaves, two free blacks, and two whites — are predestined to wither. An inter-racial queer relationship that is conceived in slavery has the special ability to pass strict scrutiny because it can be read as a manifestation of white benevolence, flourishing under the guise of the white slave master's paternal love for his black slave when other permutations of queer relationships between the two races cannot. An example that testifies to this is Caldonia's brother Calvin's affection for William's mulatto son Louis. Setting itself in contrast to the affection between Henry and William, which packages itself in subtlety, Calvin's feeling for Louis is characterized by a fervency eager to let itself be known. Calvin's desire is best encapsulated by the scene in which Louis is lying "less than five inches" (188) next to him on a bank after they swim. The

novel's homosexual subtext becomes clear at the moment when Calvin leans over to Louis, wanting to drink the pool of sweat and water accumulated in the "small depression at the base of Louis's neck" (188). Unfortunately, Calvin loses his chance, because Louis has already walked away by the time that Calvin gathers enough courage to take action. This episode, which indicates Louis's ignorance of Calvin's love, underscores the axiom that a queer relationship that is inconsistent with the structure of slavery, in this case, between two free blacks, is impossible in the plantation. As the narrator says, the best remedy to cure Calvin's love sickness perhaps is to leave the plantation: "there was no solution for caring about the man with the traveling eye [Calvin]. Maybe New York could help take away the love, along with everything else" (188). The glimpse of hope that New York provides for Calvin re-inscribes the geographical stratum of race and sexuality in *The Known World* where different places allow for and exclude different forms of affection.

10 Henry and William's secretive mutual affection manages to grow through the antebellum South because it begins as a normal master and slave relationship. Growing up in veneration of his master, Henry is eager to cultivate intimacy with the man. The first step that he takes is bribing William's groom Toby for his position. Henry demonstrates his attentiveness to William through subtle means. For instance, he would rise every morning before dawn, stand in front of the mansion, and welcome his master and his horse's arrival with a beating heart (20). In this case, William's horse, Sir Guilderham, becomes a channel of affection in this master-slave complex. Under slavery, Henry's feeling for his master is normalized into a form of labor. As a stableman, Henry's duty is to take care of his master's horse. Henry's devotion to Sir Guilderham shows that he deems this menial labor more than a task to earn a living, but a performance to win his master's recognition. Henry would skip other duties of the day if possible, just to "comb the mane until his hands [are] tired" (21). Here, the meaning of Henry's life is condensed in the horse's physical condition, the only method through which he can outlet his desire for his master under a complex cluster of social surveillance.

11 Henry's unrequited yearning for his master's notice is eventually requited. After seeing the boy shiver in the "rags he tied around his feet" (27) in his first winter as a groom, William orders him a pair of shoes, permits him to eat in the same kitchen where the house slaves eat, and be clothed the same way as they do. Nonetheless, William's kindness towards Henry is in fact self-serving. During William's ride back from his mistress' place every morning, he suffers from headaches. These ailments miraculously disappeared upon the sight of Henry. If intimacy reveals a person's innermost nature and character, William's attachment to Henry

springs from his insecurity; that is to say, Henry's subservience becomes a blanket that shelters William from his marital and health crises. As Scott's subject/object dialectics informs us, a master's subject position is reciprocally defined by his subjugation of slaves. As such, Henry's servitude, particularly his patient waits every morning, enables William to recuperate from his split conscience which wanders back and forth between his wife and mistress, and to realize that he is a wholesome master anticipated by his slaves.

12 As time goes by, William "came to develop a kind of love for the boy, and that love built up morning after morning" (8). To read William's affection for Henry in a more materialistic way, Henry in fact is an object in which William can find a transient form of security, of which he is deprived when he is with either his wife or mistress. Under the same constellation of technologies that constrains Henry's desire, William's affection for Henry remains unspoken, but is expressed through Henry's rising price. To keep Henry's parents from buying and thus freeing their son from his plantation, William claims that Henry's worth increases as his stablemanship develops: as the narrator says, "the cost of [Henry's] intelligence was not fixed and because it was fluid, it was whatever the market would bear" (17).

13 The intimacy between Henry and William is subtle but it does not go unnoticed; characters in the novel actually describe the post-slavery relationship between William and Henry as unnatural. In the scene after William reproaches Henry for wrestling with his own slave, Moses, William goes to Fern, a black teacher to free blacks, and signs Henry up for her class in the hopes that schooling can transform Henry into a more proper slave owner. After William leaves, Fern recalls a rumor that "there might be something unnatural between him and Henry. Why else would a white man of his stature spend so much of his life with a young man he had once owned" (128). This behind-the-scene gossip not only reveals two of the underlying phobias in the antebellum South, namely miscegenation and homosexuality, but also shows that people in the community are suspicious of William and Henry's apprenticeship. However, the suspicion is hushed because inter-racial same-sex intimacy is such a taboo that talking about it without any concrete evidence at hand would be a serious offense to the house of Robbins.

14 Having that said, the townsmen in Manchester County, both black and white, have every possible found reason to deem Henry and William's post-slavery bond unnatural, especially because free blacks who were once in slavery often keep a distance from whites, and some of them even keep them out of sight. For instance, after Henry's parents, Augustus and Mildred, bought themselves out of slavery, they found a house at the edge of town.

Augustus likes its location "because it was at the farthest end of the county and the nearest white man with slaves was half a mile away" (15). However, unlike his father, Henry does not observe such separatist rituals. His relationship with William after his slavery contract ends remains close and has further developed into a form of business mentorship. From William, Henry learns "the value of money" and "the value of his labors," (113) acquiring knowledge to be a full-fledged free man.

15 This apprenticeship in fact benefits both the protégé and the mentor — it not only acculturates Henry into the white capitalist society, but also appeases William's nostalgia for Henry. William admits that he "misses the boy [but] he had not been so surprised about his feelings for a black human being since realizing that he loved Philomena" (112). As William continues on to his reverie about Henry's anticipation for him at the entrance of his mansion every morning, he compares his waiting disposition to that of "a father waiting for his prodigal sons" (112). In order to keep Henry's "calming ways" (112) in his company after he was bought out of the plantation, William "had the boy come back again and again to make boots and shoes for him and his male guests" (112). Proceeding from this, it would not be wrong to say that this amiable inter-racial friendship in which a free black economically profits from his former holder's favoritism of him is in fact charged with eroticism, which accords with Dariack Scott's theoretical discussion of testeria.

16 Testeria, according to Scott's explication, is a metaphor of a "psychic disturbance" in which "a black male's testes is substituted for the female's uterus," a figurative speech which refers to the emasculated position when "black males are called into being in white supremacist patriarchy" (137). That is, what appears to be the black male subjectivity is in reality an object position "analogous to that occupied by women" (137). To put it in Freudian terms, black males inhabit the "untenable space" which identifies with and yet is dislocated from the "Symbolic Order of the White Father" (137). The eroticism that rests at the heart of the psychic life of testeria emerges when the black male strives to appear masculine in a white supremacist environment, finding himself stuck in the conundrum of resisting and at the same time identifying with the white male power. It is precisely this combination of and confusion between wanting and refusing white masculinity that marks black men's relationship with white men erotic. Uncovering this sexual undertone that lies deep in the homosociality between black and white men grants for the realization that the mentee position that Henry occupies in his relationship with William is testeric, in which he is interpellated as a forgiving father, cared for like a black mistress, and summoned like an obedient servant. Distinctive in this inter-racial intimacy, then, is Henry's ease in inhabiting

what Scott dubbed as the "untenable" space. Willfully responding to William's call for returning to the plantation, which other free blacks would have avoided like the plague, Henry surrenders to the objectified subjectivity that is imposed upon him. His submission to and identification with William revises Scott's formation of black male sexuality, which is characterized by complicity and discordance with white male power, to total docility, which, in turn, renders him as an object of desire for William. The provocative conclusion that this reading offers is that hidden underneath Henry's coming-of-age are his desire for whiteness and dis-identification with the African-American community. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine why *The Known World* is not well received in the African-American community. Henry's eventual financial independence which is made possible by William's assistance implies that submission and compliance were the requisites for African-Americans to become successful in the white supremacist antebellum South. To use Kristevan language, Henry is the deject figure who renders contemporary African-Americans readers abject, because his success confronts them with the knowledge, despite the fictional and temporal distance, that their freedom is always dependent upon the whims of hegemonic powers. But equally important is to realize that this conclusion is informed by a white supremacist perspective, for reading William as the exclusive distributor of freedom in fact re-articulates the superiority of whiteness. Scott's investment in the eroticism inherent in abjection proves to be useful when thinking through this thought loop, as his formulation of abjection argues that subjects are reliant on objects as much as objects are dependent upon subjects in "bringing one another into being" (15). To review Henry and William's queer apprenticeship through this lens, it is true that Henry's economic prowess is a result of his services to William, but, William's masterly subjectivity is simultaneously undergirded by Henry's servanthood. As such, Jones did not tell a 'sell-out' story, but presented a vision of a discursive form of black agency, a subjectivity that is not gained through white interpellation, but resided in the historical legacy of defeat, a condition which oppositionally orientates the white master identity.

17 Before delving deeper into the psychopathology of slavery, I would like to briefly review how the slave trade has distorted the genealogy of the slaves' families. This social contextualization will assist us in understanding that Henry's queer psyche, which prioritizes William, his father *de jure*, over Augustus, his father *de facto*, is not a reflex of a personal hysteria, but a manifestation of the nation's historia. In her article "Mama's Baby, PaPa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), Hortense Spillers explains that African-American community's present matriarchal structure is a consequence of its slavery past. Chattel slavery has given rise to the mental phenomenon of "dual fatherhood" in the slave

community, a mental complex that is comprised of the presence of the slave's "captor father," meaning his/her master, and the absence of the slave's biological father. Unlike many of the slave families whose father was sold to other plantations, Henry grows up in close physical proximity to his father, but that does not exclude him from being a victim confused by the state of "dual fatherhood." It is true that Henry's childhood is nothing close to being traumatic, but his parents' departure from the Robbins plantation during his early years seems to have left a fissure in his psyche. When Henry was six, Augustus bought himself out of slavery. Three years later, Augustus purchased his wife. Upon her departure, Henry sobbingly pleads, "please, les go back" (16), begging his mother to return to the plantation. As an attempt to appease his inconsolable son, Augustus says to Henry "Before you can turn around good, you will be comin home with us" (16). At this time, Henry tries to make sense of the word "home." The first image that his mind conjures up is a cabin in which he, his mother, and Rita, who is a good friend of his mother, huddle around the fire place. It is important to note that his father Augustus, as Spiller would expect, is absent in Henry's visualization of home. What deepens this scene's significance is Henry's first close encounter with his master. Perturbed by the crying child, Robbins approaches the crowd and asks Henry why he is crying. Henry responds "For nothin" (16). It is not so much the verbal exchange that deserves our attention here, but Henry's perception of the size of his master, which appears to him as a "mountain separating [him] from the sun" (16). To encapsulate this scene using object-relation theory, the moment when Augustus "pulls his wife from the child" (17) creates frustration and anxiety in Henry, but these feelings are immediately soothed by Robbins's commanding appearance which promises him protection in replacement of his mother.

18 Starting from the winter of 1834, Henry's relationship with his parents becomes further strained. Their visits are cut short because of the cold, and there are even times that Henry will skip them without compelling reasons. Having stood in the cold in vain for many hours, Augustus eventually grows weary of his son's attitude. During a February Sunday afternoon visit, he "grab[s] [Henry]," "sh[akes] him" and "push[es] him" (19) to the ground. This act of violence is reported. The next Sunday, Augusts and Mildred are greeted by William, who reproachfully says "I heard you did something to my boy, to my property" (19) and decides "no more visits for a month" (19). This scene is troubling to readers because it suggests that Henry has become a 'turn-coat.' This may be true, but I would like to point out that Henry's report to his master on his father's violent abuse on him begs a social diagnosis. To properly understand this scene's queer social implication, I turn to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952).

19 In chapter 6 of Fanon's monograph, "The Negro and Psychopathology", Fanon reminds us that to impose "evil spirits" on either the white or black men in cases like Henry's is "a major error in education" (148). Instead, he suggests we should recognize that the notion of family has a social bearing. Fanon says that, in a (post)colonial context, "white family is the agent of [...] systems" and "a country is the sum of these white families" (148-9). In other words, each individual in a society is trained and shaped by the white family ideal. Using Freudian terms, this ideal will be internalized by the society's members and eventually form their superegos. Problems then arise when a child of color comes in contact with the white world. For instance, if a black subject acquires the white superego, it will change him or her in a fundamental way, for the white superego will supersede and cast their black family structures "back to the id" (149). As Fanon eloquently sums up "the individual who climbs up into society — white and civilized — tends to reject his family — black and savage — on the plane of imagination" (149). In Henry's case, he, indeed, only identifies with his "captor father," while his biological father is partly dislocated by slavery, and partly taken away by freedom. One has to bear in mind that William did not sell Augustus in order to interfere in the Townsend's family; it is Augustus who purchased himself. As such, since the early age of six, Henry, without his biological father around, can only identify with a form of mediated black masculinity through the reflection of his "captor father's" gaze. Fanon's theory remains applicable when we look at Henry's mentality after his emancipation. On the first day of his freedom, Augustus asks him, "you feelin any different?" (49) Henry replies: "No sir, I don't reckon I do" (49). It is not until this moment that Augustus realizes his son is different from other black subjects, who always pine for freedom. Augustus starts to ponder whether or not "all would have been different if he had bought the boy's freedom, before Mildred's" (49).

20 The chasm between Henry and the rest of his community is further widened at the moment when he bought his first slave from William. As a black man, Henry does not find enslaving another black man ethically problematic until he confesses it to his parents. Augustus and Mildred are enraged by their son's choice, especially Augustus, who slams a stick across Henry's shoulder, and demands that he leave the family. Even after experiencing his family's hostility, Henry still does find fault with owning black slaves; it is this jarring ignorance of the wrong in owning his own kinsmen as property that cries out for closer scrutiny. In what begins as a reunion dinner scene, Henry tells his parents that he "got his own man [whom he bought] cheap from Master Robbins" (137). Trying to contain his temper, Augustus rhetorically asks his son, "Don't you know the wrong of that?" (137); to this, Henry defiantly answers "Nobody never told me the wrong of that" (137). His naivety

soon betrays itself as a defensive strategy when he repeatedly evokes the legal language of law and rights: as he begs innocence to Augustus, he argues, "Papa, I ain't done nothing I ain't a right to. I ain't done nothing no white man wouldn't do" (138). Henry goes on to rationalize his slave holding decision by equating himself to white men as he pleads again: "I ain't done nothing that any white man wouldn't do. I ain't broke no law" (137). This episode demonstrates an uncanny structural resemblance to Eve Sedgwick's delineation of coming out in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Henry's closet houses his secretive obsession with white male power, and the two halves of his schizophrenia — namely his black skin and his white psyche, which are partitioned by the closet door — converge when he acknowledges his possession of Moses. The tension that this acknowledgement sets forth in the Townsend family is, as Sedgwick describes, an unlocking of "a powerful unknowing as unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank [the closet] can pretend to be, but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space" (77). That is, Henry's secretive obsession with white male power is paradoxically made known to his family as an unknown, or more precisely, an innocence, an inability to fathom the problematics in his engagement in the slave trade. Henry's innocence, furthermore, can be interpreted as a symptom which diagnoses his slave owning stature as a manifestation of his white superego at work, a mental bifurcation that indicates the queering of his psychic apparatus by chattel slavery.

21 The controversy around Henry's slave owning stature suggests that black success in plantation life is marked as queer. Henry is rendered scandalous not because he is sexually pervasive, but because he poses as transgressive — his economic success posits him as an equal of white people. Lee Edelman in *No Future* says that "the queer comes to figure [...] the resistance [...] to every social structure of form" (4); to build my conclusion upon Edelman, Henry and William's apprenticeship is queer precisely because it does not conform to the heterosexualized concept of homosexuality. In the form of slave/master relationship, William and Henry's intimacy slips through the plantation's homophobic surveillance, allowing William to fashion Henry into a black slave master, an identity which confuses the conventional way of viewing property ownership and private intimacy as exclusively white rights, which ultimately disrupted the plantation tradition which is built upon white kinship.

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# “I should have gone to Mary’s”: Filling the Void in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

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## Abstract:

Following the latest direction of the study on *Invisible Man*, this article further examines the complex relationship between race and sexuality in Ellison’s novel. Racism and sexism are intermingled in the novel, and they serve as the driving forces of the narrative dominated by male characters. The men in Ellison’s novel blindly pursue the same ideal masculinity, which is defined as the combination of social power and sexual prowess. Assuming that their masculinity is incomplete in one way or another, the male characters chase each other desiring the ideal, which renders the men even more insecure about their masculinity. As the characters do not see the complete masculinity in themselves, the novel as a whole seems to be devoid of the ideal ‘Man.’ However, the ‘Man’ decidedly exists in the novel, but not in one person. African-American and Caucasian male characters collectively create the complete form of the ideal ‘Man’ and exert oppressive power over African-American women. Focusing on the perspective of the narrator, this article first examines how African-American and Caucasian men give chase to each other in search of an ideal masculinity. Next, the ways in which African-American women are overshadowed as a result of the men’s blind chase are discussed. Finally, this article looks at how these doubly oppressed women can fill a void in the novel which is faced with an impasse as the male characters struggle to reach the perfect masculinity.

1 Since its publication in 1952, the criticism of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* has continuously shifted its focus. Following an African-American narrator who starts as an eloquent, promising scholarship awardee and ends as a threat to his college and to the society, the novel suggests both microcosmic and macrocosmic views on America in the 1930s. Ellison’s earlier critics argued that the novel distinctively presents a universal humanist vision through the narrator’s individual *Bildungsroman*. Kenneth Burke, comparing *Invisible Man* to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, defines Ellison’s novel as an “epoch-making book” which “reconstructs its time and takes on a universal poignancy” (79). Taking a similar approach, Joseph Frank states that Ellison’s novel is a “negative Bildungsroman” where the “narrator-hero learns that everything he has been taught to believe [...] is actually false and treacherous” (37). Recently, critics have focused more on the novel’s racial discourse. Jack Turner argues that without “awakening to race,” the narrator cannot achieve the “liberal democratic character” in the novel by which the earlier critics of Ellison meant the narrator’s individual selfhood seen from the universal humanist vision (655). The discussion of the novel also turned to gender issues. In *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* (2005), Daniel Y. Kim states that in *Invisible Man*, “the black man signifies for the white man all the

masculine plenitude he feels himself to lack” and that the black townsman named Trueblood in particular, who rapes his own daughter and proudly talks about it to Caucasian male audiences, demonstrates how “the Negrophobic white man is, at bottom, both a Negrophile and a homosexual” (142). Given that some African-American male characters in the novel become a symbol of masculinity to which Caucasian male characters feel inferior, Kim’s argument holds much truth. However, it should also be noted that there are a few African-American male characters who envy the Caucasian male characters’ masculinity in terms of social power. Additionally, it is clear how self-conscious the narrator is of his skin color which makes him feel socially inferior to characters like Jack and Mr. Norton, thus supporting Turner’s argument about the novel’s fundamental racial awareness.

2 Following the latest direction of the study on *Invisible Man*, this article will further examine the complex relationship between race and sexuality presented in Ellison’s novel. Racism and sexism are intermingled in the novel, and they are the driving forces of the narrative dominated by male characters. In the novel, Caucasian male characters indirectly fulfill their sexual desire by socially dominating African-American male characters, and the latter in turn compensate for the sense of social inferiority by exerting sexual prowess over the wives of the former. The men in Ellison’s novel blindly pursue the same ideal masculinity, which is defined as the combination of social power and virility. Assuming that their masculinity is incomplete in one way or another, the male characters chase each other desiring the ideal, which renders the men even more insecure. As the characters do not see the complete masculinity in themselves, the novel as a whole seems to be devoid of the ideal ‘Man.’ However, the ‘Man’ decidedly exists in the novel, just not in one person. African-American and Caucasian male characters collectively form the complete form of the ideal ‘Man’ and exert oppressive power over African-American female characters. In the hierarchical structure drawn from the racist and sexist society of America in the 1930s, the group in power would be Caucasian males, who possessed both social power and gender dominance. Although drawing the comparison between Caucasian women and African-American men in terms of their social strata would be tricky and require further deliberate exploration, it is obvious that African-American women, discriminated against their race and sexuality simultaneously, would be placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> In Ellison’s

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<sup>1</sup> The novel is set in the American South as well as in Harlem, New York, in the 1930s. In New York, women were enfranchised in 1917, but the anti-suffragist movement continued until the 1920s, exerting pressure on the burgeoning rights of Caucasian women. Meanwhile, the de jure segregation of the Jim Crow Laws was continued until the mid-1960s in which the Voting Rights Acts was signed and realized what C. Vann Woodward called “unparalleled legislative achievement for civil rights” (186). Considering the history of

novel, the African-American women are doubly oppressed by the society, i.e. racially and sexually, and their presence and potential are overlooked. Focusing on the perspective of the narrator, this article will first examine how African-American and Caucasian men give chase to each other in search of an ideal masculinity. Next, the way in which African-American women are overshadowed as a result of the men's blind chase will be discussed. Finally, this article will look at how these doubly oppressed women can fill a void in the novel which is faced with an impasse as the male characters struggle to reach the perfect masculinity.

3 In *Invisible Man*, Caucasian male characters project the stereotypes of large physique, violence, and sexual prowess onto African-American men. Among these stereotypes, African-American men's sexual prowess is idolized by Caucasian men as illustrated in Norton's encounter with Trueblood. Compared to Trueblood who impregnates his own daughter, Mr. Norton cannot act upon the incestuous desire he and Trueblood share. Reminiscing about his daughter, Mr. Norton describes her as "more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet" (Ellison, *Invisible* 42). Mr. Norton's strong affection makes him deny the father-daughter relationship. What makes Mr. Norton's fascination even greater is probably the fact that his daughter passed away and therefore Mr. Norton can never see her again. Introduced to Trueblood's incestuous history, Mr. Norton insists that he should talk to the African-American man for more anecdotal details. Here, Trueblood is used for Mr. Norton's vicarious satisfaction of making love with one's own daughter. Mr. Norton immerses himself in Trueblood's incest narrative, so much so that the narrator, although wishing to leave, hesitates to interrupt the spellbound Caucasian man. Trueblood's extreme virility leads to Mr. Norton's indirect, aural voyeurism, allowing the Caucasian man alternative pleasure.

4 It is worth noting that Mr. Norton is not the only one who idealizes Trueblood's masculinity. Trueblood "had told the story many, many times" to the Caucasian men who also seek vicarious pleasure (54). The visitors to Trueblood's house represent the Caucasian men's pursuit of an extremely virile masculinity. Trueblood says that some of his audiences even pay for the story: "they gimme more help [money] than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. [...] [T]he Caucasian folks treats me fine" (67-68). Trueblood's masculinity, the virility in particular, becomes the object of admiration, for

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women's suffrage movement and Jim Crow law's enduring influence, it would require arduous research in order to determine the social strata of Caucasian women and African-American men in the 1930s. For more detailed information, please consult "The Strange Career of Jim Crow" (2001) by C. Vann Woodward and "The Concise History of Woman Suffrage" (2005) by Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle. In this article, the ninth paragraph discusses the ambiguous power relation between African-American men and Caucasian women.

which the Caucasian audience has to pay. Sexuality here becomes a currency, momentarily determining the power relations between African-American and Caucasian characters. “[S]taring intensely at Trueblood,” Mr. Norton also pays Trueblood a hundred dollars, because his hidden desire is fulfilled (69). At the same time, Mr. Norton realizes his inferiority to the African-American man, “his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation” (51). As the narrator perceives, Mr. Norton’s blue eyes and Trueblood’s black face represent the general stereotyping of African-American men’s masculinity and the Caucasian men’s collective envy of it. In addition to the social power they already have, the Caucasian men desire African-American men’s sexual prowess in order to reach the ideal masculinity.

5 In an effort to compensate for his sense of inferiority, Mr. Norton uses the social power he has as one of the “white trustees” of the college the narrator attends. In the slave quarters where Trueblood lives, Mr. Norton keeps reeling along the road while repeatedly blaming the hot weather. After meeting Trueblood, Mr. Norton faints and cannot recover until he enlists the help of a doctor in the Golden Day, a bar and brothel frequented by African-American veterans. Similar to Trueblood’s house, the Golden Day is a place in which African-American men’s masculinity is predominant. Once he returns to the college campus, Mr. Norton becomes a socially influential figure as a Caucasian trustee. Although Mr. Norton tells the narrator that everything is going to be fine, his nonchalant face betrays his true intention of punishing the narrator. Like a child and a parent, the narrator and Mr. Norton create the picture of an African-American slave and a Caucasian master, further supported by the atmosphere of Mr. Norton’s lodging, “with white pillars like those of an old plantation manor house,” which resembles a Southern mansion from the times of American Slavery (100). In this way, Mr. Norton substitutes social power for his ineffective virility and compensates for the humility he feels in the slave quarters.

6 The narrator also seeks compensation for his undermined masculinity. What he is shown as lacking in social power, the narrator tries to make up for in a heightened sexuality. Expelled from the college, the narrator arrives in Harlem, New York, where he learns about his inferior social status as an African-American man. Once he feels an urge to fight for his own freedom, the narrator joins the Brotherhood, a civil rights organization led by a Caucasian man named Jack.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the organization’s apparent dedication to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Brotherhood in which the narrator participates as its spokesperson is comprised of both Caucasian and African-American people. The organization is apparently committed to the betterment of African-American people’s social circumstances. Christopher Z. Hobson suggests that the readers can easily associate “the

betterment of African-American people's lot, there is yet another hierarchy within the Brotherhood which ultimately places the African-American narrator under the Caucasian members like Jack, depriving him of "a chance to speak" (308). Determined to compromise the Brotherhood, the narrator approaches Caucasian men's wives using his masculinity.

7 Unlike their Caucasian husbands, the narrator sexually appeals to the Caucasian women. A case in point would be Hubert, one of the Caucasian members of the Brotherhood, who is always outside and does not sleep with his wife who instead seduces the narrator. In a way, the narrator gives the husband-less wife the feeling of security. Moreover, the physical manifestation of the narrator's masculinity is "so powerful, so – so *primitive!*" (413). His interracial affair with Hubert's wife is an attempt to regain some of the social power he feels he has lost. Hubert may be influential as a Caucasian man in the public sphere, but in terms of sexual power and domestic influence, the narrator is more successful than Hubert, being appraised and admired by the wife. In addition, enticing Hubert's wife with his prominent display of sexuality, the narrator reemphasizes the Caucasian men's insecure masculinity. In consequence, the narrator's sense of social inferiority is compensated.

8 The narrator's exertion of sexual prowess culminates when he seduces Sybil, "one of the big shots' [most influential Caucasian men's] wives" (516). Calling herself as a "nymphomaniac" (519), Sybil indicates that her sexual fantasy and desire cannot be fulfilled by her husband who is often absent from the house much like Hubert. In place of her husband, Sybil wants the narrator to fulfil her rape fantasy. When an intoxicated Sybil soon falls asleep, the narrator does not sleep with her; when she wakes up, however, the narrator lies that he did. "I leaped straight out of the wall," the narrator says to Sybil, "I overpowered you in the empty lobby – remember? I smothered your terrified screams" (524). Sybil shows her satisfaction by demanding to stay with him all night long. When the narrator sends Sybil home in a husband-like manner and Sybil follows the instruction, he succeeds in taking the Caucasian man's place as a husband and as the manifestation of masculinity.

9 It is interesting how the narrator's attempt to substitute sexual prowess for the feeling of social inferiority falls short. Attracting Caucasian women, the narrator uses the "primitive" image of masculinity, which exists in the Caucasian women's imagination as a stereotypical African-American men's sexuality. Therefore, the narrator's strategy to lure the women emphasizes the bestiality of his masculinity. This may be linked to the case of Trueblood where the farmer's incestuous narrative is encouraged and financially supported by a number

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Brotherhood" with the Communist Party in America during the 1930s and that through the narrator's "political education and transition," Ellison presents the evolution of African-American "leftists" (57).

of Caucasian men; Trueblood's masculinity is the manifestation of uncontrolled sexual desire. It is important to note that during the imaginary intercourse with Sybil, the narrator's individual identity is not considered: "Was she [Sybil] calling me beautiful or boogieful, beautiful or sublime ... What'd either mean? I am invisible" (529). The narrator realizes that he is merely one of the African-American men with 'primitive' sexual prowess. He may use Sybil for his psychological compensation, but Sybil also uses him to fulfill her own fantasy about African-American men. Similarly, Hubert's wife desires the narrator's perceived primitiveness in her husband's absence. In this fashion, the narrator senses the ambiguous power relation between him and the Caucasian wives and wonders "[w]ho's taking revenge on whom?" (520). In brief, the narrator's roundabout way of being superior to the Caucasian men could actually undermine his masculinity, demonstrating only that his pursuit of the ideal may be self-defeating.

10 In the end, the narrator's last move to compensate for the sense of inferiority is to hide his masculinity altogether from the racist and sexist world. As Ellison's earlier critics pointed out, the novel presents the narrator's rites of passage as he goes through the sociopolitical transitions.<sup>3</sup> In regard to reaching the perfect, ideal masculinity, the narrator realizes the futility of the pursuit. The narrator's masculinity is compromised in terms of both social power and virility; his social impact cannot override that of Caucasian male characters like Mr. Norton and Jack, and his sexuality is only interpreted as primitive and bestial. In one way or another, the narrator's masculinity is manipulated by Caucasian characters. Cast out from the Brotherhood and inopportunistly chased by two police officers, the narrator accidentally falls into an uncovered manhole, in which he makes up his mind that he will never be above ground again. This, according to the narrator, is the only "way to destroy" the Caucasian manipulators (564). When above ground, his masculinity does not help the narrator, who fails to use it fully and effectively. Instead, it helps the Caucasian figures, who use the African-American men for fulfilling their sexual desire and for the sense of social superiority. In the manhole, however, the narrator's masculinity is invisible, not allowing anyone to make use of sexual and social parts of it. The expected results of hiding are, therefore, freeing the narrator's masculinity from Caucasian men and women's manipulation and, subsequently, revealing the Caucasian men's insecurity. Imagining the Caucasian men aboveground, who are now bereft of the much-abused, socially-constructed African-American masculinity, the

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<sup>3</sup> In "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded Bildungsroman," his letter to Ellison, Kenneth Burke states that the novel puts the narrator through "the transformation needed to present the entire inventory of the 'ambiguities' the author had to confront in the process of growing up" (68).

narrator is contented. Indeed, to hide underground seems to be the best and only way the narrator can find to revenge on the domination and manipulation above ground.

11 The narrator's conviction that Caucasian men also possess an incomplete masculinity is ascertained by his dream. Some might argue that the narrator's dream about being castrated by Jack symbolizes the narrator's own fear of losing his masculinity, because eventually, it is the narrator who is desexualized. Such an argument would be only partially true. Projected by Ellison onto the narrator's subconscious, the dream includes the narrator's hope to reemphasize Caucasian men's sense of insecurity. Pointing at his removed testes, the narrator explains to Jack how his own body part can represent their mutual fear of imperfect masculinity: "That there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water [...] But *your* sun [...] And *your* moon [...] *Your* world" (570; emphasis added). While the narrator explicates why their "generation" is altogether in danger due to the castration, the bridge, beneath the arch of which the narrator's testes are hanging, turns into a moving robot and disappears with the emblem of masculinity. The narrator shouts to the monster that is receding with the symbolic testicles, "No, no, *we* must stop him!" (570; emphasis added). In the dream, the narrator laughs at the people who demand his castration, and this laughter shocks the audience, including Jack and Mr. Norton. The laughter is derived from the narrator's realization of the crowds' mutual fear of having incomplete masculinity. By castrating the narrator, Jack eliminates African-American men's masculinity to which his own masculinity is not comparable. In consequence, the narrator's dream shows the Caucasian man Jack's fear of being an imperfect 'Man.' Hence the narrator's dream reveals the male characters' common pursuit and common insecurity. The narrator finds himself remaining intact after the allegedly fatal dream: "I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was *whole*" (571; emphasis added). In the end, the narrator confidently refers to his "hibernation" underground as the "greatest social crime" (581), which represents the narrator's rebellion against the white supremacy.

12 As Caucasian and African-American male characters feel insecure about their masculinity, it seems that the novel does not show the (perfect form of the) ideal masculinity. However, the novel as a whole, not in one individual character, assumes the ideal masculinity, the Caucasian male characters accounting for the social power, and the African-American male characters embodying the virility. Together, these male characters form the idealized masculinity while still chasing each other to make up for their perceived weaknesses. In other words, the ideal 'Man' is only invisible but clearly exists in the novel. The narrator realizes how an African-American man like himself can be "*part of them*

[Caucasian men] as well as apart from them” (575). Some might argue that the racially stereotyped masculinity, i.e. social power in Caucasian men and virility in African-American men, is itself racist. However, as already discussed, the novel presents remarkably racist-stereotyped rendering of the characters. In chapter 1, the narrator is forced to participate in a battle royal in which African-American men are made to fight against each other, before which a naked Caucasian woman appears to mesmerize the fighters. According to Kim, the African-American men “assume a heightened masculinity,” because the “black male body” not only serves as an agent of violence but also “display[s] a sexual arousal” in place of Caucasian men” (53).<sup>4</sup> While Caucasian men are sitting outside the boxing ring enjoying the fight, the narrator and other African-American men are ordered to look at the naked woman. In this way, the African-American male characters are highly sexualized along with the Caucasian female characters. On the other hand, social power is not endowed to these men, especially when they are under Caucasian men’s authority, they do not have any social influence. Even the college president Dr. Bledsoe, who is probably the most socially powerful African-American figure in the novel, is humbled in front of the “white visitors,” “refusing to sit down, [...] his hat in his hand, [...] then leaving with a humble bow” (Ellison 106). Clearly, the novel provides racially stereotyped male characterizations while not allowing the ideal masculinity to any individual character. Instead, the novel presents perfect masculinity, when combining the Caucasian and African-American male characters, as being comprised of both social power and sexual prowess.

13 Once created, the complete masculinity overshadows the existence of African-American women, rendering their role merely functional. Unlike the Caucasian women characters whose social status is ambiguous, African-American female characters clearly show that they are at the bottom of the social pyramid, discriminated against their race as well as sexuality.<sup>5</sup> When Mr. Norton and the narrator get out of their car with the intention of talking with Trueblood, the social power of a Caucasian man’s masculinity and the sexual prowess of an African-American man’s masculinity are combined. With the introduction of the complete form of ‘Man,’ Trueblood’s wife and daughter literally disappear from the scene

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Kim states that African-American men in Ellison’s novel, including the narrator, possess ambiguous sexuality, displaying both masculine and feminine traits. For more explication, please refer to Kim’s book “Writing Manhood”, especially to chapter 1, “Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and Its Homophobic Critique in Invisible Man.”

<sup>5</sup> Caucasian women characters’ presence is limited to domestic spheres, and they are not allowed much influence in the outer world where male characters lead. Nonetheless, Caucasian women hold an ambiguous rank in the novel’s social hierarchy and give the readers a hint that they may use African-American men for their own benefit, manipulating the men into fulfilling their sexual fantasy.

as the narrator sees “the two women turn and run frantically behind the house, their movements heavy and flatfooted” (50). To the two male visitors, Trueblood’s wife and daughter are only seen as proof of Trueblood’s excessive sexual prowess. Similarly, the “big woman” at the Brotherhood meeting exists in order to evidence the masculinity completed by Caucasian leader Jack and African-American member Tod Clifton whose “very black and very handsome” figure assuredly draws “the quick intake of a woman’s pleasurable sigh” (363). Not given a name, let alone called “Sister,” the “big woman” is disregarded as part of the meeting and literally removed from the narrative. The “big woman” insightfully warns that Ras the Exhorter, a radical Black Nationalist leader, and his followers “would attack and denounce the white meat of a roasted chicken,” meaning that the Caucasian members of the Brotherhood could be in danger (365). However, her warning is only laughed at, and without much response, the “Brothers” (including the narrator) remain quiet until Clifton concludes her opinion by saying, “We’ll take care of that” (365). After that, the “big woman” is neither described nor given any voice. As Trueblood’s women go behind the house when they finish emphasizing men’s completed masculinity, the “big woman” does not come into view again once she reinforces the power of ‘Man,’ remaining unseen and anonymous until the end. In brief, these African-American women are backgrounds to highlight masculinity and, accordingly, are eliminated from the narrative after carrying out their role.

14 When an African-American woman makes frequent appearances, like Mary Rambo does, Ellison projects the stereotypical characterization of an African-American mother onto her. While staying at home and shunning social involvement, Mary mainly concerns herself with the narrator’s physical and emotional well-being. When the narrator has no place to stay in Harlem at first, Mary insists that he should live in her house. Although he is unable to pay the rent, the narrator stays with Mary who worries about his meal most of the time: “Soon’s I’ve had mine [my coffee], I’ll see what kind of breakfast I can whip together” (323). Even when the narrator tries to discuss the issue of rent, Mary turns back to the matter of food: “I’m not worried ’cause when you get it [money] I know you’ll pay me. Meanwhile you forget it. Nobody in this house is going to starve” (323). According to Ann Folwell Stanford, Mary is one of “the mother/mammy/Madonna figures in *Invisible Man*” (20). Treating the narrator as if he is her own son, Mary becomes a domesticated mammy archetype, an enslaved African-American nanny or mother in the old South. There are quite a few anonymous male residents in Mary’s house, in and out of which they freely come, and Mary shows unrequited affection for the “boys.” Unlike the narrator who goes through eventful, step-by-step personal growth, Mary does not experience much character development, thus

remaining as a flat character. Stanford states that “Mary Rambo joins a long line of textual representations of women as ‘helpers,’ ‘caretakers,’ and ‘nurturers’” (22). While she encourages the narrator to go out and fight for the rights of African-American people, she does not participate in the social movement. Mary thus reinforces her stereotypical role by believing that an African-American man like the narrator needs her as “a woman to keep an eye on [him]” (Ellison, *Invisible* 252). When the narrator recovers, Mary’s duty as a mother is finished, and she is out of the novel’s prime focus just as Trueblood’s women and the “big woman” are.

15 In Mary’s case, the female character’s potential is presented through the very stereotype projected onto her. Because Mary does not possess social power outside her apartment, let alone shows sexual prowess, the narrator tries to detach himself from her when he becomes part of the Brotherhood. No matter how incomplete she appears to the male character’s perspective, Mary is a powerful mother figure with the power of healing and with enough sustenance to feed the homeless colored boys. She is a breadwinner and a leading motivator. Not only does she own a house and receive African-American men into it, but she also encourages them to make changes in the world. When the narrator leaves her house and falls deep into the manhole, Mary haunts his mind: “In the morning I’ll remove the lid ... Mary, I should have gone to Mary’s” (567). Mary’s encouragement and the warmth leave a significant impact on the narrator. A second look at her may reveal that Mary is not a mere landlady or a nanny, but an influential leader figure with caring motherliness.

16 Although the narrator becomes part of the men overshadowing African-American women, he sees several clues as to how much potential the women have. Indeed, the images of colored women are distorted, but when examined closely, they uncover different aspects of Ellison’s novel. First of all, Trueblood’s “women” are both child bearers, appearing “with the weary, full-fronted motions of far-gone pregnancy” (47). Nonetheless, they are vigorous enough to take care of the run-down domestic space, in a dilapidated house in the slave-quarter section. When the narrator and Mr. Norton visit the house, the women are laboring in the domestic space, “washing clothes in an iron pot” (47). They are making life go on while being ready to create the next generation. Trueblood’s women could be the originators of such a new generation as the narrator, who will continue to “keep up the good fight” and “[l]earn it to the young’uns,” fulfilling the deathbed will of the narrator’s grandfather (16). Secondly, the “big woman” from the Brotherhood meeting also shows potential. The remarks she makes are made up either of tongue slips, mistaking Ras the Exhorter as “Extortor,” or of humorous culinary expressions, comparing the Caucasian members of the Brotherhood to

“the white meat of a roasted chicken” (365). Nonetheless, her observation is right to the point. Indeed, Ras is an “extorter” who advocates violence while leading an extremist movement to change the lot of the African descendants in America, especially those from Ethiopia. One of the historically realistic figures that could be linked to Ras is Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a famous Jamaican activist who supported Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism during the 1920s and 30s.<sup>6</sup> Like Ras, Garvey emphasized the solidarity of African descendants and despised African-American activists’ cooperation with Caucasian people.<sup>7</sup> Despite the similarities, Ellison makes it clear that he is not referring to Garvey in the novel. Clifton explains to the narrator how “he [Garvey] didn’t last” and no one in the novel has seen the legendary figure (367). Even if this historical activist is only a vague model for Ras, the main reason why Ras disapproves of the narrator and other African-American Brotherhood members is that they cooperate with Caucasian men like Jack. Even though it is the “big woman” who first identifies the point, the woman’s argument only convinces the male Brotherhood members that the place she must be present is her kitchen, not the Brotherhood meeting room.

17 When the narrator finally realizes the African-American women’s potential and tries to escape the dark man-hole, he cannot go back to Mary’s. In the first place, the cover of the manhole is opened. The narrator was “in strange territory” and “someone, for some reason, had removed the manhole cover and I felt myself plunge down, down” (565). While the author chose to open the manhole when the narrator is fleeing from two police officers, it is also him who confines the narrator to the darkness permanently by eliminating the means of escape. The narrator realizes his powerlessness, and at the moment of realization, the narrator comes to understand his reliance on Mary:

But I was never to reach Mary’s, and I was over-optimistic about removing the steel cap in the morning. Great invisible waves of time flowed over me, but that morning never came. There was no morning nor light of any kind to awaken me and I slept on and on until finally I was aroused by *hunger*. [...] I tried to reach above me but found only space, unbroken and impenetrable. (567; emphasis added)

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on Garvey’s autobiography, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (1978) could be recommended; it is the compilation of Garvey’s speeches and articles, edited by Amy Jacques Garvey. Although there is an official biography of Garvey written by Tony Martin, *Marcus Garvey, Hero: A First Biography* (1983), it would be better to go directly for Garvey’s *Philosophy and Opinions*, since Martin’s book may not provide impartial views on Garvey’s political ideas. For a better understanding of the conflict among the African-American activists in Ellison’s novel, Elliott M. Rudwick’s article, “DuBois versus Garvey: Race Propagandists at War,” would be useful; Rudwick’s article offers an interesting comparison between Garvey and DuBois’ political approaches.

<sup>7</sup> Eric J. Sundquist points out that “[j]ust as Ellison’s figure of the Founder in *Invisible Man* is not Booker T. Washington, so his Ras the Exhorter cannot be tied directly to Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore [...] or Garvey himself” all of whom were West Indian black nationalists (179).

Woken up by hunger, the narrator needs to be fed by Mary. However, he cannot get out of the hole unless he is given a ladder. The author assures the narrator of his final decision, with his resolution conveyed to the narrator as an unknown voice: “Then, finally, when I could barely move, something seemed to say, ‘That’s enough, don’t kill yourself. You’ve run enough, you’re through with them at last,’ and I collapsed” (568). His desire and effort notwithstanding, the narrator cannot get back to the African-American woman.

18 By not letting the narrator return to the mother figure Mary, Ellison seems to say that an individual must break away from the past and be born again, recreating one’s self, on one’s own. It should be noted that Ellison intended to write a novel that transcends the boundaries of race or gender. In an interview with David L. Carson, Ellison suggested that the narrator is not “a great hero,” but he goes beyond “any narrow concepts of race” (207). “[T]he form in which I try to express myself,” Ellison stated in the interview, “is not a ‘racial’ form” (207). The narrator is not a protestor for African-American people, but a messenger for every human being. In another interview with Arlene Crewdson and Rita Thomson, Ellison emphasized that the novel is universal, arguing that he could stand for “all the men and all the women” whatever age they are (264). By confining the narrator to the pitch-black manhole, Ellison seems to obfuscate the narrator’s racial and sexual traits. In order to find his way out, the narrator decides to make a torch by lighting such documents as his high-school diploma and a slip on which his Brotherhood name is written. The narrator once cherished these papers in the briefcase, because they defined who he was. However, when the narrator awakes “in the blackness,” the old labels have to be burned, and the narrator realizes that he cannot return to “any part of [his] old life” (Ellison, *Invisible* 571). Although his break with the past seems lamentable, the narrator is eligible to stand for the universal in the novel after all of the documents are burned, finally suggesting that he may “speak for you,” that is to say, he could represent any individual whatever history he or she may have (581). The narrator’s hard experience of coming of age becomes an illustration of any individual’s personal development, of his or her ontological quest. What Ellison wanted to convey in the narrator, according to his interview with Crewdson and Thomson, is “one’s own most intimate and hopeful sense of human value and possibly human predicament” (Ellison, “Interview” 264). Certainly, the narrator is intended by the author to speak for the universal human questions, including those of one’s existential consciousness.

19 Nevertheless, the novel’s realization diverges from Ellison’s intention. Firstly, the narrator involves himself in even greater sexism and racism as he goes through the passage Ellison has prepared for him. Ellison explained in his interview with Chester and Howard that

“the universal” in his novel can be “reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance” (9). Unlike the author’s motive, the circumstance in which the narrator is thrown is so specific that it is inseparable from the racist and sexist social milieu. Concentrating on the ideal masculinity with social power and sexual prowess, the novel employs the male characters of both races as the driving force of its narrative. Chasing each other in search of compensation and revenge, the men conjointly manifest their ideal form of masculinity and exert its power upon African-American women. As part of the chase, the narrator learns to overlook the presence of the women of color. As Carolyn W. Sylvander argues, the narrator “loses what slight recognition he has of woman-as-human at the beginning of the novel as he becomes more closely allied with manhood, Brotherhood, and his own personhood” (77). As he follows the patriarchal leaders such as Mr. Norton, Jack, and Mr. Emerson, the narrator is trained to obsess himself over the ideal masculinity. One paradox created in this process is that the narrator, running away from the racist and sexist society, maintains the system he tries to escape. He convinces himself that he is taking revenge by hiding underground. However, the narrator draws an unheroic conclusion while gradually forgetting the African-American women who must still be suffering double oppression on the ground: “They [all the male characters in his dream] were all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world. Well, let them. I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 571). Ultimately, the narrator becomes not only an observer, but also an agent sustaining the racist and sexist society led by the male characters. Deviating from Ellison’s design for the universality of the novel, the narrator involves himself in the racism and sexism to a greater extent.

20 In order to convey the universal human questions, it seems that the novel should allow more space for the female characters to reappear. Without the rise of African-American women and the achievement of true equality regardless of race and gender, the novel would not be eligible for universality. Simply put, the novel would not be able to pose a universal human question while its focal point is not universal, but partial to one gender. It is interesting that Ellison seems to regret obscuring Mary’s presence. Ellison stated that Mary “deserve[s] more space in [*Invisible Man*] and would, I think, have made it a better book” (Conner 181). What the narrator finally sees is the distance between himself and Mary, between himself and the potential remaining in the world aboveground. Completely exhausted from the quest for perfect masculinity, the narrator has to reach Mary’s and recover energy with her healing power. Nevertheless, Mary is not given much space in the final manuscript of the novel. Ellison’s regret is clearly reflected on the narrator’s mind when

he worries himself before leaving Mary's house: "Why can't I just tell her [Mary] that I'm leaving and pay her and go on off? She was a landlady, I was a tenant – No, there was more to it" (Ellison, *Invisible* 322). Both Ellison and the narrator cannot miss the woman's potential. Mary certainly could have been a motivator, guide, and a mother, yet Ellison limits her power and belatedly regrets his final decision that determines the narrator's destiny. The narrator's longing for Mary reminds the readers that women of color will still continue their doubly-oppressed life and the racist and sexist society will continue to prevail in the narrative. Indeed, what could make the novel universal or a "better book," as Ellison admitted, would be the better character development for Mary or the narrator's reunion with other African-American women. The novel's grand quest for the universality would end in vain otherwise.

21 In the end, the interpretation of the novel is open to the readers. As Ellison intended, *Invisible Man* contains more than the African-American people's struggle against racism. Sexuality, interlaced with the issue of race, is posed to the readers as a significant question. Ellison limits the African-American female characters' presence in front of the narrator and yet the women's potential is revealed in very subtle ways. Whether it is intended by Ellison or not, the novel contains its own "hole," that is, the absence of fully-developed African-American female characters. However, the novel also shows what power these women can have. Indeed, one should not jump to conclusions by regarding the novel as misogynistic. The novel does not provide any definite answers to the readers. After all, the narrator's last destination is not Mary's house, but a manhole in complete darkness. The readers are left along with the narrator to muse over how to look at the racist and sexist society. Like the narrator looking for the way out, the readers have to find their own way to understand the complex relationship between race and gender, the interaction between racism and sexism. How the narrator could better African-American women's lot while being confined in the "man-hole" would be yet another question posed to the readers. All in all, the novel explores rather than gives answers.

22 As this article has discussed so far, Ellison's novel is one of great profundity. The novel concerns African-American and Caucasian men who blindly pursue the ideal masculinity which determines their social power and sexual prowess. Substituting one power for another, the men compensate for the sense of incompleteness and the subsequent feeling of inferiority. While struggling for their ideal, the men jointly create an ideal form of masculinity—the Caucasian men demonstrating the patriarchal social power, and the African-American men manifesting sexual prowess. As a result, the African-American women are

thrown into the hole of obscurity, eclipsed by the 'Man.' Even though their presence is overshadowed, the colored women's potential is not totally overlooked. Ellison's novel, in its roundabout yet prudent way, presents the African-American women as the hidden source of power, and it is possible that they will be the solution for the chaotic world aboveground. Without concrete solutions to the narrator's struggle, the novel invites the readers to its fathomless darkness.

23 At first it seems that the readers are thrown into the inescapable void of a hole, but they are left with possibilities of change. At the end of his epilogue, the narrator repeats "I must come out, I must emerge" (581). The fact that the narrator prepares himself for a rebirth in the manhole renders the significance of colored women even greater. It is ironic how the narrator feels whole again underground without the influence of racism and sexism, that is, with the absence of social power and sexual virility. Nonetheless, the rebirth he imagines is impossible, since the narrator is trapped in the darkness of his own accord. As the narrator concludes, "[t]he end [is] in the beginning" and as a result, the beginning and the end of his journey converge. As his narrative takes the form of a circle, there is not a break allowed for the narrator to escape. In order to break away from the "warm hole" and become the "Easter chick breaking from its shell," the narrator needs mother figures like Mary or Trueblood's women to help his rebirth, not in a physical, but in a spiritual sense (6). If the narrator, who now understands the African-American women's potential, could stop hibernating underground, go back to Mary's, and re-enable his ability to move people and lead change, the novel might take a more dynamic turn. As Ellison closes the manhole and opens the possibilities, he renders his narrative more far-sighted and his message more profound. The novel is in itself alive with potential, but only when the readers strive to see the invisible 'Man' and find the obscured women, while seeking the way out in the underground labyrinth as the narrator does. If the narrator's escape is possible, then the readers may be able to ask how the narrator can find the universal human value in the society marred by visible racism and sexism. They also might be asking how people of both races and genders could identify and remove the racist as well as sexist motives in their everyday life, when these motives are in fact deeply ingrained in the universal human nature.

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# Transnational Maternal Genealogies in Contemporary Canadian Women's Historical Novels

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## Abstract:

This article is a sustained analysis of transnational maternal genealogies in contemporary Canadian women's historical novels written in English. In contrast to conventional historical novels which privilege the lives of men, women's historical novel centralizes women's lives. Experiences such as pregnancy, rape, childbearing and rearing, breast cancer, and so on are prioritized. My article concentrates on the creation and expression of transnational maternal genealogies as manifest in an increasing number of contemporary historical novels by Canadian women. Beginning with Joy Kogawa's seminal novel *Obasan*, published in 1981, I trace the trajectory of this gendered genre to recent times with Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*. Transnational maternal genealogies differ from other dominant trends in the genre such as masculinist mainstream historiography and "historiographic metafiction" because the genre contends that gender and a link to one's maternal past, not the national context, is paramount to lived experience. Furthermore, transnational female characters challenge "traditional boundaries of historical fiction," Canada's official history, and claims as to who is and who is not Canadian. Despite the critical acclaim and notoriety many Canadian women novelists enjoy, this genre has attracted little scholarship, thus this article partakes in the critical work which can and should be done to remedy this gap.

1 Literary criticism on women's historical novels not only in Canada but also globally is not as prevalent as one might imagine. This is curious given the international profile of award-winning authors like Margaret Atwood, the sheer number of historical novels written by women, and the popularity of women's novels with critics and readers despite these facts, a sustained analysis of Canadian women's historical fiction does not exist.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I remedy this neglect by bringing attention to a specific trend in many contemporary Canadian women's historical novels written in English: the establishment of a transnational maternal genealogy.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of a transnational maternal genealogy, in the corpus of this distinct sub-genre of Canadian women's historical fiction, I argue, is to achieve three important goals. First, it asserts a critical contemporary feminist narrative style as an intervention against the two preceding dominant trends in the genre: masculinist mainstream historiography also known as master narratives, express universal truths and nationalist sentiments and

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<sup>1</sup> See Wallace; Nunes; Cooper and Short; Rody; Weldt-Basson; and Llewellyn and Heilmann for examples of the limited scholarship that currently exists. There are many studies on individual historical novels by Canadian women, for instance Atwood's "Alias Grace", as well as studies on a single Canadian woman historical novelist and her oeuvre but a comprehensive study is missing.

<sup>2</sup> For scholarship on contemporary Canadian historical novels, most of which pertains to postmodern writing, see Wylie; Cabajsky and Grubisic; Hutcheon; Monkman; Kuester; Duffy; Wylie, Andrews, and Viau.

postmodern “historiographic metafiction,” as Linda Hutcheon calls it, (Poetics 5) approaches history as construction, undermines authenticity, and displaces identity. Second, transnational maternal genealogies suggest gender and a link to one’s maternal past, not the national context, is more important in shaping the female protagonist’s identity and in empowering her feminist challenges to patriarchal authority. Third, genealogies via “female characters subvert [...] the traditional boundaries of historical fiction” (Cabajsky and Grubisic paraphrasing van Herk, xvi). These forms of feminist subversion, furthermore, explain why many of these women’s novels focus on immigration and being Canadian without having been born in Canada or being able to locate one’s ancestral roots in Canadian history.

2 The woman’s historical novel is a neglected genre with the potential to address significant gaps in literary, social, and political history in Canada. Thus, this article forms part of a larger process of ongoing scholarship such as Carole Gerson’s which is recovering Canada’s history to reflect a social sphere that is domestic, personal, political, and historical. In order to understand this innovative writing better, I first define the woman’s historical novel and a maternal genealogy and then briefly discuss the master narrative and the postmodern perspective. The majority of this article, however, takes up several women’s novels, including those which do adhere to the genre of a transnational maternal genealogy and those which fail to do so. Discussing the novels relationally elucidates the challenges this writing poses, its complexity, and the unique features which make transnational maternal genealogies a distinct sub-genre of women’s historical fiction.

3 The woman’s historical novel is written by women about women (thus, novels like Heather Robertson’s *The King Years* trilogy which centers on the life of former Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King is not taken into consideration): gender specific experiences to women such as pregnancy, rape, childbearing, childrearing, breast cancer, and so on are prioritized. Diana Wallace contends that the historical novel is a most suitable medium for women writers because “women have been violently excluded both from ‘history’ (the events of the past) and from ‘History’ (written accounts of the past) (“Letters” 25). Traditionally, women’s history has been considered an oxymoron, being characterized as romantic, unhistorical or ahistorical, misrepresentative, inaccurate, fantastical, anti-nationalist, even escapist (Wallace, *Woman’s* 15). The femiocentric foci in this genre, however, counter such claims. By filing in silences in the historical record, highlighting gaps in masculinist genre studies, promoting “feminisms in the plural” (Hutcheon *Canadian Postmodern*, 107), and rewriting women, symbolic progenitors of past, present, and future genealogies inside and outside of the text become visible. The novels establish a transnational

maternal genealogy anachronistically by following the life of either a fictional or factual woman over several decades, or the lives of several women within a family, who are not necessarily born in, but travel to, Canada.

4 Transnational maternal genealogies are women's historical novels, but they focus on women's inter-generational lives, cross national boundaries, and disrupt a unified setting in terms of space and time by incorporating the recent past. Beginning with Joy Kogawa's seminal novel *Obasan*, published in 1981, other novels which adhere to this categorization include Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* by Sky Lee, Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*, Jane Urquhart's *Away*, Sandra Birdsell's *The Russlander*, Margaret Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down With Peter*, Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, and *The Toss of a Lemon* by Padma Viswanathan amongst others.

5 The novels named above call attention to and supplement that which Herb Wylie identifies as underrepresentation in Canadian genre studies on its historical novel.

[This includes] those whom the historical record has tended to exclude –women, the working class, and racial(ized) minorities[.] ... Historical novels by Native Canadian writers or by Canadian writers of Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, or African heritage are relatively scarce, something which may have to do with their historical exclusion from ...the Canadian literary scene and with their exclusion from dominant narratives about Canada's past. (*Speaking* 4)

This trend has not necessarily ended (for instance, Native Canadian and African-Canadian writers are visibly missing in this study), but it is shifting: women's novels since the 1980s have sought to remedy the aforementioned gaps by employing a transnational maternal genealogy and developing it for feminist purposes.

6 My definition of transnational maternal genealogy references Luce Irigaray's nuanced definition of "maternal genealogy" but updates and develops it to take into account the transnational. Irigaray writes:

If we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, [...we must] assert that there is a genealogy of women. There is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mother's side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters. Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (44)

A maternal genealogy connects women, and in the Canadian woman's historical novel these connections occur across familial generations, nations, and intersections of identity. This

writing emphasizes a traversing between a contemporary narrator/character to a maternal origin which begins in a different homeland and time frame. In doing so, transnational maternal genealogies express continuity between women's lives in the past with those in the present; the national context is secondary to emphasizing a sense of gendered consciousness and desire for feminist socio-political change which the protagonists develop over time. A shared sense of gendered consciousness, via a transnational maternal genealogy, openly resists traditional master narratives found in historical novels and corresponding nationalistic studies on the historical novel (see for example, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* by Avrom Fleishman).

7 An early example of a master narrative in Canada is *The Golden Dog* by William Kirby (1877). Kirby's novel, though following the lives of French Canadians before the fall of New France in 1748, upholds the British as victorious and the idea that authors can provide objective historical accounts. As Wyile argues, the purpose of novels such as Kirby's were to assert an authentic and serious Canadian identity and history, independent of British colonialism and other national influences (*Speaking* 6). Unsurprisingly, novels like Kirby's reimagine public and official history by focusing on wars and conquests, especially the "political events and the deeds of 'great men'" (Von Dirke 417) or "white, upper-class English males" (Wyile, *Speaking* 5).

8 By propagating a national past, a collective mythology, and a unified identity, master narratives predominately ignore the lives and contributions of women; the writing is also highly individualistic and elitist: thus while political figures such as Laura Secord (recently fictionalized in a young reader's book *Acts of Courage – Laura Secord and the War of 1812* by Connie Brummel Cook) may be known, working-class women, who would have experienced some form of public life, are rarely deemed worthy of historical significance. In many cases, women's lives are recorded and referenced solely in relation to the achievements of male family members. In Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), the narrator asks of Mrs. Richards, a new immigrant to British Columbia in 1873, "what is her first name? she must have one –/so far she has only the name of a dead man,/ someone somewhere else" (37). Women's historical novels, therefore, contest masculinist master narratives by "expos[ing] the subjective and phallogocentric nature of mainstream historiography" (Wallace, *Woman's* 206), highlighting the inherent sexism of the official record, particularly as its representation distorts and excludes the lives and voices of women, while simultaneously arguing the way in which voices and lives are deemed worthy of historical recording/archiving is discriminatory and in need of transforming.

9 Beverly Boutillier and Alison Prentice, speaking about generations of historically minded women in Canada, assert the realization that there is an “[i]nability to identify their [women’s] own lived experience with much of the content of history” (6), predominantly “political and military history” (Wyile, *Speculative* 3). Feminist historians, since the 1970s, however, (for instance Sylvia Van Kirk’s pioneering text *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (1980)) have been actively rewriting Canada’s traditional histories. Elizabeth Jameson argues that narratives like Edgar McInnis’, Harold Innis’s, or Frederick Jackson Turner’s perpetuate an erroneous belief that women (both European-immigrants and Indigenous peoples) did not participate in fundamental ways to the colonizing of the Americas (“Ties” 67). Receiving literary attention via historical novels, is not surprising, for as Diana Wallace notes, “the historical novel has allowed [writers/readers] to invent or ‘re-imagine’ ... the unrecorded lives of marginalized and subordinated people, especially women, but also the working classes, Black people, slaves and colonized peoples, and to shape narratives, which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history” (*Woman’s*, 2). Echoing Wallace’s statement and supporting the argument of this article, Marlatt, once again in *Ana Historic*, claims, “i learned that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only important events in the world. a tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (where are the city mothers?)” (28)

10 Arguably, the city mothers can be found in postmodern historical novels, or historiographic metafiction, because this position opens up the dominant masculine discourse to include and validate women’s and other minorities’ experiences. In postmodern texts, we read, against “significant” historical events, intersecting voices from the margins like those from the working classes, diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and women’s perspectives. Historiographic metafiction decenters any focus (especially a masculine, Eurocentric, elitist one) and encourages a plurality of voices and perspectives, but the position is also deeply suspicious of a coherent identity, a sense of collective solidarity, or an attachment to a truth value or a claim based on “fact.” Thus, postmodern historical novels like Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* simultaneously validate and delegitimize an authentic voice.

11 In Atwood’s novel, which plays with fact and fiction, we can never be certain as to whether Grace Marks, an Irish girl who emigrates to Pre-Confederation Canada, is guilty of murdering her employer’s servant, Nancy Montgomery. After the end of the novel, Atwood clarifies her postmodern approach: “I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did

many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history)” (547). The truth in the case of Grace Marks, Atwood suggests, is beyond knowing because testimonies, documents, newspapers, and other forms of text based records and archives, like fictional stories, are inherently biased and constructed; the novel suggests that “[w]e cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 16) and that ,“ there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth” (109).

12 By contrast, a maternal genealogy, as Irigaray emphasizes, subscribes to authenticity, a gendered reality, and the truth of lived experiences because it is committed to feminist socio-political change. There is a latent anxiety within these novels about subscribing to the historical record as either purely objective (master narrative) or merely invention and construction (postmodern). As Milda Danytė suggests, many contemporary historical novels, including transnational maternal genealogy ones, do “not celebrate the national myths, or the national heroes as did the 19th century novel, but at the same time, do not parody the past in postmodern fashion” (40). If truths or facts become inaccessible, categories of identity (race, class, sexuality, gender, etc.), which influence and shape the protagonist’s lives in very real and meaningful ways, can be questioned and can be denied or negated. Chow reasons that, “[e]ven though feminists partake in the postmodernist ontological project of dismantling claims of cultural authority that are housed in specific representations, feminism’s rootedness in overt political struggles against the subordination of women makes it very difficult to accept (“Postmodern Automatons” 103). Therefore, the transnational maternal genealogy counters historiographic metafiction which is skeptical of historical Truth, suspicious of continuity with the past, or hostile to accessing an authentic past.

13 While predominately breaking away from master narratives and postmodern attitudes, transnational maternal genealogies continue to contribute to and draw from several manifestations of the historical novel in Canada including the master, the postmodern, the regional, the romance, and the postcolonial. Like those which are from a postcolonial perspective (i.e., Rudy Wiebe’s *Temptations of Big Bear*) or a neo-regional perspective (hearing a non-traditional voice within a specific region, e.g., Linda Abbott’s *The Loss of the Marion*, set in Newfoundland in the early twentieth century and told from the familial, woman’s point of view), maternal genealogies reflect dissatisfaction with the dominant discourses in Canada’s history and fictional-history writing. Like the “‘postcolonial, revisionist’ accounts of Canadian history and historiography in recent historical novels” (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* xii), neo-regional novels and transnational maternal genealogy

novels share a belief that reality is fundamentally marked by identity categories such as gender, race, and class and that these lived realities must be acknowledged and represented in Canada's historical fiction. For this reason, Lawrence Hill's *Book of Negroes* arguably does impart a maternal genealogy as the work centers on Aminata Diallo, an African woman brought as a slave to America who later resettles in Nova Scotia, Canada as a free woman. Aminata is freed for her participation as a Loyalist to the British government against the Americans. After leaving Canada, she returns to Africa and travels to England. This novel does important work in intervening in hegemonic Canadian history, and the only reasons it fails to fully meet the criteria of a maternal genealogy is because it does not engage the recent past, and it is written by a man.

14 As critical interventions in the dominant discourse, transnational maternal genealogies say as much about the distant past as they do about the recent past and present. Dorrit Cohn maintains that a typical feature of historical fiction is that "the historiographically oriented authorial discourse of a 'contemporary' narrator concerned with past events" (160) is markedly visible. Most women's historical novels conform to Cohn's claim because the storyteller is a woman reflecting both backwards and forwards on her life and/or the lives of her maternal family, thereby broadening the nineteenth century definition of historical fiction put forward by Walter Scott. In *Waverley* (1814), Scott insists novels should not be written in a period of the author's lifetime or the recent past; they should preferably take place "sixty years since" (4-5). Today, this caveat remains supported by several twentieth century critics including Georg Lukács, Avrom Fleishman, and Seymour Menton. Nevertheless, like Joseph W. Turner and Danytè, amongst others, I recognize the importance of broadening the requirement that the historical novel take place in a time preceding the author. This is particularly relevant in legitimizing women's narratives which assert a maternal genealogy.

15 Danytè believes "'popular' or 'unofficial memory' finds expression [...] in family history or societies that collect the everyday material culture of the recent past" (36). The recent past, experienced through familial relations, is an integral part of maternal genealogies like Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down With Peter*. Sweatman's text fuses memory and the familial history/future of the heroine, Blondie McCormach, starting in 1869 until her death in 1979 in St. Norbert, Manitoba. The transnational maternal genealogy put forth in the text, furthermore, can also be labelled as a "matrilineal narrative" (Cosslett7). A matrilineal narrative either "tell[s] the stories of several generations of women at once" (Cosslett 7), or it "shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors" (7). To reiterate, novels employing a transnational maternal genealogy, shuttle between

Canada and at least one other nation, shift anachronistically between past and present, and represent several female family members (grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters, and daughters), and conclude their narratives in Canada.

16 In the hands of women authors and readers, however, the historical novel has not endorsed “key periods of nationalist resurgence” (Duffy as referenced by Cabajsky and Grubisic x). In fact, the exact opposite is the case: transnational maternal genealogies contest homogenous notions of national identity, distinctions between nations are blurred, and the notion of the nation, including women’s roles in nationhood and nation-making, are interrogated and called into question. As Wylie argues, “[c]ontemporary Canadian novelists are much less inclined to construct patriotic narratives of the building of a nation and of a unitary Canadian character than to dramatize the exploitation, appropriation, and exclusion that such narratives of nation have often served to efface” (*Speculative* 7). In Kogawa’s *Obasan*, for example, racism and discrimination against Japanese-Canadians during WWII is centralized. The novel, set primarily in the recent past of the 1970s, follows the life of Naomi as she searches for clues as to the circumstances of her mother’s life and death after her mother returned to Japan during the Second World War.

17 Naomi, a young child during the war, never sees or hears from her mother again after she leaves for Japan. Growing up in Canada during the war, Naomi, along with the rest of her family, suffers from racism, having her family’s property absconded and sold, her family members separated, and having a forced relocation to Alberta, which leaves the family struggling to survive. Kogawa’s novel does not glorify the Second World War, and it does not condone the acts of either Japan or Canada. Meredith Shoenut argues that “Naomi’s purpose becomes to explore this political language, to question and deconstruct official versions of Canadian history, and to analyze Canada’s past as though it were fiction” (481). The text offers personal perspectives by focusing on the familial lives of women. Naomi’s family, particularly her mother and aunt, form a maternal connection in the text, which is stronger than any national identity: it manifests the “the matriarchal yearnings of dispossessed women seeking their own place in nations and in history” (Boehmer 3). The transnational maternal genealogy counters traditional records of the Second World War and demands Canada rethink its war involvement through apology to and redress to Canadians of Japanese descent.

18 A unified national identity is undermined by exploring “women’s lives and loves, their families and their feelings” thus giving “the concerns of the so called private sphere the status and interest of history” (Light 59). Though contemporary women’s historical fiction

has done much work in reclaiming and rewriting women's sexual lives, transnational maternal genealogies rely too heavily on heterosexuality. The familial and the romantic, typically suppressed and denigrated in masculinist novels and studies, nevertheless, are given historical and political importance; moreover, writing about female sexuality "allows coverage of normally taboo subjects, not just active female sexuality but also contraception, abortion, childbirth and homosexuality" (Wallace as qtd. by Cooper and Short 11). Urquhart's novel *Away* offers an ambivalent representation of female sexuality. Parodied as demonic, monstrous, and sinful, Mary's overt sexuality leads to her obsession and untimely death. Her death, therefore, serves as a warning to her female ancestors not to let romantic lust rule over reason.

19 The contemporary character, Esther, learns that her Irish great-grandmother, Mary took a young Irish sailor, who washed upon her shore, as "a daemon lover" (45); after hearing the man breathe "Moira" as his dying word (6), Mary becomes convinced her name has changed. Unable to relinquish the presence of the dead man from her life, Mary envisions that he follows her to Moira Lake, Canada in 1848 where she has made a home nearby with her husband, Brian. Disappearing one day and leaving her family forever, Mary declares, "In this land I thought he had forgotten me until I heard of the lake called Moira. Then I knew where he was. I will stay near him now until I die. I am loved by him and he is loved by me" (181). Her death symbolizes an inability to accept her new nation, and in keeping with the genre of maternal transnational genealogies, it serves as a warning against establishing a unilateral nationality. Furthermore, this fantastical romance, in which Mary freezes to death by the Lake, causes Eileen to caution her granddaughter, Esther against the perils of an all-consuming love: "'Never allow anyone, anything to change your name.' [...] I am speaking of the kind of name change that turns you into someone else altogether, someone other than who you are, the change that takes you off to somewhere else" (9). For being besotted with a dead man, Mary is derogatively referred to several times in the narrative as "away" (45). Like Mary, however, we learn that her daughter, Eileen, (Esther's grandmother) too was "silenced by passion before the age of twenty, and [...] had only now chosen to speak of the past" (8). Finally, Eileen tells Esther, "'If I were you,' [...] I would stay in this house all my life. If I were you, I would never go away'" (350). Eileen's feminist perspective thus alerts her granddaughter to the devastating consequences of patriarchal love and marriage for women.

20 While vindicating female sexuality, not all maternal genealogies therefore subscribe to an ideology of romance as empowering. Pauline Holdstock's *Into the Heart of the Country* echoes Urquhart's text when her protagonist, Molly, declares, "All my world was the [Prince

of Wales] fort [...] It was my home. Why would I desire ever to walk away from it? Why would anyone leave her home unless to be with her husband?" (1). Jane Spencer, commenting as Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, an early woman's historical novel, notes that "[r]omantic love is 'an illusion standing in the way of women's access to the romance of mother-daughter reconciliation and female power'" (as qtd. by Wallace, *Woman's* 17). Wallace, likewise, suggests, "Although Lee can offer a critique of women's victimisation by romantic love, she cannot imagine an alternative female autonomy" (*Woman's* 19): the same holds true for Holdstock's protagonist, Molly. Molly's life ends, just as Mary's in Urquhart's novel, when she freezes to death. In Urquhart's novel, however, the maternal genealogy breaks the spell of death and romantic love. Maternal genealogies, by focusing on love, sexuality, and personal lives, moreover, expose the absurdity of master narratives which claim there can be "peoples without *history*" (Cuder-Domínguez 114, italics mine).

21 Dennis Duffy controversially claims that "the [Canadian] historical novel has served as a vehicle for the imaginative representation of nationalistic ideologies" (v). One rightfully might ask what constitutes the Canadian in a transnational maternal genealogy. What makes a contemporary women's historical novel Canadian? Is it the nationality of the writer? Is it the setting of the novel? Perhaps, it is the nationality of the heroine which constitutes what we mean when we say "Canadian." Some examples of the kinds of classification difficulties I am identifying can be seen in the novel *Mina* (2004) by Jonatha Ceely. Is this a Canadian historical novel because the author was born in Kingston Ontario, though she has lived in Turkey, Italy, and now resides in the United States? The novel details the life of an Irish immigrant escaping the great famine by moving to England first and then later New York City. Similarly, Eva Stachniak, born in Wroclaw, Poland, has lived in Toronto for the last thirty years. She has recently written on the eighteenth century Russian Empress, Catherine the Great in *The Winter Palace*. Katherine Govier's *The Printmaker's Daughter* likewise is a novel set in nineteenth-century Japan and narrates the story of Oei, the daughter of the famous print maker, Hokusai. Canada as a nation, or even pre-Confederation colony, never figures in any of these novels. These concerns support Duffy's assertion that "Canadian writers have achieved international popularity by writing stories based on other people's histories, for example, [...] Pauline Gedge" (iii). While these novels address the exclusion of women's voices and lives from the dominant discourse, they do not give the reader a sense of a transnational maternal genealogy.

22 Similarly, novels like *Ravensong* by Lee Maracle and *Midnight at the Dragon Café* by Judy Fong Bates focus on the familial lives of women and engage the recent past, but the

novels' settings and time-frames remain relatively static. Fong Bates' work describes a Chinese girl Su-Jen, and her family's struggle to adjust to a new life in Canada in the late 1950s. An emphasis on intergenerational lives in Su-Jen's life is lacking. Conversely, Maracle's work challenges the ontological divide between past and present by tracing the life of Stacey, a young girl who witnesses and experiences a flu epidemic in her Native community in the 1950s. The protagonist, Stacey, reflecting on the epidemic twenty-five years later, claims, "Over the next decade the village fell apart. Women left to marry after that. They left in droves. ... The women lost the safety of the family. The village lost its clan because of it" (197). Celia, another female character, contemplates the number of babies who must have died over the last century because of European epidemics; "Whole lineages wiped out. Hundreds became thousands" (198). Dealing with their grief, the women family members sing an "ancient grieving song" to "an old hand drum" (198). While this genealogy marks pain and loss, it also signals hope and rebirth or a new maternal genealogy within Canada's recent past and future. At the same time, as a First Nations genealogy it exists independently of Canada and is subject to its own norms and conventions. The emphasis in this text, however, primarily because the women are indigenous, is not on the women's traveling or immigrating to Canada so much as experiencing the brutality and violence of colonialism, which places artificial and non-traditional boundaries on the women's lives. Jameson contends that Canadian colonialism has/had the devastating effect of "separating people of shared ethnicity and kinship into residents" of different political territories ("Connecting" 7); thus these narratives resist static notions of the nation and challenge in a productive way, the definition of "transnational" as being strictly cross "national."

23 Another potential pitfall of novels which invoke a transnational maternal genealogy is the establishment of origins. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, told from the perspective of Kae Ying Woo, a search for maternal origins is fundamental to the narrative. Lee writes, "The story began, I guess, with my great-grandmother, Lee Mui Lan, sometime in 1924, as she stood behind the cash register at the front of the even-now famous Disappearing Moon Cafe, 50 East Pender Street, Vancouver, British Columbia" (23). Lee continues later on in the novel to say "grown women are orphan children [...] we have been broken from our mother's arms too soon and made to cling to a man's world – which refuses to accept us" (138). An emphasis on recuperating maternal origins is thus necessary for feminist projects like Lee's. Her feminist comments, furthermore, resonate with Samantha Haigh's (re)articulation of the political goals, which Irigaray proposes, a maternal genealogy can achieve. She writes:

In the absence of a maternal genealogy, daughters can never symbolize their relation to their mother, to 'origin', a relation men symbolize by recreating it in relationships with other women. It is the resymbolization of this relationship which is the condition for a (re)symbolized relationship between women. It is thus vital that a maternal genealogy be (re)discovered, that women be able to separate themselves from and symbolize their relation to be woman-mother as 'origin.' (Haigh 63)

Rethinking a link to our maternal past is an important step in creating a genealogy, but one must, nevertheless, maintain a critical stance.

24 Women's roles, especially as mothers, in shaping nations and territories have been marginalized and underwritten in Canada, but it is important to bear in mind how the transnational maternal genealogies, which this article identifies and discusses, risk essentializing women as mothers, intimating women are morally infallible, turning maternal ancestors into idols, and exercising exclusionary practices. The invocation of maternal roots suggests "that an ancient and continuous [...] genealogy is important and desirable" (Sugars 21). Premised on an "anxiety of origins" (Zamora as qtd by Sugars 21) and "a sense of disinheritance in the present" (Sugars 24), this writing "enacts a desire for inheritability" (Sugars 24). An authentic claim to historical ancestors, even in the cases of invented genealogies, is a means for validating one's present and making sense of one's self through her history. Transnational maternal genealogies, as origin tales, as tales of the original mother, if left unexamined, therefore, have the potential of creating neo-master narratives and silencing the very same voices it seeks to articulate and recuperate.

25 In addition to the concern for origins and qualifying as distinctly transnational, other novels which fail to be considered transnational maternal genealogies are most women's historical novels rewriting pre-Confederation Canada. Though written presumably with the aim of rediscovering and emphasizing women's active political resistance to and participation in shaping the nation, these texts initially appear to fit the category, but they do not emphasize the recent past and the lives of women across generations. Thus, novels like Holdstock's *Into the Heart of the Country* and Suzanne Desrochers' *Bride of New France* (2011), while doing important work in addressing and redressing the violence of colonialism (both French and English) on indigenous peoples in the early historical record emphasize neo-regionalism (a specific time/setting) and the importance of a single woman's life.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Holdstock's text centralizes the life of a mixed-race woman, Molly Norton, but it traces her life in Prince Wales Fort primarily through her paternal ancestors (Richard Norton,

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<sup>3</sup> This is also the case in "The End of East" by Jen Sookfong Lee. Though the novel is told from Samantha's first person perspective and details her life with her mother and four sisters in Vancouver, the central genealogical character is her grandfather, Chan Seid Quan, who immigrates to Canada from China in 1913.

Moses Norton and later, famed-explorer husband, Samuel Hearne).<sup>4</sup> Other than a few ethereal sequences titled “Molly’s dream,” the novel remains true to its static setting and time-frame.

26 While it is tempting to read contemporary transnational maternal genealogies as inherently anti-nation or anti-nationalistic, it is false to do so. Robert David Stacey also persuasively argues that “the critical tendency to treat Canadian historical fiction as a vehicle for national allegory” (as qtd. by Cabajsky and Grubisic xix) is not the only way one must perceive the nation. It’s not that in contemporary women’s historical novels “the national dimension [...] is unimportant, but simply that the subject of the novel is not the nation per se, but what we might call the *nation-in-history*, a formulation that foregrounds the necessarily temporal dimension of the nation and national identity” (as qtd. by Cabajsky and Grubisic xix). When read relationally, maternal genealogies complicate the Canadian national identity and reject patriarchal authority over the past (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 108), especially as to whose voices are deemed worthy of history and considered “Canadian.” The fact remains, however, that because many of these works focus on non-traditional history, women’s romances, families, and personal lives, and seemingly avoid official, public history, they “end up imbuing the ‘nation’ with a priority that haunts the narrative margins” (Cabajsky and Grubisic xiii). This is especially the case given that as counter-novels, transnational maternal genealogies “perform a writing back, a retort to having been written out of the settled story” (van Herk 131) to the dominant referent, a patriarchal nation.

27 Transnational maternal genealogies in women’s historical novels certainly challenge any easy categorization according to nationality, and it is not surprising given that many contemporary Canadian women’s historical novels no longer are written strictly about Canadian women, are set in Canada, or written by authors who were born in or have lived their entire lives in Canada. Rey Chow suggests that “[t]he issues involved in women’s literature, gay and lesbian literature, ethnic literature, exceed the boundaries of the nation and national language and that they demand to be studied with newer conceptual methods” (“In the Name” 114). Rather, the traversing of several nations, including Canada, while establishing a maternal genealogy, is the central focus in all of these texts, and, therefore, a unified national identity is put into crises. By putting forth a transnational maternal genealogy inside and outside of the text, women’s novels draw attention to the problematic fact that the

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<sup>4</sup> See etymology of “patriot”: a “patriot” is understood as “one whose ruling passion is the love of his country” — F. patriote — late L. patriōta — Gr. patriōtēs, f. pátrios pátrios of one’s fathers, patris fatherland, sb. use of adj. ‘ancestral’, f. pater, patr- Father” (“Patriot”). The historical and etymological link therefore between patria and pater frames familial and national politics as patriarchal (from the Greek patriarkh’s “patria, lineage + arkhos, chief or leader” [“Father”]).

nation, like the family, is under patriarchal authority.<sup>5</sup> In Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* the narrative switches back and forth between an aunt, Bibi-Ji, (who defiantly immigrates to Canada from India in 1946, marrying for social mobility, not love), her Indian-Canadian neighbour, Leela, and her niece, Nimmo, who suffers the hardships of India's political upheavals and social unrest for nearly fifty years. The tensions between the two female relatives is visible, and is an allegory for political suspicions, religious divisions, and strained relations between Indians within India and those in the Canadian diaspora, epitomized in the novel by the terrorist attack on Air India Flight 182 in 1985. The Epilogue, set in 1986, features Nimmo's narrative in India and her reunion with her estranged son, Jasbeer (because Bibi-ji, who cannot have her own children, appropriates him as her own son). Jasbeer's return to the maternal root de-centralizes Canada as the promised land, but it also problematically transfers the maternal genealogy back to a notion of an "authentic" mother, Nimmo, and mother-land, India.

28 Shield's *The Stone Diaries*, similarly, does not finish in Canada but in another nation, the United States. Via a visible instantiation of a transnational maternal genealogy, the novel follows chronologically the life of Daisy Goodwill, later Flett, from her birth in 1905, in Manitoba, in the Dominion of Canada, to her death in 199- in Florida (347). Shields' work, as many transnational maternal genealogies do, begins by focusing on Daisy's mother, Mercy Stone, who unknowingly is pregnant and about to give birth to a daughter. Mercy's last name signifies the ability to read a maternal genealogy as a palimpsest – its presence is erased or written over by the paternal genealogy. Shields highlights this when Daisy does not take her mother's name but her father's, though Shield's title suggests the presence or importance of Mercy Stone's life is never fully forgotten. The title also plays with the occupation of Mercy's husband, Cuyler Goodwill who is a mason working in a limestone quarry. After

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<sup>5</sup> Desrocher's novel rewrites a familiar and official topic in Canadian and French Canadian history and fiction: the *filles du roi*. The novel highlights the historical impacts and consequences when maternal genealogies are appropriated for colonial, patriarchal gains. Laure, however, confounds traditional images of the *filles du roi* by befriending an Iroquois named Deskaheh. With her husband gone, Laure begins a romantic relationship with Deskaheh. The result, as Laure declares, is that "Lord, there is a Savage baby growing within me" (254). Laure is told by her neighbour, who knows the true paternity of the child, "Only the women sent from France can give the King the French colony he wants to see in Canada [...] they cannot know what you have done" (263). Laure potentially faces imprisonment or worse for having Deskaheh's child and for propagating a corrupt maternal genealogy. Thus she consents for her daughter, Luce, to be adopted by Deskaheh and his people (265-6). Desrochers' novel complicates the origin stories of New France and stories of Canada's founding mothers by showing not only how children of mixed race were considered illegitimate by the French but also how it is not only French men who begot children with the indigenous. This novel, nonetheless, does not acknowledge indigenous women as progenitors of the nation, nor can it be deemed a transnational maternal genealogy because it never addresses the recent/contemporary past, it does not shuttle between the past and the present, and it is not a matrilineal narrative. The text deliberately refuses a maternal genealogy and partakes in undermining its own recognition of mixed-race Canadians by silencing Luce's voice and future life.

Mercy dies in childbirth, Cuyler erects a monument affectionately called the Goodwill Tower, which is a careful grouping of stones dedicated to his recently deceased wife. The tower reaches a formidable 30 feet in the air, and bears Cuyler's eclectic carvings such as holy words and depictions of animals and birds (65), which attract visitors and tourists from around the country. Cuyler, however, soon after his wife's death in the novel moves to Indiana, and Daisy, who has been under the care of her neighbor Mrs. Clarentine Flett up until this time, moves to join him. From this point on, throughout the novel, Daisy travels back and forth between Canada and the United States, living in Manitoba, Indiana, Ottawa, and Florida. While Daisy is the central protagonist, the text focuses on the lives of her children, grandchildren, and other family members (Shields even playfully includes photographs of historical people who she pretends represent or are her fictionalized characters).

29 Another novel which exemplifies the kinds of challenges I have identified is *The Russlander* by Sandra Birdsell. Birdsell's novel narrates the massacre of Katherine Vogt's Prussian Mennonite family in 1917, Russia (now Ukraine) and her survival. After the massacre, Katya reunites with her grandparents who are suffering from starvation from the war; Katya claims "Canada, a word on a map, a place to escape to, providing her grandparents would be able to sell their house and what furniture hadn't already been sold. She didn't know anything at the time about Canada except the little she had learned from letters her grandparents received from distant relatives in Manitoba" (339). The novel ends in the same way it begins: Katya is a great-grandmother telling her survival story to a man named Ernest Unger who is collecting and recording Mennonite stories, primarily women's from Russia, to piece together a collective narrative. While Katya's life ends in Canada, the majority of the novel takes place in the Ukraine, thus emphasizing the importance of a transnational genealogy, but what Birdsell gives women's voices with one hand, she quickly takes away with the other. Katya's voice is appropriated by a male counterpart – a character deceptively lurking in the margins of the narrative. Unger, thus, is not the insignificant character readers mistake him for – he is the one who creates, constructs, edits, and compiles the women's narratives into a form deemed acceptable and worthy of the masculinist official record.

30 The transnational maternal genealogy established in Birdsell's novel, like many women's historical novels, also reflects a personal connection with the author. Coral Ann Howells notes, the biography of an author is never completely separate from the text (7), and indeed, in these works, it forms part of the paratext. Similar to Shields, an American-born,

Canadian author, who won the U.S. Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the Governor General's Award in Canada for her novel, Birdsell's personal relation to her narrative is evident. In the bio on her personal website, she writes, "My father was a French-speaking Cree Métis, and my mother a Low-German speaking Mennonite who was born in Russia. My mother immigrated to Canada in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. That makes me a first generation Canadian on my maternal side, while many of my father's people claimed to have lived on the western plains since the beginning of the First Nations people." The author legitimizes her novel via her biographical past and emphasizes the need for women's histories to contribute to the national, official history of Canada. At the same time as undermining masculinist narratives, Birdsell's work, however, like Desrochers', problematically asserts a notion of racial/hereditary "origin" genealogies as being more legitimate than other Canadian narratives.

31 An example of a Canadian transnational maternal genealogy that traces its roots elsewhere is Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*. Like Birdsell's novel, Viswanathan's book briefly discusses Canada at the end of the narrative. Unlike Birdsell's work, however, Viswanathan's heroine never steps on Canadian soil nor does she even mention the country. The Canadian connection in this novel is beyond Sivakami, a protagonist born in late nineteenth century India. The novel begins in 1896 in Chalapatti, the date and place of Sivakami's marriage proposal and ends with the story told from Sivakami's great-grand daughter, who moves from India to Canada. She writes, "The tale has transmuted, passed from my great-grandmother into my mother, into me, from old world into new [...] so it is that I sit here with you, the book of our lives between us, telling my story, and my people's in lands and languages I know but that are not my own" (616). The maternal genealogy established by Viswanathan is evidently transnational, as she finishes the novel not with Sivakami's words or mother-tongue but with her protagonist's kin living in Canada as a member of the Indian diaspora. Viswanathan's novel, like Badami's, underscores the circumstances behind immigration to Canada and the remaking of national identity by taking into account non-traditional voices and voices from outside of Canada.

32 Rewriting women as symbolic progenitors of contemporary and future genealogies both within and beyond the text is, thus, an important if not risky political goal. Transnational maternal genealogies bring together women's past lives with women's current transnational experiences by emphasizing continuity. Studying the Canadian woman's historical novel within a transnational feminist framework provides a way to understand coalitions and affinities as well as differences and divisions between the diverse social and political

experiences of women. Establishing a maternal genealogy within the Canadian woman's historical novel is considered a necessary step in creating an alternative literary-history for women. Promoting multiple perspectives and multiple truths, like postmodernists, these works refuse to privilege one narrative over another, thus undermining the authority of master narratives. At the same time, however, the works respect and validate the voices of minorities and claims to historical truth, which to reiterate distinguishes it from postmodern fiction. Transnational maternal genealogies, therefore, dialectically reconstruct history by strategically negotiating and engaging with multiple positions (master, postmodern, postcolonial, neo-regional, and romance).

33 In this newly created feminist space of reconstruction, historical voices from the margins can be heard and validated. Canadian women's lives (both as writers, subjects, and readers) are centralized, giving clarity and perspective on the issues and historical events that matter most to Canadian women (particularly body politics, family, immigration, religion, race, and colonialism). Speaking from the margins and breaking the silences within Canadian history and historiography, transnational maternal genealogies offer new and inventive ways of reimagining and transforming Canada's past, present, and future. These novels emphasize the need for Canadian literary criticism to engage more with the woman's historical novel because its variants, like transnational maternal genealogies, disrupt masculinist, Eurocentric definitions of what it means to be, or who is, and has been Canadian. Furthermore, the works recognize that many women's lived experiences are incompatible with the content of traditional Canadian history, and, therefore, stress reconstructing a multicultural history of Canada as a nation that is adequately reflected in its historical fiction. Finally, transnational maternal genealogies necessarily link a woman to her maternal past and contemporary present, thus broadening the traditional definition of the historical novel in Canada and demonstrating the genre's potential for activating feminist social change.

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# **The Power of Pleasure Devices: Sex Toys and Dominance in Society and Pop Culture**

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## **Abstract:**

Sexual intercourse as a source of physical and consequently also mental comfort and satisfaction nowadays is not necessarily a matter handled by the human body exclusively. As shown here, various artefacts are adapted in creative ways to either simulate interpersonal sexual acts or to enhance single or joint sexual experiences. Sex toys, as these devices are commonly labelled today, have a solid position in the sex industry, indicating not only their high popularity but also a fundamental demand for these products. By introducing such devices into one's own sexual life, sex toys become relevant for the discourse created around the distribution of power relations regarding sexuality. Nevertheless, this discourse is also shaped by the depictions and representations of sex toy use in cultural productions. The following paper argues that the role of sex toys in the construction of hierarchy and distribution of power ultimately depends on the user's subjective perception of pleasure. However, there are numerous factors that have an impact on building this subjectivity. Those are, among others, perceptions of sex toy usage shaped by the dominance of heteronormativity and further, particular attitudes towards sex toys reflected in society and text productions in popular culture.

1 Human sexuality and its significance for conventions of social relations is a recurring topic in sociology. Viewed in the context of gender studies, it can be very well considered a relevant factor for the construction of hierarchies, especially in interpersonal relationships. The aspect of pleasure, viewed from both the receiving and giving perspective, produced in single or group constellations, determines the individual's relation to the role of sexuality in building or destroying confidence and consciousness about one's own position in the social environment. Nevertheless, sexual intercourse as a source of physical and consequently also mental comfort and satisfaction is nowadays not necessarily a matter depending on the human body exclusively. As shown here, various items are adapted in creative ways to either simulate interpersonal sexual acts or to enhance single or joint sexual experiences. Sex toys, as these devices are commonly labelled today, have a solid position in the sex industry, indicating not only their high popularity but also a fundamental demand for these products. By introducing such devices into one's own sexual life, they become relevant for the discourse created around the distribution of sexual power relations. This discourse is also shaped by the depictions and representations of sex toy use in cultural productions.

2 The following paper argues that the role of sex toys in the construction of hierarchy and distribution of power ultimately depends on the user's subjective perception of pleasure. However, there are numerous factors that have an impact on building this subjectivity. Those

are, among others, perceptions of sex toy usage shaped by the dominance of heteronormativity and further, particular attitudes towards sex toys reflected in society and filmic text productions popular culture. To determine the interconnectedness of these factors, two perspectives are considered within this paper: firstly, different sets of research conducted and performed in either subjective or empirical forms, and secondly, the representation of sex toys in various 21st century films and TV productions.

3 The acknowledgement of the existence of devices built exclusively to deliver sexual pleasure only emerged in the 1960s (Maines 20), though devices that were associated with this function had been created a long time before. To classify the variety of devices that can serve to cause sexual pleasure, two differentiations have to be made: on the one hand, the historical context of the development of such devices and later, the categorization of more contemporary objects regarding their sexual functionality.

4 Firstly, the development of devices that functioned as sex toys but were not promoted and conceptualized with the expectation of arousal of sexual pleasure is a relevant factor for historical contextualization. These objects mainly appear in association with medical discourse and later, promotion of relaxation devices for the domestic sphere. The vibrator as a medical tool, for instance, emerged in the 1880s (Maines 11) with the purpose of clinically treating hysterical women, where the success of the procedure relied on the accomplishment of paroxysm, presently known as orgasm (Minge and Zimmerman 334).<sup>1</sup> Hysteria was commonly presented as a female disease and only lost its pathological status in 1952 (Maines 11) after sexuality ceased to be considered as serving only procreational purposes. At the same time, the focus of sexual discourse shifted to the pleasure bringing features of human intimacy. However, there is an explicit pathologization of female arousal in contrast to the absence of medical, either pathological or apathological, discourse around male sexuality led by the male-dominated medical community. Accordingly, this indicates an uneven distribution of agency in favor of the male-identified part of society (Maines 334), based on gender-bound distinctions of sexual normalcy. The absence of clinical interest in male sexuality then marks it as generic, or integrated, whereas the conscious investigation of female sexuality signifies it as deviant, justifying the investigation. Protecting women from hysteria through medical regulations of sexual arousal thus also served as a way to regulate their general behavior outside an intimate context (Fahs and Swank 667). The universal lack of knowledge about female pleasure did not allow for a multi-layered structure of behavioral

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<sup>1</sup> While 'paroxysm' was used to describe a physical reaction desired in the context of healing hysteria, 'orgasm' denotes the climax of sexual intercourse in the context of pleasure, not illness.

patterns, explaining the efficiency of female sexual gratification, though not officially known as such, as an effective method of treatment for a disease whose cause was precisely the lack of knowledge about the same. The later development of massaging devices for the domestic sphere then allowed the private exploration of the device without medical experts and therefore outside a medical context, whereas the promotion of these devices was strongly directed towards the enhancement of social and professional life as a consequence of biological health and physical fitness (Maines 108).

5 Secondly, the identification of devices that were built exclusively for the purpose of sexual stimulation (Vergy 11) strongly requires the explicit isolation of their function, meaning the intent of their production. A distinction has to be made between devices that are *built or used for non-sexual practices* but, nevertheless, hold the features that deliver sexual pleasure and therefore can function as sex toys as well, and devices that are *built for uses in sexual contexts only* and also explicitly are promoted as such. The first categorization can apply to almost any thinkable artefact available to individuals, while most of them, in one way or another, either resemble features of the anatomy of the gender preferred for sexual relations or carry functions that imitate sex toys themselves, without assignment to and addressing of a specific gender.<sup>2</sup> Examples of anatomy-inspired devices can be divided into two main categories: phallically shaped objects such as bottles, cucumbers or, as famously introduced in the teenage comedy *American Pie* (1999), flutes, or objects that resemble vaginal features, as for instance the American apple pie, vacuum cleaners and other objects found in the domestic sphere, such as the gap between couch cushions (Greg 1). Alternatively, non-gendered artefacts such as electronic toothbrushes, pegs or ropes can very well be introduced into sexual scenarios. However, these devices will not be discussed further as their association with sexual pleasure is contingent on their shape and not their initial function. These objects therefore only could have an impact on power negotiation if their users choose to transform them into sex toys, in which case the power distributions established are, like the process of transformation of the device itself, chosen by the initiator and therefore, not hegemonic. Objects specifically created for the purpose of sexual satisfaction, in contrast, can contribute to the establishment and reproduction of power relations not only after the user's conscious choice of purchase, but can hold a variety of

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<sup>2</sup> Though, as shown later, resemblance to specific body features does not necessarily imply a direct imitation of them, but rather can serve as an independent characteristic of the pleasure device appreciated for its function, not its connotations.

features the consumer has no control over and are embedded in a wide discourse that might affect attitudes towards them.

6 The usage of devices explicitly manufactured to enhance sexual pleasure is influenced by numerous factors, all of which can contribute to constructions of uneven power relations in the context of gender. These factors can be divided into two sections: firstly, the toys and the industry surrounding them (such as the marketing of the product and the space of purchase) and secondly, the attitudes and opinions associated with the use in either single or multiple individuals' constellations and varying by sexual orientation and the actual use of the devices for the achievement of sexual pleasure. In addition, the emergence of these attitudes, analyzed in current research, needs to be viewed in the context of textual representations of sex toys and their use in cultural productions, focusing on popular film and television in the decades around the millennium. Representations in media strongly influence or pre-fabricate the viewer's attitudes about sex toys because they provide examples of usage and also, platforms to negotiate opinions about these devices without actually having to use or possess one. As shown later, the films at hand, in most cases, do not provide common representations of sex toys and thereby promote rather negative attitudes towards their use.

7 Generalizing issues of gender and sexism in the sex toy market is a task impossible to accomplish as the present fluidity of sexualities is mirrored in the offerings of the market. Nevertheless, it is possible to exemplify instances that assign a specific gender or sexuality, and therefore often a hierarchic element to specific devices. The appearance, for instance, determines whether a sex toy is intended to be viewed as a copy of human sexual organs or a gender-independent, pleasure giving entity. Here the resemblance varies on a spectrum where there are, on the one hand, very accurately copied devices, as for instance those that replicate a specific person, fictional character, their bodily features or, more specifically, their sexual organs such as blow-up dolls or other objects directly inspired by adult-movie stars and promoted with their name. The purchase of this merchandise gives opportunity to fully control the specific body and therefore, also construct narrative traits and characteristics that may contradict the original such as the model's sexual orientation which, even if known, can be negotiated via individual fantasy rather than its model's preferences. At the same time, it remains an object whose association with a specific real world referent is contingent on the production company, which is a third party that is neither the model nor the user of the product. Nevertheless, its main promotional feature remains the simulative relationship with the human model. On the other hand, there are devices that assume a number of features of

the human body but leave out others, such as coloring to avoid direct association with a specific individual and consequently, also gender and sexuality.

8 The prioritization of features discloses focuses of sexual preference that can serve as grounding for various fetishistic and partly discriminatory assumptions, though keeping a steady distance to the living original body part. Focusing on phallically shaped toys, Fahs and Swank (2013) point out that these are marketed primarily towards women and, to a lesser extent, gay men, whereby potential male consumers seeking penetrative stimulation in a heterosexual context are ignored. The function of the toy then assigns specific sexual practices to specific customer groups and therefore, sets normative instructions for purchase while the customers that do not fit the target audience are made aware of their deviant consumption through the explicit marketing.

9 Apart from gender and sexuality, other intersectional categories are present in the crafting of sex toys. For instance, phallic toys can either fetishize a particular ethnicity by for example reinforcing the stereotype of the “gigantic black penis” (Fahs and Swank 671) or infantilize the user by taking inspiration for the design from infant toys. Some sex toys are also produced by brands typically selling products to an infantile target audience, such as Hello Kitty (*ibid.*). In addition, some devices are assigned formal qualities that do not enhance the sexual experience, but reproduce heterosexist views on the pursuit of sexual pleasure, as for instance some vibrating toys for clitoral stimulation that unnecessarily have a phallic shape.<sup>3</sup> Through this, the importance of a phallic object for female sexual satisfaction is reinforced regardless of whether the toys are used for clitoral or vaginal use. Also, this shape restricts the usage of the vibrational function on bodies that do not necessarily hold either of these features or the application of vibrating sensations in completely different body regions all together. However, a number of non-phallic variants of the vibrator explicitly aimed at female clitoral pleasure, such as the ‘Butterfly’ strap-on, and more generally, the normalization of vibrating sensations without gender attribution became more accessible in the decade after 2000 (Fahs and Swank 671).

10 Design aside, the space of purchase and the product’s packaging also offer opportunities for gender-specific or gender-neutral use. Paradoxically, the packaging for toys used for female stimulation in mainstream sex shops (where mainstream is to be understood as conceptualized for a heterosexual target audience), is addressing male buyers through pictures of female models in stereotypical pornographic depictions while using the usually

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<sup>3</sup> Also, the “original vibrator” (Maines 121) did not have a phallic shape.

phallically shaped product. In other words, the public mainstream market considers men to be the purchasers for female pleasure products by promoting them with explicit depictions of male heterosexual fantasies, rather than focusing on the device's function or addressing the assumed and desired future users of this device, namely women. The pre-determination of a male target audience denies female agency in and spending power on sexual stimulation devices (Fahs and Swank 672).

11 Precisely this lack of adequate purchase spaces caused the emergence of so-called alternative sex shops. Those can be further divided into a number of sub-categories that explicitly address their target audience by defining their space to be female-friendly, feminist or queer. While sellers aiming at an exclusively female audience often restrict access for male customers without female company in order to create a comfortable environment for all shop visitors, queer sex shops do not set boundaries for entrance based on gender but rather, expect either particular understandings of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation and their relevance in social and political contexts, or the customer's desire to learn about these issues. Directed at various bodies, genders and sexualities, they do not only acknowledge and encourage female sexual agency (Loe 99), the increase of visible diversity in sexual preferences and the relevance of the personal to be political but, furthermore, approach the sex industry, including sex toy businesses themselves, as political agents altogether. This involves considering factors such as ethical, fair-trade and toxin-free production of merchandise and, above all, educational work as a mandatory factor in the concept of a sex-positive, inclusive space for purchase (ibid. 109).<sup>4</sup> In addition, further concerns about the intersection of capital privilege and the ability to maintain and promote sex-positive attitudes is expressed in the context of "feminist" sex toy research (ibid. 97). Here, the emphasis is placed on showing that the purchase of pleasure devices is by no means a dominant strategy for constructing an empowered sexuality outside of socially normative regulations as the center of sexual pleasure remains the body's affective response to external stimulation that can, but does not have to be, performed with manufactured devices that come from a feminist or queer background.

12 At the same time, a certain amount of sex merchandise has found its way into regular stores, increasing the visibility of these products. Consequently, the use of such devices is demystified and the stigma of unsatisfying sex that needs improvement through sex toys is eliminated by presenting them as products occurring regularly in sexual contexts in the same

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<sup>4</sup> Sex-positivity here is understood as empowerment through the ability to express sexuality freely.

ways as other goods such as condoms or lubricants. The availability of sex toys in non-sexualized spaces of purchase furthermore normalizes fun and play in sexual intercourse in any kind of single or shared use (Herbenick et al. 343) as it de-centralizes the target audience by simply being available to all individuals shopping for just about anything while none of the potential intersectional characteristics, besides spending capacities, matter. On the other hand, the emergence of bookable events or social gatherings where sex toys and pleasure are put into focus, such as “home parties” that are mostly targeted at a female audience (Ehrenreich 104), confirms the demand for dialogue and education about the use and purchase of such devices in a more protected surrounding when it comes to more specific information. For these events, the domestic space, or any kind of closed space with the requirement for exclusive entry can become a temporary platform for communal exchange about sexual matters guided by an ‘expert’. Thus, Dawn Heinecken critiques precisely the temporality of the safe space for communication and the consequential lack of endurance regarding the possibly interesting new revelations for the audience (134). Accordingly, the new findings and the change of opinions on sexuality are not transferred into daily routine but left inside the closed space in order to not threaten the “status quo” (ibid.), leaving the question about the function of these events if the newly gained knowledge will not be adapted into practice. While ‘empowerment’ through education about alternative ways of receiving sexual pleasure as promoted at home parties is partly achieved through the exclusion of participants based on gender and the following assumption of shared problems and questions based on the same, the lack of information about how these findings can be made accessible not only to individuals who share the same problem but more importantly, individuals who should be part of the solution demands for the creation of an environment that enables both parties to participate in the process of education and communication. Though this, negative attitudes towards unsatisfied sexuality and the lack of pursuit of pleasure can be addressed more directly.

13 Most sociological research performed in the field of sex toys is aimed towards the use of dildos and vibrators, suggesting a wider popularity of these devices. While quantitative studies (Herbenick et al.; Reece et al. and Schick et al.) report mainly positive attitudes by women and men towards the usage of vibrators and dildos likewise, with the highest percentage of users in a sample of homosexual women (Schick et al.), no research was found on the frequency and attitudes towards and sex toy use among homosexual men, suggesting that sociological research perceives sex toys to be mainly produced for and used by female customers, reproducing the stereotype often found in marketing as illustrated before. In

addition, the extensive focus on females as users also creates the impression that women need those devices most while men are responsible for the purchase as they are targeted by the product's advertising, indicating general sexual dissatisfaction and its resolution to be determined by gender. However, this also allows for the illustration of a bigger variety of merchandise to choose from, whose purchase and exercise, albeit being promoted for a specific gender, is ultimately not restricted by the gender of the purchaser. It is, therefore, important to include both negative and positive attitudes towards sex toys into the investigation within the context of prior findings.

14 Negative attitudes towards female sex toy use include shame about the confession of practice to the partner in a heterosexual constellation, firstly because it deems the user lonely, but also because it puts pressure on the male partner (Herbenick 333). The concerns about pressure are explained by the common belief that phallic sex toys are replica of the penis, therefore are assigned the male gender and viewed as sexual competitors, posing a threat to the man's ability to give pleasure and therefore remain in a relationship with his female significant other (Fahs and Swank 674). Furthermore, the same study, focusing on women's subjective feelings and narratives about the usage of sex toys, found that heterosexual women perceive pleasure from penetration as the norm from which clitoral stimulation, though being the dominant solo practice according to statistics, deviates. In a non-shared setting of masturbation where the participants are assumed to act according to personal preference that does not have to agree with their partners', penetration is not listed as a frequent practice. The discrepancy between own preference and performance in shared settings emphasizes the androcentricity upon which both females and males negotiate understandings of norm and deviance of sexual practice instead of communicating about subjective perceptions of pleasure. This attitude can be summarized as hegemonic penetrative pleasure for female-identifying individuals, although the use and consequently, the function of sex toys in sexual acts with respect to gender and power relations highly depend on the constellation of characters in the scene. Sex toys are used alone or in a shared sexual experience, whereas the interpersonal sexual experiences with sex toys have different significations depending on the sexual preferences of those involved, ranging from homo- and heterosexuality to completely non-specified or all in- or exclusive sexual preferences. As sexualities and attitudes towards them are fluid, there can be no fixed formula for signifying the application of sex toys in particular interpersonal constellations.

15 However, sex toys also can function as props to modify and create new character structures in an enacted sexual setting, as Ehrenreich describes in the context of

sadomasochism in heterosexual relationships. Here, power negotiations are eroticized whereas the identification of submissive and dominant characters is signified by specific tools such as whips or masks. The possible break from traditionally assigned power distributions in heterosexuality becomes a narrative or drama (Ehrenrich 123) whose authenticity requires the assignment of devices that support the display of the superior or inferior position. Furthermore, the use of phallic toys in shared heterosexual settings can draw attention to the artificially assigned dominance of phallus, meaning the assignment of the active role to the individual with penetration privilege and the consequential reproduction of possessive heteronormativity, understood as a privileging of white, heterosexual, monogamous relationships where the male occupies the dominant position. Besides this, it creates scope for new experiences outside of the normative spectrum as for instance the use of phallic toys on a male body in a heterosexual setting (Fahs and Swank 669).<sup>5</sup>

16 The use of phallic sex toys in lesbian intercourse, however, is met with less focus on the question of whether the toy is a simulacrum of the penis as the original organ is not present in the sexual setting and the toy can be equally put on by both agents (Minge and Zimmerman 342).<sup>6</sup> Through this, prescribed, heteronormative power relations based on gendered body features are eliminated. The device itself, then, is also free from gender definition and functions as an independent agent for female pleasure (ibid. 340), mutating the user's body in the process of intercourse from female to post-gender or queer, rather than male (Hamming 329). In contrast to this, earlier movements such as second-wave feminism considered the use of penetrative stimulation devices in lesbian sexuality to be deviant. In the context of political purity in the private sphere (the personal is political), lesbian women's preference for vaginal stimulation was met with critique and skepticism, as phallic toys and phallic intercourse were said to recreate heterosexual power structures of active and passive actors in lesbian relationships. Thereby, the sexual pleasure individuals could gain from phallic penetration and possibilities of non-vaginal use of phallic toys were disregarded and consequently, only established reverse power relations regarding authentic and proper lesbian sexuality (Minge and Zimmerman 338). In contrast to this, the use of sex toys without partners gives the maximum agency over one's own sexuality and pleasure (Fahs and Swank 668) as the lack of another body and, consequently, another body's functions and abilities

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<sup>5</sup> Empirical data suggests that the use and purchase of phallic toys in and for heterosexual intercourse is, nevertheless, mainly directed towards the application on a female body (Reece et al. 402).

<sup>6</sup> It seems that Minge and Zimmerman only consider lesbian intercourse between cis female bodies here. Thus, the penis in lesbian intercourse performed with or by transwomen or other female individuals that possess this organ can be detached from its immediate association with masculinity as it remains up to the individual to define gender identity and consequently, the function of this organ in intercourse.

allows for a more independent experimentation. Besides the active and possessive choice of pleasure and full control over it in the situation of single use, these objects also help experimenting with one's own sexual identity, breaking with constraints based on gender, sex and sexuality. Nevertheless, gender marking is deeply embedded into the social perception of any kind of sexual pleasure including the usually private process of masturbation, whereas the prioritization of penetration over other types of sexual fulfillment is the normative and thereby dominant entity, along or against which one's own sexuality has to be defined (Fahs and Swank 681).

17 As shown here, attitudes towards sex toys are, indeed, shaped by multiple factors regarding the display of the products. Design then determines whether a toy should be perceived as a toy, signified by, for instance, bright colors and improvised shapes, or, in contrast, as a simulation of the body part that can produce arousal. Sex toy use is considered to be fairly common in all research at hand, suggesting a basic openness towards and curiosity about bringing these products into own sexual practice, as most participants in all studies at hand had used a sex toy at least once, though the frequency of use is not inquired in every study. However, the media presence of the toys and their use in specific genres also has an impact on how individuals negotiate these products' relation to their own sexuality. For instance, the heterosexist display of phallic toys in mainstream pornography (Minge and Zimmerman 337) combined with the way sex toys are occurring in popular culture does not communicate enjoyable, pleasure-centered and non-deviant sex toy use even if it is not directly presented as unusual. Non-sensational examples of use where sex toys are not used to catalyze specific affect then have to be acquired from other sources whose determination requires investigative effort in contrast to the casual display of sex toys in mainstream media.

### **Sex Toys in Film and Pop Culture**

18 Nowadays, popular culture is acknowledged as an important source of learning in the contemporary, postmodern society (Giroux in Pearce 367) on the one hand but also, as an instance that can "shape public opinion" (Dolby in Pearce 369) on the other. Precisely because of this impact it is important to include the analysis of cultural texts displaying sex toys into the investigation of the formation of attitudes about these devices. Focusing on the decades around the year 2000, there are multiple ways in which sex toys are displayed in mainstream media. Firstly, there are productions illustrating the historical development and significance of sex toys, presenting the devices in a rather neutral manner. This applies to the film *Hysteria* (2011) and partly, is found in the television series *Masters of Sex* (2013-).

Albeit directly associating sex toys with pleasure, this relation is embedded in a different historical and social context and displays antique devices not used in contemporary society anymore. In addition, both cases show sex toys in a medical milieu where they are used to achieve specific effects within the context of researching human biology or sexuality. Thus, pleasure is transformed into numeric material in these films and thereby is abstracted from today's connotations of sexuality. Given a more domestic use in contemporary society, the display of toys in these productions does not directly influence current social and cultural discourses around sex toys. The focus on domesticity, however, allows for the application of sex toys to support narrative development, particularly for the creation of humorous situations in mainstream comedy.

19 As established by Adorno and Horkheimer, “[l]aughter about something is always laughter at it” (122). More specifically, this also means that “comic laughter [...] is rooted in feelings of superiority” (Hobbes in Carroll 153), confirming humor's ability to display hierarchic relationships within film contexts. These hierarchic structures can work on both the narrative and the meta-narrative level and therefore, possibly serve as blueprints for attitudes towards sex toy uses. Humorous connotations are established through various factors: in some cases, the public exposure of the private practice of masturbation with a sex toy or an everyday device with the same abstracted function serves to support humorous effect, such as the introductory scene in *Not Another Teen Movie* (2001) or the masturbation scene at the beginning of *American Reunion* (2012), where Jim walks in on Michelle masturbating with the showerhead after being caught masturbating with a sock by his son. Both cases draw on the surprise of exposure and following shame about usage to create comedy. Alternatively, in *American Wedding* (2003), Michelle's reinterpretation of anal beads (explicitly identified as such by the possessors) for a neck massage chain and the according application by her mother requires the viewer's knowledge about their real function in order to create disgust that immediately can be discharged by laughter. *Sex and the City* reproduces stereotypes of loneliness and addiction to sex toys in “The Turtle and the Hare” (1998) when Charlotte withdraws from social activities with her girlfriends in order to play with her new Rabbit. This determines a discrepancy between proper and deviant use of sex toys where excessive usage becomes comic as it draws on the parodic effect of camp.

20 However, some films also abstract phallically shaped toys as weapons in order to amuse the viewer. For instance, in the process of becoming heterosexual, the protagonist in *Brüno* (2009) seeks to find strategies to protect himself in case of a homosexual attacking him with one or multiple dildos and learns to fight off potential ‘penetrators’ with karate

techniques. In contrast, Hank, the split personality of protagonist Charlie in *Me, Myself & Irene* (2000) seemingly applies a dildo on himself during intoxicated intercourse with Irene, who later uses the toy to beat off one of their persecutors. In both cases, the sex toy is displayed as a threat to hegemonic heterosexuality when used on a male body, confirming the prohibition for a heterosexual man to be interested in penetration and further, constructing it as a device that can de facto harm the body. This equation hits its peak in the promotional video *Playthings* (2014) by Evolve Together Inc., an organization promoting gun safety in the USA. In the video, two young boys are displayed ‘fighting’ with sex toys as swords while the mothers awkwardly exchange glances after realizing what the toys in their kids’ hands are. The clip terminates with the slogan “always lock up your guns” (while no guns occur in the video), suggesting that sex toys in children’s hands are, if not equally dangerous, then at least as inappropriate as guns and unfit for public display in general.

21 Aside from comedy, sex toys are also displayed in situations of proper threat without comic effect, used as weapons or indirectly personified as an ‘enemy’. For instance, in *American Pie* (1999), Kevin inherits his older brother’s secret manual for satisfying women sexually called the Bible, where a brief close-up of the book reveals a section headlined “Know your enemy!” with a picture of a phallic vibrator below. This supports the formerly mentioned perception of sex toys being direct rivals of men’s abilities for producing pleasure in their female partners’ bodies. However, there is no further mentioning of this enmity throughout the story and this equation is not explicitly discussed by the characters, merely suggesting a subliminal sentiment towards toys in this film world. In a similar way, sex toys are given age or maturity appropriation in *True Blood’s* “May Be the Last Time” (2014) where Adilyn and Wade, a teenage couple, are encouraged to use sex toys in their first sexual experiences together by Violet, a revengeful vampire. Albeit having selected a few items from the collection for closer inspection, they ultimately find out that both are “not into this (at all)” (Wade in TB). Their disinterest in sex toys is explained with their lack of sexual experience, indicating that sex toys only become relevant when the variety of techniques performed with the own body is exhausted. Also, Violet’s ‘sex room’ is used as a torture dungeon in the following episode (“Almost Home” 2014), drawing a parallel between devices used in contexts of pleasure and their ability to produce pain.

22 In contrast to this stand films where sex toys are directly used to brutally harm characters. In *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Butch Coolidge and Marcellus Wallace are captured by the pawn shop owner Maynard who later rapes Marcellus with his friend Zed. Butch and Marcellus wake up in the shop’s cellar with gag balls in their mouths, one of many toys often

used for BDSM role-play, and later, Butch is watched by a 'gimp' while Marcellus is violated. This scene has two layers of transgression and abstraction of sex toys and their initial function. On the one hand, BDSM sex toys are abstracted from their normal sphere of application in consensual dominance submission role-play and fantasized situations where pain contributes to sexual arousal into the direct opposite, namely non-fantasized, brutal abuse. Also, the blending of human and toy, more specifically the voluntary reduction of an individual to an object or 'gimp' and his later more humanized assignment of watching Butch presents an interesting dichotomy regarding power structures in BDSM. These two factors together signify the transition from fantasy to actual brutalization, albeit signified by the same props. In a different way, an abstracted device is used to perform the murder in the context of the deadly sin 'lust' in *Seven* (1995). Though the strap-on suit with a dagger attached to it is not a device directly available or used widely, it nevertheless draws on associations with BDSM and 'pain for pleasure' sub-culture. Finally, a dildo is used as a penetration device by Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), where she takes revenge on her guardian Nils Bjurman who formerly raped her, also drawing on transgressions of voluntary and involuntary intercourse, punishing the delinquent with his own crime and the ability to inflict pain with a device originally produced for pleasure. Indeed, both humorous and negative displays of sex toys in film and TV can be read as means to develop particular hierarchies in character constellations through different assignments of the device. However, they also have to be in agreement with the viewer's reality and experiences in order to come to full effect.

### **Power and Sexuality**

23 As mentioned in the beginning, the medical discourse led by a majority of men in combination with the lack of educated understanding and even the awareness of existence of female sexual pleasure forms the very core of the development of the first vibrator. Without the context of clitoral orgasm, sexual dissatisfaction was labelled and treated as a disease that needed to be cured, emphasizing the resulting improvement in social behavior and appearance of women, which then again served male participants in society, as illustrated in *Hysteria* where Charlotte Dalrymple is considered an outcast for her non-feminine behavior and skepticism towards hysteria as a disease. Framed by further structural factors such as the indoctrination of heterosexual intercourse for procreational purposes only, declaring the family as a central institution of public life, the first power issue regarding sexuality lay within the arrangement of society by strictly heteronormative and androcentric conventions.

This still present heterosexual norm strongly shapes the individual's perception of sexual enhancement devices, in the sense that even if sex toys are not made to simulate particular, gender-specific features of the male or female body, the distinction from a gender biased modelling object has to be made explicit. In other words, a gender neutral interpretation of sex toys has to be emphasized and explicitly opposed with the norm that positions objects used and created for sexual purposes on a gender-bound spectrum even if they do not replicate gender specific organs. In this model, the division of sexuality follows the classic, deterministic distribution of agency of men being dominant and superior, women on the other hand submissive and inferior (and liking it), setting penetration as the normative sexual act although it often only satisfies the male phallic arousal while other forms of arousal serving female pleasure deviate from it (Fahs and Swank 675). According to Freud, however, the sexuality of both genders is phallic in the pre-oedipal state, centered on either the penis or the clitoris, though female sexual desire is later shifted into vaginal normalcy as this form of pleasure complements the masculine phallic arousal (Irigaray 114). Furthermore, the domination of male primary sexual organs in this model is also likely to influence society's focus of interest in the topic, explaining why most research (Herbenick et al.; Schick et al. and Reece et al.) found is dedicated to phallically shaped sex toys along with the lack of representation of non-phallic stimulants for female characters in the films at hand.

24 Nevertheless, there are sexual constellations that are not determined by the heteronormative model and it is in these that one can find toys not specifically tailored to gender-specific use. For a maximum degree of inclusion, these are only specified as non-heterosexual to avoid label misinterpretations, although it is necessary to say that not every heterosexual interpersonal relation is automatically heteronormative and power relations within it unevenly distributed. Arguably, power relations in any interpersonal sexual engagement outside of the heterosexual- and social norm then are a matter of consensual agreement between the participating characters, where sex toys can be used to symbolically support the artificially created hierarchies, which, nevertheless, can be chosen to adapt the phallogocentric model of power distribution due to personal preference. In this context, the power assigned to the object relates to the figurative properties of a penis, while potential flaws and peculiarities of the original human organ such as impotence, premature ejaculation, lack of arousal or consequences of unprotected intercourse such as pregnancy or transmission of STDs are inexistent in its artificial simulacrum (Hamming 331). Furthermore, the device stands out for its constant availability as the purchase only depends on a single event of

spending effort and not on the needs of human partners who have to be physically present, agree on sexual intercourse and, above all, fulfill the needs of their lover (ibid.).

25 The adaption of the object or the attachment of it to one's own body to be used on another one ultimately should only serve to satisfy sexual needs without consequences for the user's non-sexual life if the exercise is based on consent. A person occupying the penetrating position (no matter whether male or female) is not automatically assigned sexual or social dominance unless explicitly discussed and desired, much like submission or passivity on a non-sexual level does not logically follow from being penetrated. According to Haraway's model of the cyborg, the merging of the active user with the object transforms the individual into a post-gender and consequently also post-human being, indicating that the object is liberated an from gender-specific classification and simultaneously transfers this liberation onto the human body of the user (Hamming 335). Power, in this context, is assigned to the ability to create sexual arousal in either oneself or the individual(s) the experience is shared with, signifying the sex toy only as a tool for the achievement or practice of consensual power relations that support and serve sexual arousal. However, sex toys also can contribute to negotiations of power outside of the process of application to bodies such as the ability to give or receive orgasm.

26 The presence of sex toys can encourage a dialogue about sexuality and the satisfaction of sexual needs as much as it can cause conflict regarding the same (Herbenick 330). In contrast to rather cryptic and subjectively connoted concepts such as arousal or orgasm, toys serve as real-world referents for the practice of sexuality as the involvement in intimate settings is their predominant function. Not being bound to male or female identified bodies, they are positioned as a neutral signifier for sexual play and possess positive connotations as additives for the achievement of climax. Communication about sexuality then can revolve around an object without the risk of discomfort caused by referencing the bodies that are unable to meet the needs of the partner and have to be complemented by the device or object, as shown in a car-dialogue between Jim and Michelle shortly after the aforementioned introductory scene in *American Reunion*. At the same time, sex toys can cause conflicts in interpersonal sexual relationships when they are not perceived as a neutral object but rather interpreted as carrying a gender signification and thus functioning as a mechanical version of the partner's organs that are potentially unable to fulfill the user's sexual needs (Fahs and Swank 676). This interpretation is supported by the fact that many female users are secretive about their engagement with sex toys in heterosexual relationships but contradicted by research findings which show that attitudes towards sex toys are generally positive. Hence,

the power assigned to the sex toy depends on the individual's interpretation of social power distributions along the gender spectrum and the perception of sex toys as being gendered or not.

27 Most of these structural differences are also mirrored in the films at hand. For instance, the absence of interest in communicating an authentic application of differently shaped devices is shown in both cases where non-phallic toys occur (*American Wedding*; *Pulp Fiction*): they are abstracted from their initial purpose. Also, characters never use sex toys alone without being interrupted or 'caught' by others, occasionally producing the above mentioned conflict or communication situation where the toy serves as an entity isolated from both parties of the conflict caused by the dissatisfactory sexual relationship as shown in *American Reunion* (2012). At the same time, sex toys also do not occur as devices that can be used in a shared setting without the following regret or emphasis of deviance of this practice as shown in *Me, Myself & Irene*, or abusing them as weapons as in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* or *Seven*, and finally, the context of campy homosexual promiscuity, as in the case of *Brüno*. Moreover, sex toys are used to construct female homosexuality in *American Pie 2* (2001), displaying the possession of a sex toy as an identifying feature for this sexual orientation assumed by the women's social behavior while lesbian<sup>7</sup> or female bisexual characters in other films at hand are never shown using devices in intercourse.

28 On the one hand, the absence of non-comical or terrifying displays of sex toys in shared settings agrees with the general construction of 'flawless' fictional characters who are never shown to use the bathroom or perform other everyday tasks without narrative purpose. On the other hand, the occurrence of sex toys in most cases serves exaggerated symbolic purposes and their inclusion usually marks the scene as highly sexualized, albeit this sexualization often also has symbolic meanings attached to it. Phallic sex toys are mostly displayed as catalyzers of either comedy or threat, while one exception is found in *Fight Club* (1999). Here, a dildo sits on Marla Singer's shelf and is slightly brought into movement by Tyler Durden, but is not directly involved in action or narrative and therefore, cannot be said to advocate any specific use in sexual contexts. Nevertheless, its casual placement on a visible spot in the shot combined with the lack of explicit purpose in the scene marks it as a normalized item in the film's world.

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<sup>7</sup> "I need confirmation!"- Stifler when breaking into an apartment shared by two women assuming they are sexually involved in "AP2".

## Conclusion

29 Nowadays, sex toys are a staple in the sex industry with a high popularity and use rate. Their significance for social impact comes with the wide spread of these products within society and consumer sphere. Here, the products are presented, marketed and promoted in a certain way to reach a specific audience that is assumed to exist, causing potential customers to adapt to the industry's offerings rather than modifying the industry's assumptions according to their own demands. It has been shown that sex toys are, in many ways, a significant part of today's formation of discourse around and practice of sexuality. It is, however, not possible to come to a full conclusion from the findings as the variety of objects, sexualities, circumstances and constellations in which sex toys can be used is not possible to grasp and, above all, highly subjective. However, it is also important to acknowledge the different factors that influence this subjectivity.

30 One dominant influence can be found in mass media productions and the according display of sexuality that is subject to normative regulations because of media's wide sphere of influence. As shown here, popular culture and film as one of the major media forms that shapes public opinion, rarely display sex toys as neutral devices for enhancing sexual relations, but rather, reproduce negative attitudes towards these devices by showing them in comical or violent contexts. On the one hand, the abstracted occurrence of sex toys as weapons or comic toys can be explained by the facilitated display of these devices outside of a sexual context but nevertheless, maintaining narrative significance, as it would be impossible to show the devices for genital stimulation in direct action outside of an adult movie. On the other hand, however, the example of non-sensational display of sex toys in *Fight Club* shows that there is a way to integrate and therefore, normalize these devices by placing them in the film world but not relying on their occurrence as catalyzer for narrative development.

31 In addition, the predominant presence of female-targeted sex toys and the plurality of research addressing female pleasure devices leads to the conclusion that females are assumed to benefit most from the market as either active users and consumers or partners that benefit from the presence of toys in interpersonal sexual relations. However, this targeting does not imply an unjustified distribution of power in general, but has to be attended to on a case-to-case basis. In the same way, the appearance and conception of toys themselves does not necessarily imply the prioritization of one gender over the other, unless explicitly stated to do so. However, outside of an interpersonal context, sex toys very much serve as empowering devices for the enhancement and better understanding of one's own sexuality, though the

attitudes towards them are never outside of the public discourse around sexuality. To determine the social relevance of sex toys more accurately, this issue could be investigated through a stricter division of various sexual orientations and genders although the creation of isolated groups can lead to a full exclusion of individuals who cannot identify with any of the created categories and are either ignored completely or have to modify their own self-identified sexuality in order to participate.

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