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Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction (II)

Edited by
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About

gender forum is an open access, peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated to the intersectional discussion of re-configurations of gender and sexualities in the fields of literary and cultural production, the media, and the arts. Inaugurated by Beate Neumeier in 2002, the journal transitioned to a team of co-editors consisting of Judith Rauscher and Johanna Pitetti-Heil during the academic year of 2021.

Since the journal's inception, *gender forum* has focused on a multitude of questions ranging widely across the various theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, gender studies, queer theory, and masculinity studies. The journal also publishes reviews and it occasionally includes interviews, fictional pieces, and poetry.

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

Submissions

We currently only accept manuscripts for thematic issues. Please consult our calls for submissions: <http://genderforum.org/call-for-submissions/>

Manuscripts should conform to the current MLA Style (9th edition) and be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words and send your manuscript (as an email attachment in MS Word format) to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in gender studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (9th edition), 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.

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Editorial

Johanna Pitetti-Heil, University of Cologne, Germany

As the new general co-editor of *gender forum*, it is my greatest pleasure to be writing the editorial for the second special issue on “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction,” guest-edited by Judith Rauscher and Marta Usiekniewicz. It is truly an honor to be stepping and growing into the shoes of one of *gender forum*’s general editors, and I am looking forward to continuing the legacy of founding editor Beate Neumeier, whose visionary work created Germany’s first English-language open-access journal for gender studies with a particular focus on literary and cultural studies. Resounding Judith Rauscher’s words from her editorial for issue 80 (2021), I want to express my awe and gratitude for the relentless commitment that Beate Neumeier and her team have poured into *gender forum*, which has grown into a living archive of feminist scholarship and research in gender studies and queer studies.

I could not have wished for a more wonderful co-editor than Judith Rauscher for this joint endeavor of making gender and queer studies freely available. Not only do we share our scholarly commitment to gender and queer studies, we also consider it our responsibility to support early career researchers in their first publishing processes and to provide a platform for scholars working from the margin in what remains a highly traditional and hierarchical university system, in which the ways of how to do things are not always readily available to everyone. My previous editorial work has prepared me well for these endeavors, but while technical expertise and experience with the editorial processes are certainly important to keep a journal running, it is the collective energy that an editorial team develops that makes the heart of a journal beat. I

want to take this opportunity to thank Judith Rauscher and our student assistants—Izel Ercanoglu, Tensae Desta, Julia Hahn-Klose, Maheen Muzaffar, and Leontien Potthoff—for their warm welcome, their thorough editorial work, their creative ideas, and their scholarly and political commitment to intersectional gender and queer studies.

Gender and queer studies have not only been shaking to the core the compulsory heteronormative assumptions of identity and desire, they continuously, creatively, and poetically re-calibrate what it means, entails, and implies to think, feel, identify, and love otherwise. For many, doing this work is not merely an academic exercise but a deeply personal and political lived reality, which informs theory and critique and which comes with a variety of vulnerabilities and risks. Queer literature and other forms of queer cultural production have been lifelines in hostile environments, just as projects of “cruising utopia,” as José Esteban Muñoz entitled his 2009-monograph, have been pointing to the necessity of imagining queer political futures. Whether utopian, dystopian, or both, in penning speculative fiction, and “in all the brouhaha clanging about these unreal worlds,” as Samuel R. Delaney has underlined in “About 5,750 Words,” “chords are sounded in total sympathy with the real”—a real that, despite all the socio-cultural and political changes of the past forty years, is still structured along the lines of violently heteronormative configurations of gendered identity and desire. It is thus not surprising that this second issue on “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction” in *gender forum* highlights the ways in which literary imagining reflects on and critiques the structures through which ideological state apparatuses yield power and exercise violence over non-conforming gendered bodies, identities, and practices. Writing about and publishing special issues on questions of gender and queerness in speculative fiction always offers opportunities of further pushing, widening, re-constructing, changing, oscillating, unthinking, and rethinking the structures that have been established around processes of subjectivation, desire, and potentialities of resistance. I invite all readers to critically enjoy this issue (and to read it along “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction” I in issue 80 [2021]) . . . and if it sparks your own scholarly imagination to guest-edit a special issue of *gender form*, we welcome inquiries via gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

Johanna Pitetti-Heil
General Co-Editor

Introduction: Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction (II)

Edited by Judith Rauscher and Martha Usiekniewicz

When we wrote the introduction to the first part of our double issue on “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction,” published as issue 80 (2021), there were signs everywhere of political and social developments that were putting increasing pressure on women, gender-non-conforming folks, and queer people. Scholarly discourses in Europe and the United States, that is those discourses we are most familiar with, registered these developments and scholars alongside activists on both sides of the Atlantic began their efforts to historicize, contextualize, and explain them. At the same time, many researchers gradually had to come to terms with the fact that cultural critique and theory do not necessarily impact the world outside the academy. Despite having seen the warning signs of strengthening anti-feminist, anti-queer, anti-gender, and anti-trans agitations for many years and being intellectually aware of the need to critique Western narratives of progress, many of “us”—if we may evoke such a tenuous collectivity for a moment—had been too naive in our stubborn hope for a future marked by less violence and discrimination (whether institutionalized or not), more equality before the law, and more opportunities for marginalized individuals and groups to see their concerns represented and have their grievances heard and addressed. These hopes have not been confirmed, or at least, they have not been confirmed evenly.

Many obvious advances were made in Europe and the United States in the past decades in terms of a more wide-spread public acknowledgement of, critical engagement with, and willingness to address sexism, homophobia, and other forms of gender- and sexuality-based violence. There were also obvious advances in terms of a codification of changing popular opinions about gender and LGBTQIA*

issues in the form of anti-discrimination laws, policies, and regulations, whether on the level of state institutions, in the private sector, or in civil society. At the same time, severe backlashes to these changes have affected narratives surrounding and policies addressing these populations. The extent of these backlashes and the resulting precarity of social advances become painfully obvious when we consider how quickly a change of government can lead to the reversal of laws protecting reproductive rights. Two such prominent examples of the past two years are the controversial 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling further restricting the already limited access to abortion in Poland and the 2022 Supreme Court decision to strike down *Roe v. Wade* in the United States. It is been terrifyingly alarming to witness how readily states abandon institutions, systems, and actions put in place to protect marginalized groups from harm for the sake of “public good” in times of crisis, as has been seen in many countries’ neglect of at-risk populations, children, and parents of young children during the COVID pandemic, to see just how fragile such political advances can be. The last few months have proven as much.

Between the war in Ukraine, the food, energy, and refugee crises it has produced in Europe in addition to multiple other, already existing food, energy, and refugee crises in the world, escalating climate catastrophe, the global health emergencies and economic strife resulting from the ongoing COVID pandemic, the world looks different now than it did a year ago when our contributors submitted their first drafts of the articles included in this special issue of *gender forum*, or even five month ago, when they submitted their first round of revisions. From our specific perspective as European scholars of American Studies, the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States and the impact this U.S. Supreme Court decision may have on other laws in the country, including legislation that guarantees the availability of contraceptives, science-based sex education, marriage equality, or trans people’s access to medical care, felt like another major shift. Reconsidering the submissions we invited for this issue so many month ago now, it really seems as if some of the dystopian visions discussed by the authors in this issue have moved, as the popular meme suggests, from the fantasy and science fiction sections in the bookstores and libraries of the West to the current events section. Acknowledging the losses and challenges that the events of the last year have caused, especially for populations made vulnerable to crisis by systems of oppression and exploitation, we cannot help but notice that some of the analyses offered in this issue resonate differently now than when they were first conceptualized and submitted, just as the context in which they are being read continues to change as current events and crises are unfolding.

Michaela Keck's article, "Women's Complicity, Resistance, and Moral Agency: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*," examines women's complicity and the limits of agency under oppression described in Atwood's two novels. Keck points to the contradictory and contingent nature of acts of resistance and complicity under patriarchy, and suggests a move away from prescriptive notions of how victims of oppression should react to their dehumanization. Whereas Keck addresses female subjects' relationship with a violent state, Sladja Blazan's analysis of hyperempathy in her article "'Something Beyond Pain': Race, Gender, and Hyperempathy in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*" discusses the extent to which a heightened form of empathy troubles the very notion of subjectivity in a dystopian landscape where state violence has been replaced with a day-to-day struggle for survival in the absence of a recognizable state. This rethinking of empathy by way of feminism and critical race approaches, Blazan suggests, enables a broader reconsideration of the "violence of liberal conceptions of the human under racial capitalism" (34).

The two 1990s cyberpunk novels analyzed by Tram Nguyen in "Feminist Memorializations in Marge Piercy and Rafael Carter" examine the complicity of technology in gender oppression and state violence by way of (constructed) collective memory and (selective) memorialization. Nguyen shows how both Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* and Rafael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* recast private memory practices, as opposed to state-funded memorialization, as means of resisting corporate and patriarchal oppression. Finally, Stina Novak and Corina Wieser-Cox's examination of a recent *Netflix* adaptation of a science fantasy comic book series in "'This is the World We Made': Queer Allegory, Neo-Colonial Militarization and Scientific Ethics in *The Old Guard* (2020)" argues that the movie replaces the "bury-your-gays" trope with a plot of queer immortality and revenge as a means of challenging conventional representations of queerness in mainstream action cinema and in order to offer a queer feminist critique of neocolonialism, militarism, and scientific ethics. As Novak and Wieser-Cox indicate, this critique is complicated by the movie's genre-typical depiction and justification of extreme violence.

Three of the articles featured in this issue (those by Keck, Blazan, and Nguyen) offer a new reading of dystopian texts first published in the 1980s and 1990s. In some way, this points to a rekindled academic interest in works produced during the last two decades of the twentieth century reflective of a recent popular turn toward the 1980s and early 1990s, visible in fashion and music (see bucket hats, chokers, and oversized jeans, as well as the 1990s dance revival of Beyoncé's latest "Break my Soul" or the Dua Lipa and Elton John collab on "Cold Heart")

as well as in nostalgic TV and film returns to content and visualities associated with these decades (see TV series such as *Glow*, *Stranger Things*, and *Bel-Air*, or movies such as *Top Gun*, *Mid90s*, and *Wonder Woman 1984*). The feminist cultural output of those years, including its dystopic visions, has been as influential as it has been contested, which is why we are glad to feature articles that provide new perspectives on some of the key texts of feminist speculative fiction at a moment when these texts seem to speak to us in new ways. This being said, we are equally grateful for the one contribution in this issue that—rather than re-reading a work that has been discussed by scholars for over two decades—analyses a recent movie that revises a genre that became increasingly popular during the 1980s and 1990s: the Hollywood action film.

Before we conclude by suggesting a few ways in which the essays collected in this special issue resonate for us with this current historical and cultural moment, we would like to take a moment to consider the relationship between violence and the state. Western thought has long operated under the assumption that political rule is closely linked to the power to use or threaten violence, whether the violence in question is considered legitimate or not. Indeed, the modern state is often conceived, as Max Weber famously writes in response to thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, as “that human community [*gemeinschaft* in the sense of social and political association] which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory” (310-11; emphasis in original). Alongside Weber, political thinkers/collectives such as Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, The Combahee River Collective, Zygmund Bauman, or Judith Butler have produced different accounts of situations and constellations in which the state’s use of physical violence against its citizens or against non-citizens must be considered illegitimate or at least highly questionable. Alternatively, political thinkers such as John Locke, Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir, Angela Davis, Michael Walzer, or more recently Andreas Malm have also discussed situations and constellations in which people’s violent resistance against an oppressive state and its institutions might be viewed as justified. Relatedly, scholars interested in (state) violence have commented on the social, political, and cultural processes by which certain kinds of violence are made (to appear) legitimate in general or justified when enacted against certain kinds of people, while also reflecting on the limitations imposed on debates about legitimate (state) violence, when non-physical forms of violence are excluded from the discussion.

One theory of violence that may be relevant in this context is Johan Galtung’s systematic of violence, proposed in his influential essay

“Cultural Violence” (1990). Not only does Galtung’s systematic offer pertinent cues for the discussion of representation of violence in literature and other media, it also speaks to debates about the role of literature and media in relation to (state) violence more broadly, not least because it was also formulated and developed during the 1980s and 1990s when television changed the ways in which we experience real-life violence (cf. Baudrillard’s critique of the news coverage on the first Gulf War). Coming from the field of peace studies, Galtung sought to define peace in more complex terms than as the absence of war and violence in more complex terms than as the type of physical injury inflicted against bodies. Framing violence as “avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to *life*” (292, emphasis in original), Galtung distinguishes “act[s] of direct violence” such as killing, maiming, desocialization, detention, or expulsion, from “fact[s] of structural violence” (292) such as exploitation, social segmentation or fragmentation, and marginalization. Exploring what he describes as “invariant[s]” or “permanence[s]” of “cultural violence” (294), he pointed towards “those aspects of culture [...] that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence” by making them “look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong” (291). Of course, invariability and permanence are relative here. The permanences of cultural violence can change, have changed, and continue to change as cultures change over time. They can also change rapidly as a result of extreme events or crises. In the current historical moment, we see a mixture of both types of cultural change: the gradual, almost imperceptible shifts that continually stretch the boundaries of what is viewed as acceptable or defensible violence, and the rapid, shocking shifts (narrated for example as a turning point in history, a “*Zeitenwende*”¹) that split societies between those who quickly embrace the new “normal,” those who take some time to adjust, and those who continue to actively resist it. The materials discussed by our authors in this issue also address these different types of cultural change, as they examine representations of (dystopian) societies in which disturbing forms of direct violence and pervasive forms of structural violence have become normalized, but in which some acts and structures—often through some extreme event, a gradual learning process, or an otherwise induced change of awareness on the part of the protagonist(s)—suddenly become recognizable again as violent and/or illegitimate.

In ways that resonate with more recent theorizations of violence from the field of gender and queer studies, broadly defined, Galtung suggests that cultural violence operates in and through six cultural domains:

¹ Term used by German chancellor Olaf Scholz in a speech on February 27, 2022, in which he announced the German military reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, and formal science. Cultural violence works, he notes, by “changing the moral color of an act” or by “making reality opaque” (292). Feminist thinkers and scholars of gender and queer studies, too, have theorized such processes of moralization and obfuscation. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, or Sara Ahmed, for instance, explain how ways of knowing and feeling are employed to turn certain behaviors or ways of being into alleged “transgressions” that are supposedly “deserving” of punishment, while at the same time obscuring the violence of everyday acts of gender policing and straightening by presenting them either as necessary for maintaining the “natural” order of things, or by hiding the fact that such violent mechanisms of control exist in the first place. As Sanna Karhu notes, Judith Butler herself describes her theory of gender as one that should be thought of “explicitly in terms of the questions of violence” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 207; qtd. in Karhu 827), by which Butler means “the violence performed by gender norms, that is, the forceful division of bodies as either male or female within the discourse of normative heterosexuality” (Karhu 827). While states do not always actively engage in the enforcement of a binary sex-gender-system and heteronormativity through acts of direct violence, they often do so indirectly through laws and institutions, or by supporting certain religious practices, ideologies, forms of language, types of art, kinds of science, and, one might add, economic systems, rather than others. Or to borrow from Judith Butler’s more recent work on gender and non-/violence, states frequently engage in acts of “normative violence” (Butler, “Preface” xx) that can be considered acts of “gender violence” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 6), or cast acts of resistance against such violence as violent (cf. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*). The analyses collected in this issue as well as the previous one take note of such normative acts of gender violence as well as of violent acts of (gendered) resistance against the cultural norms these normative acts of gender violence seek to establish.

It is interesting to note how often works of speculative fiction have been invoked in recent years in various arenas of political engagement, likely because of the sometimes facile analogies they offer to people everywhere on the political spectrum who see rights rescinded or threatened that they considered irrevocable. Protesters in the United States have been wearing dresses reminiscent of the uniforms worn by the handmaids in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* during court hearings for example. Simultaneously, internet users have been debating, whether Atwood’s reproductive dystopia and its popular TV adaptation are in fact the best cultural texts to evoke in connection to the political struggle for reproductive justice in the United States. Some of these critics of the *Handmaid* references suggest that Octavia Butler’s works

may be better suited to explain the current political and cultural moment because they engage class-based and racist violence more explicitly than Atwood's works. In this context, white feminists in particular may find it productive to consider Michaela Keck's discussion of the ways in which privileged women can become implicated in and complicity with patriarchal structures that empower men and certain women to enact direct and symbolic violence against other women. Alternatively, some readers may find it useful to engage with Sladja Blazan's discussion of the radical notion of empathy proposed by Octavia Butler, which—if understood as an ethics and as a practice—points to possible models of relating to others in times of crisis, models that encourage us to think critically about the potential benefits as well as the risks of being in close proximity to each other, whether physically or emotionally. For other readers, revisiting Marge Piercy and Rafael Carter's imagined worlds may offer the opportunity to think about the ways in which contested collective memories of the past are deployed in military conflicts and subsequent projects of social reconstruction in order to justify acts of direct and structural violence. Nguyen's article may also be of interest to those thinking about the important role that the media and communication technologies more generally can come to play in such state-sanctioned processes of memorialization. Lastly, a queer reading of a movie such as *The Old Guard* may point to some of the gender scripts as well as to some of the gendered scripts of violence and citizenship that are activated in military conflicts and neocolonial projects backed by corporatized science, scripts that can be both harmful and emancipatory for disenfranchised groups.

Taken together, the analyses featured in the articles of this issue, along with the ones featured in part one of the double issue, highlight some of the conceptual and ethical complexities that arise when one considers issues of gender and sexuality in relation to violent states, violent institutions, violent communities, and violent individuals, or—alternatively—in relation to states, institutions, communities, and individuals that remain nonviolent in the face of violence, conflict, or crisis. The essays collected here can only begin to explore these complexities. Still, what they show is that cultural violence studies and gender and queer studies have much to say to one another, as do cultural violence studies and the study of gender and sexuality in speculative fiction. There is an obvious fascination in the Western popular imagination with speculative depictions of state violence as well as with speculative depictions of violent societies in the absence of state control, whether the violence enacted is gender violence, racist violence, neocolonial violence, ecological violence, or other kinds of violence. There is also an obvious fascination with speculative representations of struggles of resistance

against oppressive systems, whether these representations take the form of narratives of heroic individualism or narratives of collective action. The resulting works challenge idealized notions of modern nation states as nonviolent political formations and about the legitimacy of state violence, drawing attention to the naturalized forms of direct, structural, and cultural violence states employ to maintain order as well as to the violence they employ to maintain a social order marked by inequality and injustice. It is this uneasy wavering between representations of imaginary forms of (state) violence and representations of current or historical realities of (state) violence in fictionalized form that makes speculative fiction across media both timeless and always potentially timely. We hope that this special issue can speak to some of the very timely questions surrounding matters of gender, violence, and the state and in doing so join a conversation that must be ongoing.

We hope that both issues of *gender forum* dedicated to “Gender, Violence, and the State in Contemporary Speculative Fiction” offer not just new insights into the field, but are in productive conversation with one another. Our readers will be the judges of that and we thank each and every one of you for your intellectual engagement with and critique of the ideas and theories presented here. We are also very grateful to all the authors, blind peer-reviewers, and members of the editorial team of *gender forum* who have made this double issue happen during a period that was and to many continues to be very difficult. As many of us involved in finalizing the issue now embark on our summer break, we wish all of us and our readers the time and mental space to take a break and, if this issue has sparked your interest, to engage with and enjoy more works of speculative fiction in more forms and from many more time periods and places than could be covered here. There is so much more out there to be explored. We hope you are in a place to do so.

Judith Rauscher and Marta Usiekiewicz

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Women's Complicity, Resistance, and Moral Agency: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*

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Abstract

This article explores women's complicity in and resistance against Gilead's totalitarian patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019). It approaches complicity from a broader theoretical perspective, according to which individuals cannot escape being complicit with the political system in which they live since they are inextricably implicated in a web of social interactions and structural relations. Furthermore, it understands complicity as also always shaped by an individual's active role in upholding the given socio-political structures, a form of complicity that is not only tied to one's self-understanding but also to the social roles and scripts available in society. Specifically, the article parses the variegated positions of power and/or powerlessness that grant and/or deny Atwood's female protagonists different privileges and powers, which make possible varying degrees and kinds of complicity in and resistance against patriarchal oppression. Rather than evaluating the female characters' guilt in normative, i.e. legal and moral terms, the focus lies on the women's entanglements in Gilead's dehumanization of and violence against women. I argue that the acts of complicity and resistance of Atwood's protagonists are not only contingent on their specific situatedness but also ambiguous, contradictory, and, at times, strategic. Because Atwood's women characters repeatedly raise the question of moral responsibility, in the end, I also attend to the question of whether the novels provide us with a viable direction regarding questions of moral agency in the context of women's violation and subjugation by the state of Gilead.

Introduction

More than three decades after its publication, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has lost none of its poignancy in addressing violence against women, whether political, physical, sexual, or epistemological. With the exception of the "Historical Notes," the novel is told from the perspective of Offred, who finds herself among those women whose national duty it is to breed children for the state of Gilead. Her story thus discursively relates to a long history of state-organized domination and exploitation of women in North America from colonial times to slavery and to the present. At the same time, her tale provides a haunting testimony to women's complicity in and resistance to the coercive abuses of an authoritarian regime, not least by Offred herself. Other women characters openly collaborate with Gilead's theocratic rule by devising its misogynist ideology (Serena Joy) and enforcing it (Aunt Lydia), if necessary, with brute force. Or so it seems.

Atwood's sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), reveals that Aunt Lydia's ostensible zealotry is a carefully put-on act of loyalty that masks her secret activities to bring about Gilead's downfall. Notwithstanding the vastly different social positions of Offred and Aunt Lydia, the two women's stories share a concern with their own compliant roles while also seeking to repudiate Gilead's official justifications of systemic violence. Unlike *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred's story subsumes the experiences of other women, *The Testaments* places the "eyewitness narratives" (Howells 185) of Agnes and Nicole alongside that of Aunt Lydia and, thus, juxtaposes multiple voices and perspectives located in differing positions within—and also outside of—Gilead's social hierarchy. Read together, both novels explore various forms of women's complicity in and resistance against systemic violence. Furthermore, Atwood's classic feminist dystopia and its equally dystopic sequel invite us to ponder what we would do if we were in the protagonists' place and ask us to reflect on the characters' actions and reactions to Gilead's authoritarian state, whose "dynamics of domination" (Glasberg 682) complicate any clear-cut distinctions between "victim" and "perpetrator."¹

This analysis assumes that while individuals cannot escape being complicit with the political system in which they live since they are embedded in a web of social interaction and structural relations,

¹ Ronald P. Glasberg interrelates the testimonies of concentration camp survivors in Nazi Germany (Primo Levi) and Stalin's Soviet Union (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) with Atwood's dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. He defines domination as "the physical and spiritual violation of humanity" (679), contending that in Gilead "misogyny has a crucial role" alongside the camp systems' embrace of "thinghood" and the avoidance of assuming "personal responsibility" (682).

individuals also play an active role in upholding the given socio-political structures. Based on this understanding, it examines women's complicity and resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. Specifically, it parses some of the variegated positions which grant—or deny—Atwood's protagonists different privileges and powers, at the same time as these positions make possible various degrees and kinds of complicity as well as resistance. Rather than aiming to determine the characters' guilt in normative, i.e. legal and moral terms, this contribution focuses on exploring the characters' entanglements in Gilead's dehumanization of and violence against women. However, because Atwood's protagonists repeatedly raise the question of moral responsibility—their own and that of society in general—I also attend to the question of whether the novels provide us with a viable direction regarding moral agency at the end of this article. I argue that the complicity and resistance of Atwood's female characters, which encompass Offred's rather passive behavior as a representative of “the ordinary woman” and Aunt Lydia's active membership in the political elite, are not only contingent on their specific situatedness and self-identification, but also ambiguous, contradictory, and, at times, strategic.

Critical Perspectives on Atwood's Feminist Dystopias, Complicity, and Resistance

Before the publication of *The Testaments*, scholars above all denounced Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia's collaboration with Gilead's subjugation of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. There was and still is, however, disagreement about the degree to which the Aunts and Commanders' Wives wield power and whether the Aunts are, in fact, subordinated to the male ruling class.² Indeed, Aunt Lydia's double agency in Atwood's sequel prompts a reconsideration of her character and will, no doubt, generate a renewed debate about her dual role. The critical discussion about Offred's complicity and resistance, by contrast, is likely to continue alongside the exploration of the roles of Agnes, Becka, and Nicole.

Generally, scholars discussing Offred can be divided into those who consider her complicit with Gilead's theocracy and those who emphasize her subversive acts. Notably, the latter branch of scholarship dominates our understanding of Offred's narrative as an effective, even political act of female resistance against Gilead and its erasure of individual expression, identity, memory, and history, a reading which commonly also points to the transgressive aspects inherent in the “Historical

² Contrary to most other scholars, Tara J. Johnson argues that the Aunts “have as much if not more power as the Commanders have” (68).

Notes.”³ Even those scholars who carefully trace the contradictory aspects in Offred’s story and behavior, such as her alternating complacent passivity and sharp-witted self-reflection, tend to stress the subversive dimensions of her tale and, thus, ultimately highlight her acts of resistance.⁴ Doing so, however, risks turning a blind eye to Offred’s own role as a handmaid in the sense of being complicit in the system’s domination of women, a question raised not least by the novel’s own ambiguous title—*The Handmaid’s Tale*. In fact, Martha Mamozai criticized already in 1990 the continuing problematic scholarly and feminist tendency to uphold and even celebrate the innocent victim status of female figures like Offred instead of also shedding light on her complicity with the regime (cf. 17).⁵ According to Mamozai, the investigation of women’s contradictory participation in a male-dominated system constitutes a necessary counterpoint to the all-too-widespread idea of “the female victim” as opposed to “the male aggressor” (cf. 14-15). Along these lines, Shirley Neuman urged in her 2006 article to “be wary [...] of the impulse to make an unmitigated heroine of the novel’s Offred” (863).

So far, only a few scholars have focused on both Offred’s complicity in and her resistance to Gilead’s authoritarian patriarchy. While scholars who concentrate on issues of race, class, and gender are divided about the question of her white privilege,⁶ those who foreground the novel’s

³ Examples of this position are the studies by Linda Kauffman, Michael Foley, Hilde Staels, or David Hogsette.

⁴ Coral Ann Howells, Shirley Neuman, or Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk read *The Handmaid’s Tale* as Offred’s political and feminist coming-of-age despite her passivity. The surfacing of a top secret file in *The Testaments*, which reveals that Offred/June has become a highly sought-after member of the resistance movement in Canada, whom Gilead has already tried to eliminate twice (cf. *TT* 330), can be seen as affirming this interpretation.

⁵ With the serial adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by the streaming service Hulu, this trend continues unabated. An Internet search shows that the TV series has inspired numerous student essays, bachelor and master theses which define the relationship between Offred and the Commander from a predominantly psychological and medical perspective as a case of Stockholm syndrome. An engagement with Offred’s own complicity in Gilead’s theocracy, it seems, is further from readers’ and audiences’ minds than ever.

⁶ Ben Merriman views Offred as an “improbable but extremely sympathetic” figure with which the novel glosses over the “pernicious character of White privilege” (45); whereas Danita J. Dodson and Zahra Sadeghi and Narges Mirzapour insist on the important dialogic and discursive interconnections between Offred’s marginalization and the brainwashing, silencing, and sexual exploitation of enslaved and colonized Black women and women of color (cf. Dodson 72-80; Sadeghi and Mirzapour 7-8).

dystopian aspects concur that Offred acquiesces to and even actively cooperates with Gilead's patriarchy, an attitude which they see paralleled by the post-Gileadan male academics' appropriation of her story. However, most of these studies share the implicit assumption that complicity and resistance are clearly distinguishable opposites: either one is complicit, or one is not. As a result, they produce remarkably linear readings of Offred's increasing enmeshment in Gilead's totalitarian structures. Stillman and Johnson reason that she "has no modes of resistance against Gilead, at least none that threaten [it] in any way" (75). Likewise, Weiss opposes Offred's complicity in "overt action against the regime" (par. 3), conceding only briefly that her acts of resistance are limited. Building on these brief remarks, this paper seeks to offer a more nuanced exploration of Offred's—and some of the other female protagonists'—participation in and resistance to Gilead's repressive system by applying a more theoretically refined understanding of women's complicity in state violence and repression.

Both Christopher Kutz and Giuliana Monteverde assert that the question of complicity always requires asking: complicit with whom or with what? (cf. Kutz 138; cf. Monteverde 99). But where Kutz aims to establish a moral framework in order to gauge an individual's accountability for collective action, Monteverde's interest is directed at exploring and critiquing everyday practices in American popular culture with which feminism, in all its diverse manifestations, contributes the perpetuation of oppressive patterns and ideologies among different social groups of women. In doing so, she continues as well as innovates the important work begun by Black and white third-wave feminists in the 1990s, who brought to critical attention female complicity in a male-dominated system and, furthermore, exposed white women's role in upholding hegemonic power structures without, however, actually theorizing complicity.⁷ By contrast, Monteverde puts forth a differentiated feminist notion of complicity, which considers the contexts and intersectional positions of women and acknowledges that women can be oppressors and oppressed at the same time (cf. 103).

⁷ Black, queer, and working class women's critiques of the first and second feminist waves, together with the successful establishment of the concept of intersectionality, prompted questions of white women's complicity by scholars and feminist critics like Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby, Kimberlé Crenshaw, or Martha Mamozai to name a few. Since then, scholars like Tania Modleski, Angela McRobbie, or Giuliana Monteverde have continued to examine white postfeminist entanglements in hegemonic patriarchal structures.

Such an approach likewise undergirds critical perspectives on complicity from the social and political sciences. Mihaela Mihai proposes that one way of attaining more nuanced insights regarding individuals' participation in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes is to view the relation between complicity and resistance as "a continuum of positions individuals can occupy" (Mihai n. p.). The specific position of an individual, according to Mihai, is contingent upon two aspects: firstly, the intersectional positionality of an individual, i.e. one's situatedness, which depends on gender, race, class, age, religion, and other relevant social categories that constrain, regulate, and/or enable individuals; and, secondly, the temporality of this position, which hinges on the interrelation of an individual's memory, hope, and future imagination. In short, complicity is "always enmeshed in complex social relations and influenced—though not fully determined—by one's situatedness within those relations, as well as the temporal horizons opened by that location" (Mihai n. p.). This understanding unfolds a "myriad of positions one can occupy on a temporally dynamic continuum between complicity and resistance" (Mihai n. p.). Even if this complex notion of a continuum of complicity cannot grasp the "diffuse" and "unconscious" patterns of complicity or the "mixed motives" (Mihai n. p.) of human beings in their entirety, specifically under undemocratic political conditions, it still provides a model that is sensitive to the contexts that shape the complicit acts—including the inaction—of an individual as well as their behavior. Moreover, conceiving of complicity and resistance in terms of a dynamic continuum with multiple positions allows us to explore the "gray areas": "just as there is no perfectly unencumbered agency, no order is ever so totalising as to annihilate all resistance" (Mihai n. p.).

According to Charlotte Knowles, there is one crucial and ambiguous aspect which these models fail to capture, namely women's active roles "in accepting and even embracing their own unfreedom" (251).⁸ Taking her cue from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Knowles reminds us that a thorough contextual and intersectional approach alone fails to account for the phenomenon that women often actively reinforce their own oppression, and by implication, that of other women.⁹ While Beauvoir suggests that, in part, social privileges and material rewards

⁸ In *Our Treacherous Hearts: Why Women Let Men Get Their Way* (1992), Rosalind Coward already points to women's contradictory and "hidden complicity" (10) in upholding traditional social structures and expectations regarding family, motherhood, women's work, and sexuality, which she sees as resulting from a combination of systemic constraints, financial and emotional dependencies, as well as deep-seated feminine self-identifications.

⁹ Beauvoir's implicitly white perspective on gender oppression has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge intersectional differences among women, see Sabine Broeck, pp. 167-84; or Kathryn Gines, pp. 251-73.

motivate women to embrace instances of other women's subjugation, philosopher Susan James "emphasizes the dependent situation of women as the primary cause of their complicity" (Knowles 243). Even so, Beauvoir points to one of the major contradictions with which any exploration of women's compliant behavior inevitably has to grapple, namely that women, even if they have a choice—however slight—may not automatically "gravitate toward" (Knowles 251) resistance. Here, Knowles points to the self-understanding women develop for themselves and their agency in relation to the dominant and, for women more so than for men, limited and limiting social roles and scripts available to them. It is these social roles and scripts, however constraining and misleading, to which women tend to resort when resistance requires a radical revision of who they think they are and what capacities they believe they possess (cf. Knowles 249-51). When seen from the dual perspective of structural and active complicity, Knowles concludes, women's perpetuation of patriarchal hegemony becomes an "everyday phenomenon" (255), according to which, more often than not, women "take their social roles as essentially binding" (Knowles 254). The ambiguity of women's complicity can also be discerned in Atwood's female protagonists in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*.

Not Without Our Handmaids and Aunts: Gilead's Special Women's Sphere

Atwood's Gilead constitutes a totalitarian state whose sexist patriarchy reduces women to their reproductive function and their supposedly "natural" domestic and religious calling.¹⁰ Yet the testimonies from *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* complicate the idea that women in Gilead are solely the victims of its patriarchy, as one of the narrators of the frame narrative, Professor Pieixoto, indicates in the "Historical Notes" (cf. *HT* 317-22). Despite their drastically curtailed rights, the female protagonists participate, passively as well as actively, and from differing positions of power and powerlessness, in the un/making of the state that oppresses them.

With Offred and Aunt Lydia, Atwood creates two first-generation Gileadan women whose positions within the system's "separate female

¹⁰ Atwood constructs Gilead's patriarchy in a palimpsestic manner, invoking cross-cultural as well as anachronistic policies of denying women their rights. For example, the idea of limiting women to reproduction, domesticity, and morals invokes the "three Ks of 'Kinder, Küche, Kirche' (children, kitchen, church)" (Krimmer 8) of the Third Reich. Aunt Lydia's statement that women in Gilead are "given freedom from" (*HT* 34) is likewise reminiscent of Nazi Germany's call for the "emancipation of woman from emancipation" (Krimmer 8).

sphere" (TT 176) could not be more different. As a fertile white woman, Offred belongs to the lower-ranked breeders or in official parlance Handmaids, whereas Aunt Lydia, an older white woman and former judge, who has outwardly proven her loyalty to the state, rules and controls Gilead's female sphere as the state's most powerful Founding Aunt. Notwithstanding their vastly disparate ranks and powers, their eyewitness accounts oscillate between strategies of defense, the admission of guilt, and mental resistance (with the important difference that Aunt Lydia also actively resists Gilead's regime, albeit in a clandestine manner). Moreover, their narratives show ruptures that indicate an awareness of their complicity, which haunts them no less than their traumatic experiences. Placing past and present events alongside each other allows them to reflect on themselves, the ways in which they reconstruct their past in the present, as well as their cooperation with Gilead.¹¹

Offred, the Handmaid: One of Many

From the beginning, Offred leaves no doubt that her aim is "to last" (HT 17), even if survival comes at the price of her cooperation with the abhorred authoritarian patriarchy. Central to her survival is what Offred calls her "choice" of being a Handmaid, which places her among those women who participate in Gilead's religiously-sanctioned rape and its ritual performance by its male ruling elite, the Commanders, in the presence of their Wives. To talk about an active "choice" in a situation in which all available alternatives to the ritualized rape as a Handmaid point toward death suggests that there is, in fact, no choice at all: either she refuses and is sent directly to work in contaminated territories as an Unwoman, where sickness and death await; or she obeys the Commander's wife and consents to secret sex with another man to finally become pregnant, which also poses the risk of death by punishment in case of her discovery; or, like the openly rebellious Moira, she subjects herself to torture before she is forced into a different form of rape as a prostitute at Jezebel's. At the same time, her remark about a "choice" suggests that Offred reconciles herself to her new role as a Handmaid,

¹¹ Atwood complicates our reading of the novels by adding "The Historical Notes" and *The Thirteenth Symposium*, which reveal that the Professors Pieixoto and Wade have "arranged" (HT 320) the stories "in an order that made approximate narrative sense" (TT 414) to them as male historians. While their interventions certainly represent a form of epistemological violence, Atwood also parodies their academic work and perspective by exposing their blind spots regarding gender, power, and violence.

and it is this reconciliation to her situation which enmeshes her in an intricate web of complicity in her own and other women's oppression.

At first, Offred tries to resist her participation in the enforced ritual of copulation at least partly by rationalizing it as an act that impacts only her body:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I have not signed up for. (HT 105)

Offred here resorts to bodily passivity while internally revising the official ideology of the Ceremony into a form of "fucking" in which only the Commander is active. She thus tries to separate the "inter" from the "course," as it were, blending out the interpersonal dimension of the coitus and also her own part in it. Still, she acknowledges her passive participation. It may well be that it is this awareness of her own part in the act of breeding that causes her to render a somewhat restrained description of the Commander: she emphasizes her own "complicated" (HT 68) feelings towards him, wonders whether "there is no end to his disguises, of benevolence" (HT 98) and imagines what it would be like to "spit" down on him from her window or "hit" him with "something" (HT 67). Hence, rather than flatly demonizing him, Offred emphasizes her internal resistance against Gilead's misogynist patriarchy and its male ruling class.¹² However, her strategy falls apart once the Commander asks her to meet him on the sly in his study. Their relationship takes on an interpersonal dimension so that Offred can no longer maintain the separation between body and mind. Apart from playing scrabble and conversing together, Offred suddenly finds herself in a "conspiracy" (HT 149) *with* the Commander, which redefines the enforced ritual in terms of desire rather than coercion—even though their understanding of desire differs greatly.

¹² Atwood theorizes victimhood in her four "basic victim positions" in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). Although these positions are useful for thinking about female complicity, I nevertheless see the danger that they provide too "linear" (*Survival* 39) a framework, as Atwood herself admits, and a framework that is also prescriptive. While I consider Michael Foley's application of Atwood's "basic victim positions" to *The Handmaid's Tale* as a successful demonstration of the "dynamic complexity" of the "spectrum of mental responses [by the female characters] in the face of traditionalist oppression" (57), this study wants to remind us of the multidimensional and dynamic entanglements of Atwood's protagonists *with* the patriarchal structures.

At this moment, a significant rupture occurs in Offred's narrative. She swerves from her bewilderment at this unexpected development—"one of the most bizarre things that's happened to me, ever" (*HT* 154)—to her memory of an interview with the mistress of a concentration camp commandant of the Third Reich. She remembers particularly the mistress's denial of the Jewish genocide, her lover's role in the killings and by implication her own: "She did not believe he was a monster. He was not a monster, to her. [...] She believed in decency, she was nice to the Jewish maid [...]" (*HT* 155-56). Yet "[s]everal days after this interview with her was filmed, she killed herself" (*HT* 156). Whether that was because of her terminal illness or out of guilt, Offred does not say. Neither does she explain how her past memory of the commandant's mistress in Nazi Germany relates to herself, the Commander's mistress in Gilead. Although the analogy is open for manifold interpretations, what the two allegedly apolitical "mistresses" share is their deep embeddedness in the society they inhabit, including its everyday life and pleasures as well as its violence and brutal killings.¹³ Even more so, both occupy a position of intimacy with the powerful male elite and, therefore, power itself. Offred acknowledges these parallels only indirectly in that she admits her own enjoyment of wielding a secret power over Serena Joy (cf. *HT* 171) and that, to her, the Commander is "not a monster" either, but a man with "a little belly" and "[w]isps of hair" (*HT* 267). Later, when she reflects on the formerly democratic media's interest in the glamorous lives of celebrities rather than those of everyday people like herself, she states: "[w]e lived in the gaps between the stories" (*HT* 67). The gaps in her own testimony likewise invite us to ponder her omissions. How do the roles of everyday women like Offred's add up to Gilead's regime of terror?

Offred—contrary to the commandant's mistress—does not deny Gilead's atrocities against other women, racial and ethnic groups. She takes note of the transports of Black men and women into segregated enclosures and the expulsion and killing of Jewish Americans. Only vaguely does she distinguish between the official news and her own suspicions about what is really going on.¹⁴ These references, when compared to such personal experiences as being confronted with the publicly displayed executions, Moira's torture, or her own participation in the collective killings, take up relatively little room. Indeed, Offred includes

¹³ According to Mihaela Frunză and Iulia Grad, at stake here is also what Hannah Arendt calls "the banality of evil," i.e. the conspicuous absence of a demoniacal villain or tragic hero. In "the dystopian world of Gilead, nobody has the monopoly on evil" since "[e]ach character is simply too banal for that" (197).

¹⁴ Offred voices her doubt about Black resettlement thus: "Lord knows what they're supposed to do, once they get there. Farm is the theory" (*HT* 94); and she adds to the supposedly voluntary emigration of Jewish Americans: "if you can believe the news" (*HT* 211).

the Women Salvagings in her story, indicating that she participated more than once: "I've seen it before, [...] I don't want to see it any more. I look at the grass instead. I describe the rope" (*HT* 288).¹⁵ In her tale, Offred acknowledges her "consent" and "complicity in the death of [Ofcharles]" (*HT* 288) but remains silent about what lies behind her preference not to "see." By contrast, she comments that her own "assent" (*HT* 290) to the Particution, a collective tearing apart of three male members of the resistance alive, leaves her "sick" with pain and brutalized: "[...] I'm hungry. This is monstrous" (*HT* 293).¹⁶

Contrary to Professor Pieixoto's gendered historical record, which features Offred as "one of many" who "must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history in which she was a part" (*HT* 317) as opposed to the detailed investigation into the individual lives of the Commanders Waterford and Judd, her own record insists on her personal implication in Gilead's crimes. I use implication for her story rather than complicity, because although Offred admits that she has reconciled herself to her position as a Handmaid and actively brought about another Handmaid's death, she also counters these confessions. Rather, she presents her own role as a mixture of consenting, actively participating, but also suffering from being dehumanized by the regime through rituals such as the Particution. Additionally, Offred reinforces her subjugation by seeking to redefine Gilead's enforced sexual relations as well as her role as the Commander's mistress by embracing her relationship with Nick as a love affair. Indeed, I want to suggest that Offred's relationship with Nick demonstrates the manifold contradictions inherent in her complicity, showing her as actively embracing her "unfreedom," as Knowles calls it, at the same time as she remains inextricably enmeshed in Gilead's perverted system of sexual exploitation.

Contrary to her relationship with the Commander, Offred shows some degree of self-determination when she is with Nick: "I went [...] on my own [...]. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely" (*HT* 280). Her agency even fills her with some "pride" (*HT* 283) and, contrary to her sexual passivity with the Commander and her other acts of complicity, now she wants to "see" the object of her desire, Nick, "up close" (*HT*

¹⁵ To Mohr, the Salvagings are a "sarcastic word play on salvaging and savage" and the Particutions an "apt amalgam of participation and execution" (261).

¹⁶ When, upon her arrival in Gilead, Offred's daughter Nicole becomes an unwitting viewer of the spectacle of the Particution, she expresses her shock at the Handmaids' enthusiastic participation in the collective killings: "It was gruesome; it was terrifying. It added a whole new dimension to my picture of Handmaids. Maybe my mother had been like that, I thought: feral" (*TT* 22).

281). Still, the affair results in her dependence—physically, mentally, and emotionally—so that she temporarily even forgets about her will to survive. And although she feels “ashamed” (*HT* 283) of herself for embracing her own unfreedom, she actively pursues this state of dependency. In doing so, she repeats the pattern of falling in love and subordinating herself to her lover that is also displayed in her memories of her affair and later marriage with Luke, and that is deeply ingrained in her own understanding about who she is:

Falling in love, I said. Falling into it, we all did then, one way or another. How could [the Commander] have made such light of it? [...] It was the central thing; it was the way *you understood yourself*; if it never happened to you, not ever, you would be like a mutant [...]. (*HT* 237; emphasis added)

Attempting to resist the Commander and, hence, Gilead's oppressive patriarchy, Offred here resorts to her past roles of lover and later wife, a self-identification according to which she falls in love with a man whom she desires yet to whom she also subordinates herself. Here, she follows a “limited number of scripts” of romantic love “provided in magazines, romance novels, [and] fairy tales,” as Madonne Miner has astutely observed (164).¹⁷ In fact, Offred's report imitates these scripts by providing different variations of how she fell for Nick before she admits: “It didn't happen that way either” (*HT* 275). While these scripts allow her to redefine Gilead's forced sexual relations as love, the relationship that develops remains contradictory.¹⁸

Aunt Lydia and her Pearls: Ruthless, Cunning, and With an Exaggerated Thirst for Justice

In her self-authored account, Aunt Lydia features as the larger-than-life Founding Mother and double agent who is instrumental in Gilead's rise and fall. By literally placing her story inside Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Sua Vita: A Defense of One's Life* (1865), she creates a hybrid of an autobiography and a defense, which also includes highly explosive

¹⁷ Miner reads Luke and the Commander as “twins” who “mirror one another” (160) with their chauvinist mindset and heteronormative view of the world. There is, however, an important difference in the degree to which Offred is subjugated to the two, which impacts on her degree or lack of agency. Being Luke's mistress means being dependent; being the Commander's mistress means being owned and dehumanized. A similar distinction needs to be made between Nick and the Commander, which is why I would not go as far as Neuman, for whom Offred's relationship with Nick “marks a relapse into willed ignorance” (864).

¹⁸ Other important roles for Offred's self-understanding are being a daughter, who opposes her mother's radical feminism, but also being a mother herself, a role which Gilead denies her. Redefining herself as a “lover” instead of a “breeder” can also be read as a compensation for losing her home, husband, family, and daughter.

intelligence files. Given her former profession as an American “family court judge” (TT 36), her story can also be read as a closing argument presented at her own trial in the court of public opinion with the readers as judges. In her summation, Lydia casts herself in the role of a powerful agent and morally righteous avenger in a retributive narrative that intertwines a higher form of justice with her personal revenge against Gilead’s misogynist theocracy (cf. TT 32). Even so, she concedes her entanglement in Gilead’s web of female victimization and, importantly, in the state’s perpetration of violence against women, two neglected aspects in Professor Pieixoto’s keynote at *The Thirteenth Symposium*. Although he stresses Agnes and Nicole’s important roles in Gilead’s demise, he calls them the “two young refugees” (TT 413) and speculates at length about the possible fabrication of *The Ardua Hall Holograph* and the “‘Lydia’ personage” (TT 410).

To this “Lydia personage,” who figures as a “true believer” (HT 139; 177) in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood adds several intriguing twists in *The Testaments*. Firstly, her life story reveals her as a woman of the ruling elite. As the top-ranking Aunt, she exerts more power than any other woman in Gilead, regularly has coffee with one of the most influential male leaders, Commander Judd, and tea with her fellow female Founders. Although Judd publically takes “the credit” (TT 178) for Lydia’s accomplishments, her influence reaches far into the uppermost echelons of Gilead. Being on intimate terms with the patriarchal rulers secures her “the pleasures of power” (Thompson 51) and privileges denied to the majority of women (even though hers is very different from the intimacy that Offred has with the Commander). As an Aunt, she is entitled to shape and authorize policy, law, and education—ideologies of (white) womanhood in particular—, dole out rewards and punishments, use and abuse violence, read and write, and decide over the careers, indeed over the lives and deaths, of Gilead’s citizens.¹⁹ Even more, in her position as the most powerful of the Aunts, she can—and does—extend her sway into the lives and psyches of her fellow Aunts and the Commanders so that she is deeply enmeshed in Gilead’s totalitarian system, where intrigue and mistrust reign, where one caste keeps the other in check, and where members of the same caste are expected to denounce each other. The Founding Aunts are no exception: “Despite our pretense of amity, indeed of collegiality, the underlying currents of hostility were already building. If it’s a henyard, I thought, I intend to be the alpha hen. To do that, I need

¹⁹ Her remark about “Judd’s ridiculous Certificate of Whiteness scheme had collapsed in a welter of forgeries and bribery” (TT 64) shows that she looks through Gilead’s supremacist propaganda. Otherwise, however, she turns a blind eye to matters of race and ethnicity.

to establish pecking rights over the others" (TT 177). Determined to be the one in control, she employs "[d]ivide and conquer" (TT 177) as her motto and, thus, reinforces the system's operational modes of suspicion and denunciation.

Secondly, Lydia has been brutally reeducated by Gilead's Founding Fathers, which results in a performance of loyalty that masks her double agency. Similar to Offred, Aunt Lydia's former life was that of a privileged white woman. But unlike Offred, Lydia comes from an underclass family in the criminal milieu and passionately detests her abusive father and his anti-intellectual misogyny: "I was a girl and, worse, a smarty-pants girl. Nothing for it but to wallop those pretensions out of me, with fists or boots or whatever else was to hand. [My father] got his throat cut before the triumph of Gilead, or I would have arranged to have it done for him" (TT 112). Defying her family background, she has an abortion, chooses a career over a family, overcomes all adversities through hard work, and is proud of her achievements. But like the Handmaids, she and other white, educated professional women face the "choice" of being killed or left alive after Gilead ousts the American government. And like Offred, Lydia wants to live, so she reconciles herself to her new role, "[t]hankful enough to cooperate" (TT 147). In her reflections on the dehumanization, imprisonment, and torture which precede her collaboration with the regime, she carefully juxtaposes her lack of bravery with her resolve to retaliate one day:

Did I weep? Yes: tears came out of my two visible eyes, my moist weeping human eyes. But I had a third eye, in the middle of my forehead. I could feel it: it was cold, like a stone. It did not weep: it saw. And behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it.* (TT 149; emphasis in the original)

In spite of her powerful statement of revenge, in order to stay alive, Lydia first has to join the ranks of the female founders, yet she is fully aware that her position requires a loyalty test during which she must not show any hesitation to kill her fellow prisoners.

At this point in Lydia's story, trauma, nightmare, and actual experience blur. In her recurring dream, this test of loyalty is rendered in great detail and framed in terms of justice: she dreams that she is part of a killing squad, pointing a rifle at women she knows from America and Gilead and on whom she has "passed sentence [...]. But they are all smiling. What do I see in their eyes? Fear, contempt, defiance? Pity?" (TT 169). She is both judge and judged by these women. When she pulls the trigger, she "can't breathe," "choke[s]," "fall[s]" (TT 170), and wakes up; whereas the description of her dream fills a page, her actual "ordeal" (TT 172) takes up barely a paragraph and glosses over the particulars. The

contrast between the details of her dream and the truncated actual test indicates that her sense of culpability shapes her trauma and that she downplays her role as a perpetrator of state violence. According to herself, from that moment on she delivers a performance of loyalty to the state that is beyond suspicion. Unlike Offred, who continues to remark on her guilt, shame, and experience of dehumanization, Lydia redefines her performance of loyalty as one long and arduous test in her fight against the regime until the moment of payback. Rather than emphasizing her own suffering and pain as Offred does, or reflecting on her own brutalization (Offred would have called it monstrous), Lydia presents her trauma as justifying her revenge and her emotional coldness as unshakeable resolve.

However, assimilating into Gilead's authoritarian ideology and denunciatory system, it can be argued, constitutes far less of an ordeal for Lydia than she makes us believe. In fact, this process is greatly facilitated by her self-understanding from the past:

[...] none of my college-acquired polish was of any use to me here. I needed to revert to the mulish underclass child, the determined drudge, the brainy overachiever, the strategic ladder-climber who'd got me to the social perch from which I'd just been deposed. I needed to work the angles, once I could find out what the angles were. I'd been in tight corners before. I had prevailed. *That was my story to myself.* (TT 117; emphasis added)

She resorts to the familiar script of the hard-working strategist and superior achiever, assuming the seemingly non-gendered identity that had already ensured her status as a legal authority in the patriarchal pre-Gileadan social structures. Once she has fully grasped the new regime's authoritarian and misogynist "angles," she exploits the reactionary ideology of Gilead, suggesting a separate female sphere under the strict control of the Founding Aunts, while also fortifying her control over her niche of power. Unsurprisingly, Gilead's patriarchy—embodied by Commander Judd—welcomes the idea and rewards Lydia with slightly more power than the other Aunts. Over time, she exploits Gilead's totalitarian "web of guilty complicities" (Frunză and Grad 201) to tighten her "grip over Ardua Hall" (TT 178) by collecting incriminating evidence against those surrounding her. What is more, she shows an almost boastful pride in her secret cache of "shameful information" (TT 251) and expresses unabashed enjoyment when she can pit the Aunts against each other or put pressure on Commander Judd.

However, Lydia's cooperation with Gilead's authoritarian system cannot be accounted for as a strategic performance alone. Indeed, she actively embraces the system whenever there is an occasion to avenge herself for long-held resentments and injuries according to her motto "Vengeance is mine" (TT 251). It is then that she slips into her former role

as judge, not shying away from staging a crime or inflicting terror and death either. In the absence of democratic laws and human rights, she appropriates the law of Gilead to mete out justice as she sees fit. Her repeated allusions to superhuman forces such as the Wheel of Fortune (cf. *TT* 211) or calling herself “the Recording Angel” (*TT* 277) cannot obscure her desire for revenge. She intervenes in a case reminiscent of her own history of fatherly abuse, namely Dr. Grove’s sexual abuse of Becka, and arranges his death by dismemberment. She also successfully manipulates Aunt Elizabeth to eliminate her (Lydia’s) arch-enemy Aunt Vidala. In this way, she retaliates for Vidala’s attempt to denounce and dethrone her from her power position. And when Commander Judd tries to make her the scapegoat for Agnes and Nicole’s defection, she turns the tables by insisting on her subordinate position as a woman who only ever followed his “wisest” (*TT* 391) choices. Behind her performance of loyalty, however, she hides her knowledge that—thanks to her secret documents—Judd will be held accountable as one of Gilead’s most powerful and corrupt leaders, whereas she, Lydia, can withdraw to a position of enforced compliance. Upon learning that her secret files have safely arrived in Canada, the moment of “retributive vengeance” (*TT* 317) is within reach: “I had a flashback. [...] In my brown sackcloth robe I raised the gun, aimed, shot. A bullet, or no bullet? A bullet” (*TT* 391).

Finally, Aunt Lydia’s role as double agent constitutes a twist of the original novel that brings its own problems regarding her exploitation of the very structures and ideology she aims to defeat.²⁰ Her complicity in and perpetration of Gilead’s totalitarian logic is perhaps best illuminated with the help of Becka’s “sacrifice.” By this point, Lydia’s defense of her actions no longer speaks for itself but is revised by the eyewitness accounts of Agnes and Nicole, each of whom sheds light on Becka’s death from a different perspective: Agnes, the young woman and disciple of Lydia, who is a fellow victim of Dr. Grove’s sexual abuse, gives an account of her friend’s death from her perspective as an insider to Gilead, who knows its power structures and ideology since childhood; while Nicole, the teenager from Canada, who was raised by a left-leaning couple and secret members of the resistance movement, provides her perspective as an outsider.

²⁰ Aunt Lydia belongs to a long line of powerful women in Atwood’s work. Her ambiguous role as both victim and perpetrator, as well as her involvement in the death of one of her loyal inferiors, the young Becka, shows strong parallels to Penelope’s implication in the hanging of her twelve maids in *The Penelopiad* (2005).

Contrary to Lydia's own self-aggrandizement and the fearsome and powerful reputation that she holds among the women of Gilead, Agnes and Nicole see an ordinary-looking woman with wrinkles and yellowed teeth. They soon learn, though, that Lydia's power lies in her manipulative stratagems. Looking back at their seemingly coincidental first meeting, Agnes states: "after I came to know Aunt Lydia better, I realized that luck had nothing to do with it" (*TT* 230). In fact, Lydia carefully calculated her visit to plant the idea into Agnes's mind to become an Aunt like Becka. At Ardua Hall, the two are "reeducated" by Aunt Lydia herself. She places her evidence against the regime into their hands to teach them that "[b]eneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting" (*TT* 308). Moreover, Agnes learns what it means to be an Aunt:

If I remained at Ardua Hall [...] this is what I would become. All of the secrets I had learned [...] would be mine, to use as I saw fit. All of this power. All of this potential to judge the wicked in silence, and to punish them in ways they would not be able to anticipate. All of this vengeance. (*TT* 309)

Being an Aunt, in Lydia's teaching, means wielding power with all its responsibilities and temptations. Lydia's reeducation also contains the crucial lesson of loyalty to her and Ardua Hall. Taking into account Agnes and Becka's different temperaments, self-identifications, and personal histories, Lydia carefully prepares them for their loyalty tests. She lets Agnes know that her mother is alive in Canada and counts on the young woman's "vengeful side" (*TT* 309) against Gilead so that, when the critical moment for the disclosure of Gilead's crimes arrives, she can count on Agnes's support, even if that means to leave Becka behind.

Lydia's manipulation of Becka is even more perfidious and reveals that Lydia does not hesitate to exploit the friendship and devotion among others for her own purposes. She counts particularly on Becka's sense of duty, moral righteousness, and her loving devotion to Agnes, having secretly overheard the girls' conversations and pledges of sisterly love. She also knows that Becka, against her better knowledge, has internalized many of the misogynist teachings of Gilead, including a self-destructive sense of her duties as a woman and future Aunt as epitomized in a perverted version of the biblical story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces. As the teachings of the Aunts go, the concubine herself is guilty of her rape, whereas the male perpetrators' guilt is ignored. To redeem herself, the concubine nobly sacrifices herself "to help other people" (*TT* 80). The utmost heroic act of a woman, Gilead's ideology propagates, is to sacrifice herself for the good of others. Hence, when it is time to smuggle Nicole and the incriminating documents out of the country, Lydia suggests that Nicole leaves disguised as Becka and together with Agnes according to Gilead's protocol of the Pearl Girls, while Becka stays behind and goes into hiding. To convince Becka, Lydia

expounds once again on the importance of female selflessness: “Our entire mission, not to mention the personal safety of Aunt Victoria and Nicole, depends on you [Becka]. It is a great deal of responsibility—a renewed Gilead can be possible only through you; and you would not want the others to be caught and hanged” (TT 354). Here, Lydia does not shrink from using the very ideology that she aims to overthrow while purporting to topple the oppressive regime of Gilead for the good of others and secretly plotting for personal revenge. For Becka, however, going into hiding results in her death, a consequence that Lydia, despite all her superior knowledge, does not prevent.

Becka is not given a voice in *The Testaments*. It is Nicole who mocks the official ethos of the Pearl Girls’ noble sacrifices, and Agnes also records how Nicole calls out Gilead’s “[v]ictim-blaming” (TT 327) and Aunt Lydia’s “emotional blackmail” (TT 337) of Becka. Although Becka and Agnes see through the lies about the concubine’s death for a higher good and understand her rape as a “horrible” crime which does not leave her any “choice” (TT 303) for heroics, they fail to extricate themselves from the operative maxims that serve Gilead—and Aunt Lydia—so well. Instead, it is left to the readers to make the connection between Gilead’s misogynist ideology, Aunt Lydia’s work as a double agent, and what the two young women understand as their “choices” in the system or their tests of loyalty to Aunt Lydia and the regime of Gilead.

Quo Vadis, Moral Agency?

Much more can be said about Aunt Lydia’s ambiguous, contradictory, and, at times, strategic complicity in and resistance against Gilead’s domination of women and about how these interrelated positions of complicity and resistance are transmitted to the next generation—Agnes, Becka, and their Canadian sister in the struggle, Nicole—in particular. All the women’s attempts to survive and defy their subjugation, along with that of other women, are contingent on the social hierarchies and power dynamics of Gilead (and beyond). At the same time, all the women’s backgrounds and their sense of who they are and how they self-identify shape these efforts. Offred’s tale reminds us that “the ordinary woman,” who identifies herself in apolitical terms as lover, wife, and mother, is as inextricably bound up with racial, educational, class and other privileges as she is implicated in the monstrous policies of Gilead’s misogynist totalitarianism. Aunt Lydia’s attempts at self-defense reveal that women in positions of authority can simultaneously be victims and perpetrators; it also shows that their resistance endangers their own survival as much as it harms other women who, like Becka, are deeply loyal and looking for moral guidance. Agnes’s testimony (which includes Becka’s story) provides insights into her and Becka’s ambivalent attitudes about Gilead’s

ideology of separate spheres, which empowers the powerful Aunts and allows them to live out of the reach of paternal sexual abuse but severely curtails other women's rights and agency to the point of sanctioning misogynist crimes. Also, Agnes and Aunt Lydia's stories show that revenge is not to be underrated in circumstances of dehumanization and oppression.

Nicole's eyewitness narrative, with its outsider perspective, finally provides one possible answer to the vexed question of female moral agency in a patriarchal state and society that does everything in its power to distort or even erase its citizens' moral agency in order to cement its political authority. Although Nicole is plagued by guilt like the other women in the novels—in her case guilt for the death of her (non-biological) family due to their hiding her from Gilead's spies (cf. *TT* 39), her social environment assures her that the assassination of Melanie and Neil is not her fault but a choice for resisting Gilead that the two have made. In her story, Nicole writes: "I felt that I owed Neil and Melanie, and the other dead people" (*TT* 199). It is this response to the violence and suffering committed by the state of Gilead which offers a viable direction for individual and collective moral agency: rather than succumbing to the sense that nothing can be done, or that whatever can be done requires too much or will always be flawed, Nicole takes on her part in attempting to improve the lives of the women in Gilead regardless of her own shortcomings and, one may add, acts of complicity. When examined from a critical perspective that highlights the inextricable interrelation between complicity and resistance, as this contribution has done, Atwood's dystopian novels display multifaceted and complex experiences of state violence by women belonging to different generations and occupying divergent intersectional positionalities.

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“Something Beyond Pain”: Race, Gender, and Hyperempathy in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*

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Abstract

In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia E. Butler describes a heightened form of empathy—a *hyperempathy*—an involuntary, inescapable, and overwhelming wave of empathy amplified to the level of physical experience. The narrative follows Lauren Oya Olamina as her hyperempathy develops from a shameful impairment to an asset that engenders a new and growing community. As an interactional and intra-actional identification, hyperempathy is grounded in a radically relational understanding of subjectivity. As such it initiates a slow and careful dismantling of the humanist subject that is based on the imperative of individualism. This article traces the steps involved in reconceptualizing subjectivity under the auspices of relationality and argues that Butler’s text proposes a distinctive ethics, offering not only a fictional form of relating to the Other but revising the concept of empathy altogether. Distinctly incorporating an emplacement of race and gender, Butler’s text can inform more recent feminist reconsiderations of empathy in relational-cultural theory. Finally, the article argues that Butler’s revision of empathy raises questions regarding deficits and failures in the shared or collective consciousness and demonstrates how speculative fiction can address the violence of liberal conceptions of the human under racial capitalism.

Butler’s Prophetic Science Fiction

One of the many important contributions that Black women’s speculative fiction offers readers today is not a corrective to mainstream male-dominated Euro-American science fiction but an altogether distinctive ethics.¹ A prime example can be found in Octavia E. Butler’s 1993 dystopian novel *Parable of the Sower*, where the concept of empathy is revised in a hyperbolized fictional form that makes emotion-regulation on the side of the empathee impossible. The novel’s main protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, suffers from a condition called hyperempathy,² which causes her to involuntarily experience the joy or the pain of those within the field of her vision. Hyperempathy is a chemical reaction in the body that is triggered by sight. Lauren feels what she sees others feel. In this article I argue that by introducing hyperempathy in *Parable of the Sower*, Butler reconceptualizes subjectivity in the somatic imaginary within an interpersonal framework of mutuality and equality. By doing so, she sheds a new light on the concept of empathy. After introducing more recent theories of empathy and feminist revisions thereof, I argue that Butler’s text ventures even further in exposing the insufficiency of contemporary conceptualizations of empathy. Grounded in a radically relational understanding of subjectivity marked by mutual recognition and an affective bond that carries the potential to eliminate hierarchies, hyperempathy raises questions regarding deficits and failures in the shared or collective consciousness, which I will focus on in this article.

Parable of the Sower is not social theory. The novel is commonly classified as dystopian science fiction (Phillips). Yet, as Madhu Dubey among others has pointed out, the “dystopia presented in *Parable of the Sower* is so closely extrapolated from current trends” that “it produces a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement” (106). Set in the year 2024, the novel begins in a time when “everything was getting worse; the climate, the economy, crime, drugs, you know” (Butler 1993, 176). Readers in 2022 are eerily familiar with such scenarios, which prompted scholars such as Iossifidis, already in 2002, to read the novel as prophetic. Monica A. Coleman was even more explicit in her application of the novel to current problems by organizing a discussion of the novel with the science fiction writer Tananarive Due under the title “Octavia Tried to Tell us: Parable for Today’s Pandemic.” The event correlates the effects of the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic to scenes in the novel. Butler

¹ Sheree R. Thomas situates Butler’s emancipatory forms of speculative fiction within the tradition of the African diaspora. Similarly, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson interprets “Bloodchild” in *Becoming Human* as belonging to an Africanist tradition that exists apart from what is considered to be the Euro-American modernist humanist tradition.

² Cf. Sami Schalk’s chapter 3 of *Bodyminds Reimagined* for an overview of scholarship on hyperempathy.

herself expressed her hope that *Parable of the Sower* would not become a “prophecy” (Butler, Interview). Yet, environmental disasters, a global epidemic, and runaway capitalism are dominating world-news only two years before Butler’s apocalyptic scenario commences. In its prescient quality, the text repeatedly bursts the linearity of futurity in classic science fiction, demonstrating that, as Alexis Lothian expressed it, “we live in the future” (1). It is therefore certainly in keeping with the times when returning to this text in search of answers to ongoing predicaments and one of the strongest elements that Butler proposes is her reconceptualization of empathy.

Earthbound Change or the Future in the Present

There is no consensual definition of empathy (Bohart & Greenberg 1997; Batson 2009). Empathy is considered to be an ability to take somebody else’s perspective, understand this person’s frame of reference, and experience and therefore, in a way, *feel* what this person feels. It is an affective entangling of sentient beings. Most scholars agree that three components are necessary for empathy: “(a) an *emotional simulation*[.]” “(b) a conceptual, *perspective-taking* process[.]” and “(c) an *emotion-regulation* process used to soothe personal distress at the other’s pain or discomfort, making it possible to mobilize compassion and helping behavior for the other” (Elliott et al. 43). In this definition, empathy is a personal simulation that activates manageable compassion and leads to action. The absence of such empathy in *Parable of the Sower* is central to the plot’s development. The novel depicts a society where the overwhelming economic power of big corporations is posing as the de-facto government. Throughout the text, companies that control key decisions about production and distribution are present in the background, with the effect of foregrounding the life of the main protagonist Lauren, her family, and the people in her environment and how they are affected by this concentration of power. Lauren’s father describes this situation: “Politicians and big corporations get the bread and we get the circuses” (Butler 1993, 20). What he circumscribes in a playful if bitter way is a brutal, exhausting, apocalyptic scenario that plays out in violent murders, lethal or personality-changing drug abuse, flight and refuge, brutal corporal violence, and cannibalism. In such an environment, any sense of empathy is a hindrance to survival. For example, when Lauren’s parents tried to help a group of people with an injured woman, the very same group attacked them (10). Empathy can be understood as a virtue, a skill, at times even as a moral imperative. In the society that Lauren inhabits, it is a luxury or a liability.

The link between poverty and racial discrimination is topicalized from the beginning. The novel opens in the gated community of Robledo,

where Lauren lives as a fifteen-year-old child with her father, his wife, and her stepmother’s two sons. It is one of the few remaining self-organized enwalled spaces. Commenting on why big companies still have not expressed any interest in buying off Robledo, Lauren’s father explains it to be “too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic, to be of any interest to anybody” (113). As a self-organized community populated mainly by people of color, Robledo seems a comparably promising environment for young people such as Lauren. Yet, any hope for a future free of violence and hardships is shattered a few sentences later, when the father describes life in this gated community: “What it does have is street poor, body dumps, and a memory of once being well-off” (ibid.). In this way, the first part of the novel establishes a generational gap. While Lauren’s parents and their friends dream of a better past returning in the future, the next generation has no access to this hope. Robledo in all its brutality is all they know. Lauren sighs: “The adults say things will get better, but they never have” (15). Living as a woman of color in an environment that discriminates against people of color and in which women are disproportionately more subject to sexual abuse and violence, Lauren is highly aware of the necessity to plot her way out of these miserable living conditions without recourse to parental help. The first step, she quickly realizes, will demand a break with the framework of a world that her parents inhabit and an ability to imagine a future that does not revert to their past.

It is at the intersection of the past and the future that Butler instrumentalizes the generic conventions of science fiction in her own original way. Lauren is acutely aware of the restrictions of the present, most of which are located at the crossroads of racial and gendered discrimination. Confirming genre conventions, the main protagonist literally reaches out to “the stars,” (80) when all her hopes are invested in the promise of interplanetary travel and life on a different planet. Yet, most of the narrative is structured around her contemplations about how to change life on Earth before boarding a spaceship into a different galaxy. In her own words: “There’s always a lot to do before you get to go to heaven” (ibid.). Butler, therefore, uses a central tenet of the genre, “science and space projects,” (ibid.) to expand the prospects of a world dominated by racial and gendered restrictions without simply highlighting an escape route. Rather than depicting changed social parameters on a different planet, *Parable of the Sower* focuses on the reconceptualization of the same on Earth. To “take root among the stars,” (ibid.) Lauren knows, it is necessary to cultivate a community that destabilizes teleological epistemic presumptions about subjectivities based on hierarchies via exclusion. Demonstrating ways in which empathy relies on a position of privilege to exemplify the intricate structure of social

hierarchies highlights that a simple focus on victims versus perpetrators will not initiate structural change. Rather, the key to building a different community is the belief in change itself: “Everyone knows that change is inevitable” (25) in this novel. Lauren therefore creates her own personal belief-system based on the permanency of change. She calls it Earthseed, putting emphasis on the terrestrial origins of her futuristic interplanetary path.

The Permeability of Boundaries

Along the way of constructing Earthseed, Lauren’s decisions are strategically guided by the response to structures within which gender and race operate as organizing categories of oppression. The opening chapters of *Parable of the Sower* set in the gated community in which the protagonist spends her childhood are followed by Lauren’s story as a refugee. After even her seemingly safe home burned down and her family disappeared, most likely murdered, Lauren has no choice but to leave, knowing only that she might “stop in Northern California or go through to Canada” (186). From the beginning, she decides that traveling as a woman is too dangerous. Gender thus determines one’s chances of survival. This fear is confirmed in various scenes along the way, the most striking of which are numerous depictions of rape, where all victims are gendered female. Their ages range from “a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old” (12) to an “old lady” raped by the drugged burglars who pillaged her house (22). Lauren decides to travel disguised as a man: “A girl alone only faced one kind of future outside. I intend to go out posing as a man when I go” (130). Gendered as female, Lauren is only mobile in disguise. When her stepmother and her brothers in the chaos following the fire in her gated community disappear, Lauren immediately knows that they will not be able to survive: “In the night, a woman and three kids might look like a gift basket of food, money, and sex” (144). Even before intersectionality had been theorized, Butler already intertwined gendered identities with race in order to foreground the intersecting nature of oppressive social structures. When she decides to travel with a biracial couple, Zahra and Harry, Lauren’s disguise proves necessary yet again: “We believed two men and a woman would be more likely to survive than two women and a man” (200). In a rehearsal of intersectional abuse, Lauren’s friend Zahra summarizes why racial disguise was necessary as well: “Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they’re gay or straight. Harry’ll piss off all the blacks and you’ll piss off all the whites” (161). All along, the violence depicted in the novel is carried out directly by its characters, who have incorporated its parameters of oppression. Lauren dressed up as a man pretends to be Zahra’s heterosexual partner and both pretend to be traveling with “their white friend” (ibid.) in order to avoid the attention of fellow travelers. To get at the interlocking nature of

race and gender as categories of oppression, Butler highlights the violence geared directly at intersections such as Black motherhood and interracial romance. All along, the racial and sexual assaults are carried out by poverty-stricken neighbors, drugged youth gangs or people hungry enough to turn to cannibalism. The state behind this violence remains invisible as it exercises its power by withholding access to capital.

Instead of naming those responsible for the miserable living conditions, the narrative is invested in constructing structures that expose the porosity of closed spaces, demonstrating that change can only be initiated within as there is no outside to state control. Reports about violence outside Robledo often match what is happening within the enwalled space, emphasizing that seclusion is not the solution. When her neighbor is robbed, raped, and tied up, Lauren is appalled by the shocking scene: "An old lady like that" (22)! Yet, even this exhibition of violence is exacerbated in the next one: Lauren's father and his wife find Mrs. Smith's dead body, a few days after she had committed suicide. This rapid pace of almost unbearable brutality and despair is kept throughout the text. In the next chapter, Lauren's other neighbor is introduced, the three-year-old Amy Dunn. Raped by her uncle, Amy's mother is just twelve years older than her daughter. Seeing no other possibilities for Amy, Lauren takes it upon herself to provide for the little girl's schooling. In the next chapter: "Amy Dunn is dead" (44). The three-year-old child is shot most likely by accident by a bullet that went "right through the metal gate" (45). Like the bullet that found its way from the outside into the inside of the supposedly gated space, the novel makes it obvious that for innocent, unprotected, poor people there is no safe space, even within the walls of a self-organized, community-oriented environment such as Robledo. Transformation can only be engendered in the present as there is no escape.

Exposed to death and dying almost daily, Lauren understands even as a child that the walls behind which the family had entrenched themselves are only provisional. Lauren thus rehearses daily how to ensure her survival long before she is forced to leave by secretly practicing what will later prove to be helpful and necessary survival strategies such as learning to shoot, studying what can be used as food in the forest, or preparing a survival kit for the case of emergency. The gated community, indeed, never was a place to lead a protected life but rather a training camp to prepare for what comes after Robledo: "I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there" (53). Yet, her actions are guided by the recognition that survival is only the precondition for life. Lauren is therefore working on a philosophy that she hopes will engender a sustainable community. The society depicted in the novel is one where those detrimentally affected by uneven power

structures are either surviving in fortified militarized neighborhoods or left destroying each other in brutal acts of violence. In the face of perpetual conflict and societal dysfunction, both—those on the winning and those on the losing side—know that not state and government but communities can initiate change. Even the rich maintain their status by selling the promise of sanctuary in their privately-owned gated cities. The inside becomes the outside in controlled housing estates as well, as it is in those enwalled spaces that the inhabitants are yet again, as the novel spells out, practically enslaved. Lauren quickly understands that the only way out of this impasse is a reconceptualization of the present with those who surround her. Constructing her own minutely crafted belief system that will engender a community is thus equally important as learning to shoot or forage for food. As there is no space outside of the oppressive power structures, she puts the concept of change at the center of her philosophy. In this only in this way that the future past can become a viable asset.

The failure to keep the outside out, parallels a similar crisis of boundaries in Lauren's hyperempathy. While posing as a man or passing as white might protect Lauren against violence directed at her, it does not protect her from experiencing the effects of the violence committed against other women, women with children, and biracial couples. Her condition of hyperempathy forces her to feel the pain of the other. Yet, rather than avoiding those easily hurt, Lauren initiates the transformation within her society by inviting those affected by the violence to travel with her in spite of her hyperempathy. After quickly identifying women and particularly women traveling with children, as well as biracial couples, to be the most vulnerable, Lauren, Zahra, and Harry accept into their community two sisters who had been abused and sexually enslaved by their father, a mother and her daughter who look the "most racially mixed that I had ever met" (272), and a couple, referred to throughout chapter 17 only as "the mixed couple." Zahra herself, the first to join Harry and Lauren's little group, had escaped from forced polygamy. When asked the reason for inviting people who might be considered liabilities into her circle, Lauren explains: "Why not. We're natural allies—the mixed couple and the mixed group" (196). Circumventing big sentimental gestures, Lauren presents the incorporation of new members into the group as effectively transforming the social environment that she lives in. While the prescribed roles function as navigating guides that ensure survival, they transform into connecting points within the community that Lauren creates. This is most strikingly exemplified in "the mixed couple" that only hesitatingly joins Lauren's group. Once the couple decides to become a part of the community organized around Lauren, they become Gloria Natividad Douglas, "a pale brown woman with a round, pretty face, long

black hair bound up in a coil atop her head” (199) and Travis Charles Douglas, a man with “an unusual deep-black complexion—skin so smooth that [Lauren] can’t believe he has ever in his life had a pimple” (198). In sections like this, Butler does justice to her self-assigned rule to “portray human variety” in her literature. Race and gender are not erased within the futuristic framework of intergalactic travel that her community is preparing for but rather emplaced. Lauren’s Earthseed-group is redefining racial and gendered difference (qtd. in Schalk 85) as an asset rather than a liability, effectively diversifying rather than presenting universal or posthuman models that seek to erase difference.

The Violence of Liberal Humanism Exposed in Hyperempathy

As a condition that marks a porosity of the “bodymind,” to use Sami Schalk’s fitting term,³ hyperempathy incorporates the feelings of another as if they were one’s own. What is commonly perceived as external to one’s own psychological and physical make-up becomes internal. As a young woman, Lauren could leave her enwalled home only on very rare occasions, such as her baptism. While cycling across town on the way to a church, she and her family and friends witness an apocalyptic landscape. Injured or dead bodies are scattered on the streets. Lauren tries not to look but she “couldn’t help seeing—collecting some of their general misery” (10). The pain of those exposed to the devastating brutality of a life outside of fortified neighborhoods is perceptible even without looking at the damaged bodies. Lauren explains her inscription in these lives: “I feel what I see others feeling or that I believe they feel. [...] I get a lot of grief that doesn’t belong to me, and that isn’t real. But it hurts” (12). As Lauren’s hyperempathetic experiences are not exclusively cognitive or emotional, she cannot train herself not to feel them or to dismiss them. The external stimuli become her internal make-up.

One of the earliest definitions of empathy centers on exactly the aspect that Butler hyperbolizes in her hyperempathy, namely the ability to experience the feelings of the other. The British psychologist Edward Titchener, who is credited to have coined the term empathy, explains it by way of the German designation “Einfühlung,” which literally means *to feel oneself into another*. Titchener “denominates empathy the ‘fact’ that when someone has a ‘visual image’ of a given character, that person contemporarily experiences a kinesthetic activation in the corresponding muscles” that is “mind’s muscles” (Titchener 25). Other than more recent

³ In *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*, Sami Schalk uses the materialist feminist disability studies concept of the bodymind that was first introduced by Margaret Price to highlight that the body and the mind are enmeshed in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, in particular in her concept of hyperempathy.

theories of empathy, this definition accentuates the physicality of the empathic experience, and as such perhaps comes closest to Butler’s sense of hyperempathy. As an intensification of this *feeling into another*, hyperempathy transforms the feeling into one’s own somatic experience. The condition is provoked as much by *interpreting* another as it is by *experiencing*; the corresponding feeling depends on one’s personal understanding of the situation. Rather than a social obligation or even a survival mechanism, hyperempathy emerges at the junction between two bodies and establishes a corporeal and simultaneously cognitive entanglement. The fact that this corporeality extends to all sentient beings only strengthens the materiality. When attacked by a dog that she is forced to kill in self-defense, Lauren almost loses consciousness (cf. 197). Her reaction is triggered by visual impressions of the dog’s pain. Seeing becomes feeling, and Lauren cannot simply choose to not experience what she recognizes in the other, human or nonhuman.

This central passage in terms of Butler’s conceptualization of hyperempathy is raising important questions about empathy. Why is Lauren the only one affected by the atrocious exhibition of pain that they encounter? If we return to Titchner’s definition of empathy, it becomes obvious that Lauren’s friends and family are not only able to suspend their empathy but forced to do so in order to reach their destination. But what good is empathy if it has no effect? In contrast to empathy, hyperempathy is a somatic experience that cannot be discarded nor evaded. The pain that Lauren believes to have seen outside of the gated community travels with her back to Robledo, when she remembers: “There was a naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs. A woman with a swollen, bloody, beaten face. [...]” (12). She trains herself not to feel the pain exhibited in these images that became part of her memory. The active process of suspending those images exposes the insufficiency of empathy as a key to social justice. An empathic response is reserved for those in power who are free to *simulate* compassion. For Lauren and her family, the exclusion of an emphatic response is a premise to survival.

The topical exclusion of affect is emphasized in two paternal characters: Lauren’s father and her doctor. Both seek to forcefully separate the inside from the outside or the mind from the body as they dismiss their intricate entanglement. Lauren refers to her condition as “sharing,” thus emphasizing the mutuality and the reciprocity. Yet, in spite of the physicality of this experience, the “doctors” describe Lauren’s condition “as an ‘organic delusional syndrome’” (12). This diagnosis, in turn, strengthens her father’s belief that Lauren’s experiences are “not real” or simply “crazy”: “[My father] has always pretended, or perhaps

believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about (11). Working against this paternal gaslighting, Lauren slowly reaches her own understanding of hyperempathy that allows her to reevaluate not only her specific condition but empathy in general. Eventually, she arrives at a conclusion that some sort of dissociation is happening with people who don't *feel* the pain that they witness in somebody else. Since every body experiences injuries as painful, it is to be expected that some form of identification must be part of the reaction of those witnessing these pains. Lauren therefore wonders about people who inflict pain on others:

It's beyond me how one human being could do that to another. [...] If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things. [...] [I]f everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain? (108)

The abnormality is located in those who do not feel the pain, those who have no empathy, rather than in “sharers” as herself. Left contemplating a world in which pain is regulated by pain, Lauren exposes the violence of the liberal humanist subject not affected by brutality imposed on sentient beings.

This incorporated invisible violence is mostly exemplified in the character of Lauren's father, who as “a preacher and a professor and a dean” forces her to hide “her sharing” (12) throughout her childhood. Instructed in this way, Lauren at first considers her condition to be an unfortunate aberration. The fact that her hyperempathy was caused by her mother's drug abuse while pregnant makes it even more difficult for Lauren to arrive at the conclusion that hyperempathy is not her deficiency but the society's flaw. Yet, upon leaving home, Lauren begins to contemplate what effect hyperempathy has produced in her life so far. Focusing on reading her body in relation to her environment, she finally comes to reevaluate her ability to feel what others feel: “I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I could give it to people. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all” (108). Lauren thus marks the missing empathy in her society as a structural impediment towards reaching her goal of constructing a livable future. It is in this way that she identifies her primary goal—to construct a community apart from her father's ideals within which care rather than empathy paves the way towards livable futures.

The Centrality of Care

In instances of hyperempathy, the imaginary receives its material equivalent. Butler foregrounds the reality of the imaginary, when Lauren's

brother, Keith, plays a prank on her by using red color to pretend to bleed. Because Lauren is convinced that he is hurt, she begins to bleed herself. It “isn’t real. But it hurts” (11-12). Hyperempathy is therefore a form of a somatic imaginary. Just as an optical illusion can fool the eyes, Lauren’s hyperempathic sense can also be misled. The physical responses are chemically induced and not controllable. In Lauren’s own words: “my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they are going to stay scrambled” (12). At the same time, they are triggered by Lauren’s subjective assessment of a given situation. Once she has understood this principle, Lauren even learns to bluff, pretend, and delude in order to avoid not only her own pain. She is able to deceive a fellow sharer, Emery Tanaka Solis, by pretending not to be hurt badly and thus avoids causing her pain (cf. 291). This phenomenological gap between what is perceived and what is felt places emphasis on the interpretation or the willingness to see the pain of the other. Only after cognitively recognizing someone’s pain as such does it translate into a personal physical experience. Seen from this perspective, empathy becomes a form of sight, its absence a form of volitional cognitive exclusion.

The willingness to recognize the pain of the Other affirms the moral and political value of the work of care.⁴ The centrality of care is exemplified in the character of Lauren’s brother Keith, about whom Lauren explains: “He believes in what he sees, and no matter what’s in front of him, he doesn’t see much” (14). In other words, he does not care. After Keith is killed by a fellow gang-member, Lauren explains: “He would have been a monster if he had been allowed to grow up. Maybe he was one already. He never cared what he did. If he wanted to do something and it wouldn’t cause him immediate physical pain, he did it, fuck the earth” (108). Keith is a central character in the novel, exemplifying the incorporation of violence that Lauren learns to avert. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde writes: “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (Lorde 227). Keith’s violence grows exponentially in relation to the violence he endures. His indifference is augmented when compared to Lauren’s encompassing dedication to avoiding the pain of the other. Lauren, certainly, *sees much*. She therefore also *feels much*. This, (non)care for other people extends to nothing less than “the earth.” To care implies a willingness to cognitively process one’s own inscription in one’s environment. Care is

⁴ Audre Lorde’s pioneering work in exposing the centrality of care and self-care to Black feminist activism has paved the way to a now established strand of Black feminism that envisions more caring futures that nurture relationships.

thus the elemental factor in an entangled vision of the Self that extends to the domain of the planetary.

In her introduction to a study of the concept of care María Puig de la Bellacasa highlights the connection between caring and community: “Care as a concrete work of maintenance, with ethical and affective implications, and as a vital politics in interdependent worlds is an important conception” in community-building processes (5). The novel’s inclusion of big powerful corporations run by those whose wealth depends on providing the promise of a functional residency to those in need makes it obvious that community is pivotal to survival. If care precedes community, then care is crucial to survival. Keith’s brutal murder by his fellow gang-members functions as confirmation of this assessment. Lauren, thus, feels strengthened in the need to build a community based on care. Of the new people that she meets on the road she decides: “I’d like to draw them all in. They could be the beginning of an Earthseed community” (207). All of the identified characters that she does draw in are former victims of racial and gendered violence. Her care for them leads Lauren to Earthseed. Her growing community creates hope in the midst of their dystopian reality, building on care as a premise⁵. The novel identifies the locus for change in the resistance of the oppressed gendered and raced protagonists to succumb to turning violent themselves. The focus on change, adaptation, and consensual incorporation would have made it possible even for someone as *monstrous* as Keith to change.

It is within this radically reciprocal process of creating a community upon the ashes of destroyed relations, based on the permanency of change, that Butler exposes the insufficiency of empathy. Hyperempathy exposes one of the main problems that comes with classic notions of empathy—the superior position of the respondent. “Sharing” is radically relational, which discards any notion of victimization or moralizing.⁶ Empathy, on the other hand, depends on conscious and controllable simulation, putting the one to extend empathy into the position of superiority. Extending empathy can also be a way of obfuscating responsible reactions. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan

⁵ Similarly, Saidiya Hartman calls her readers to take up “matters of care” as an antidote to violence and Christina Sharpe, responding to this call, analyzes the difficulties involved in extending care built on a long history of racial oppression that nevertheless, as she argues in *In the Wake*, remains to be necessary.

⁶ Exposing the socio-political problems that moralizing entails, Jane Bennett refers to moralism as a “style of speaking, writing, and thinking that is too confident about its judgements and thus too punitive in its orientation to others” (4). Thought-provoking discussions raised by the juxtaposition of critical analysis and moralizing can be found in the collection *Politics of Moralizing* edited by Jane Bennett and Michael J. Shapiro.

Sontag follows the genealogy of a long tradition of fascination with shocking images of war and brutality in Euro-American cultures. Violence, when witnessed without risk or pain, responsibility, sense of agency or presence, as seen in a photograph or a film, is deemed to be voyeuristic and secretly pleasant in Sontag’s account. Expressing empathy, in this sense, when witnessing somebody subjected to violence can even serve as an excuse for failing to take action. Hyperempathy makes any form of pleasure or self-serving functionalizing as response to the pain of the other impossible, as this pain literally becomes one’s own. The effect is, however, similar as it incapacitates one’s ability to extend help.

Lauren’s hyperempathy has occasionally been interpreted as a telepathic superpower (Francis 114) and as belonging to the domain of the supernatural.⁷ These readings dissociate hyperempathy from the community-building framework. Reading hyperempathy from a disability studies perspective, Sami Schalk demonstrates that as a context-sensitive reaction, hyperempathy “challenges the notion that a technologically created, disability-free future is an inherently good future” (102). Butler’s future utopia thus is a complex vision of the non-normative human that includes a revision of disability, racial, and gendered insignnia, all of which are included rather than glossed over. Intensifying empathy to a point of pain is an intensification of relationality. Hyperempathy describes an inscription into the environment that is only debilitating in the context of violence . It is neither unnatural nor supernatural. Instead, hyperempathy describes a subjective reality that translates into a somatic experience with distributed agency. As such, it is a form of intersubjectivity. The relational nature complicates the view of subjectiveness as a biased cognition. The perception is neither in the subject nor in the object but somewhere between the two. The focus on distribution or sharing emphasizes the aspect of participation. Yet, it is care that initiates action.

Subjectivity as Multi-Humanness

Lauren’s subjective interpretation of pain that inevitably translates into a physical experience is an entangling of vision, cognition, and somatic experience. Compassion, in this sense, is superfluous as there is no simulation involved. The experiences that hyperempathy registers are equally visual as they are cognitive and physical. Yet, care remains key to hyperempathy because Lauren’s compassion is not activated by a physical response; rather, her compassion leads to hyperempathy.

⁷ In an interview with Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating, Octavia Butler complains: “Reviewers typically account for Lauren’s hyperempathic powers as something supernatural—as a type of extrasensory telepathy—when I didn’t write it that way” (Butler, Mehaffy, Keating 64).

Lauren needs to see something happen, she needs to care that it happens, and only then does she experience the feelings of the other. Other than classic models of empathy, hyperempathy does not allow any emotion-regulation. On the contrary, it incapacitates the sharer. Lauren thus cannot soothe anyone in distress. Hyperempathy exposes the degree to which the other characters in the novel have learned to control their empathy so as to not care. Furthermore, hyperempathy exposes that soothing is not the solution to the problems they are facing. Rather than soothing, the aim of the sharer is to avoid the pain of the other at all costs. Should this not be the aim of empathy as well? Abstaining and desisting from inflicting pain on the other certainly does seem like a practical solution to ending violence. In other words, what good is empathy, if it does not prevent pain and violence.

It is perhaps for similar reasons that empathy has recently been revised through a feminist lens in what came to be called "relational-cultural theory," developed by Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey, Judith Jordan, and other scholars at the Stone Center for Clinical and Developmental Studies and Research on Women at Wellesley College (Freedberg 254). Empathy, in this new theory, is reconceptualized in response to recent developments in feminist scholarship as a model that highlights the impact on both the respondent and the affected. The more traditional models of empathy all demonstrate a strong focus on the respondent. In these older models, personal growth is acquired through independence on the side of the respondent from the side of the affected. Rather than promoting ways of avoiding dependence for the sake of independence, the relational-cultural model of empathy suggests that personal growth is acquired through dependent connection. Avoiding the unidirectional concept revises empathy as a cognitive-affective experience in an interpersonal framework of mutuality and equality.

Parable of the Sower offers a similar reconceptualization of empathy, but it exceeds the framework offered by scholars at the Stone Center and can thus serve as an important addition, if not correction, to this most recent attempt of improving outdated theories. Using a community-building process centered on change as an organizing device, Butler constructs a fluid group identity based on relationality through diversity. This aspect can inform relational-cultural theory in which *affective resonance* is encouraged and acknowledged as an essential element. In Butler's *Parable* series, one finds a similar notion of affective resonance that is here theorized as compulsive within the framework of hyperempathy. Scholars at the Stone Center describe affective resonance in the following way: "It is a form of psychological arousal in which the worker experiences a vicarious emotional response while

cognitively aware that the source of affect in oneself emanates from the other person” (Jordan 1997 quoted in Freedberg 255). The equivalent in the novel is expressed in Lauren’s description of her hyperempathy: “I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel” (12). As a fictional concept, hyperempathy finds its counterpart in relational-cultural theory in a sociological framework in that it performs a radical revision of empathy under the auspices of reciprocity. Freedberg writes about “the affective flow necessary for empathic connection,” that, according to her grows, “the more the worker presents as a genuine human being” (255). Yet, it is this very humanness that Butler’s novel puts into question.

Rather than prescribing reciprocity and acknowledging humanity, Butler’s text highlights the contours of a humanistic society that excludes relationality. When Lauren thinks about her brother, she is sad and disappointed by his inability to feel how his actions affect other people—she fears that this inability would transform him into “a monster” (108) were he to live longer. Lauren sees his monstrosity expressed in his violent and forced dissociation from his environment. Rather than creating visions of posthumanist, postracial societies, *Parable of the Sower* discards the cultural frame of reference that makes relationality impossible: “WE ARE COMING APART. / The community, the families, individual family members. [...] We’re a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time” (109). Racial and gendered violence that breaks communities makes humanism in its diversified form impossible. The ways in which racial discrimination hinders relational empathy as prescribed by humanism constitute an of yet largely underexamined aspect of relational-cultural theory.⁸ Having lost Keith, Lauren mobilizes all her energy in order to create a community within which it is possible to be more-than-human or differently human. Rather than erasing racial and gendered identification markers, this model is establishing a space for diversification, erasing instead the power relations that they imply, thus marking it as a necessary step towards any relational models.

Hyperempathy extrapolates from Titchener’s focus on *Einfühlung* towards a material interlocking with all sentient beings. This quality has led some scholars to interpret hyperempathy within the new materialist theories such as Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action and Stacy Alaimo’s notion of *trans-corporeality* (cf. Watkins). Hyperempathy, after all, marks a material exchange that creates meaning, a process that is at the heart of new materialist theories. Both Barad’s concept of intra-action and Alaimo’s notion of *trans-corporeality* are not merely physical but also biochemical in nature, i.e. these concepts not only place emphasis on

⁸ Relational theory has addressed gender-specific problems but has “limitations for intervening with women of color” (Quinn and Grumbach 203).

physicality but on material exchanges that cannot be separated from processes of meaning-making. In her important intervention in environmental studies, Alaimo explains: “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the humans are always inter-meshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Alaimo 13). Yet, as Diane Leong contends in her interpretation of *Parable of the Sower*, the question as to what degree this substance is inscribed with racial and gendered insignia remains largely unexplored in Barad’s and Alaimo’s theories. In *Parable of the Sower*, racial blackness and gender structure discussions about matter, or more to the point: “the material body—is defined by and through disavowed social fantasies about black female flesh that are linked to the global legacies of modern slavery” (Leong 6). Instances of hyperempathy expose that any attempts of revising empathy will necessarily need to begin at bodily inscriptions across race and gender.

As in Alaimo’s theory, the trans-corporeality of hyperempathy describes an intermeshing with one’s environment (if only the sentient part); yet, Butler places the emphasis on the distribution of affect. In Lauren’s own words: “I had no sense of my own body. It hurt, but I couldn’t have said where—or even whether the pain was mine or some else’s. The pain was intense, yet defuse somehow. I felt [...] disembodied” (282). In lieu of a proper designation, she describes a state that is not incorporeal or metaphysical, but rather disembodied. Yet, in moments of hyperempathy, it might be more accurate to describe Lauren as multi-bodied. Rather than genetically altered, she is posthuman only in the sense of her multi-humanness. In moments of hyperempathy, she is the dog whose pain becomes hers. An effective diversification of subjectivity, this exposure raises the question of what we do in order *not to recognize what we see*. Lauren’s gift starkly demonstrates how, as a highly social species co-existing in vast collective structures, we suffer a surprising deficit of shared or collective consciousness based on intersecting racial and gender discrimination.

Hyperempathy is a powerful concept as it underlines the reinscription of gendered and racialized bodies severed from their environment back into it. The materiality of the body is exposed in a radical interaction with other bodies in its diversity. The reaction to outside stimuli initiates change within social structures in that it does not recognize racial, gender, or species as limitations. The change is material and thus biopolitical, effectively deconstructing the Enlightenment visions of the human as an individual, replacing it with a dividual. The image of the Vitruvian Man in its function as the ideal human figure literally encircled and disconnected from the environment, is exposed in its porosity. Furthermore, the

hyperempathic model is subject to permanent change. Instead of prescribing forms of being-in-the-world, the hyperempathetic body is in constant interaction with other sentient bodies through a physical form of care. The transcorporeality of hyperempathy thus effectively undermines normative structures-based exclusion. Lauren herself describes hyperempathy as “something beyond pain” (41). While it often is, indeed, painful, hyperempathy reaches towards an entanglement with the Other, which, after all, under different circumstances can lead to heightened states of pleasure as well.

In comparison to classic theories of empathy which involve an asymmetrical power relation, hyperempathy describes a raw coupling of minds. It discards the seemingly generous yet often hierarchical gesture that is often extended to another in empathy. As an interactional and intra-actional identification, hyperempathy is grounded in a radically relational understanding of subjectivity.⁹ As such, it initiates a slow and careful dismantling of the humanist subject based on the imperative of individualism. Far from a proposal to seek a solution in a technological fix, Butler’s work reconceptualizes subjectivity and knowledge with the help of a relational theory of the human based on diversification. This, in turn, exposes progressive visions of posthumanism based on universalism as an alluring doxa that can occlude systemic exploitation of racially marked and gendered populations as well as nonhuman subjects and resources. Genetic engineering as a solution to “all forms of racism” (Nayar 2012) erases the feminist investment in creating identification figurations that Butler has so carefully constructed. Lauren bursts the internal frame of reference by making space for change within which empathy is exposed as a relational affect in spite of its initial assessment as a potentially lethal disability. Rather than offering a solution, *Parable of the Sower* exposes the need to radically rethink not just our humanist but also our posthumanist conceptions that have become so central to our present.

⁹ In the sequel to *Parable of the Sower* entitled *Parable of the Talents* Lauren is even forced to feel the pleasure of the slave holder that he feels while whipping.

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Feminist Memorializations in Marge Piercy and Rafael Carter

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Abstract

Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* and Rafael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* render the future of the Global North as dominated by corporatism, patriarchal militarism, and technological stratification. Piercy and Carter investigate the problematics of memory and memorialization to imagine possibilities for ethical subjectivities for worlds transformed by advanced technology and AI. These novels accuse their fictional states of mobilizing advanced technologies to seize power over their citizens. Emphasizing the pernicious consequences of gendered violence committed by state institutions, Piercy and Carter show in their novels that while state memory practices and memorializations are brutally authoritarian, social and personal memory practices generate a means of recuperating feminist resistance against state violence.

Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991) and Rafael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* (1996) fuse cyberpunk tropes with feminist concerns to contest state brutality and constraints on women's citizenship. Piercy and Carter highlight the threats to women's autonomy and citizenship under patriarchal militarism and technocultural dominance at the end of the twentieth century. For the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2021), cyberpunk is "everywhere" and fertile ground for "interrogating the future of identity from feminist, queer, Indigenous, and Afrofuturist perspectives, as well as broader cultural interrogations of (sur)veillance and cultural activism" (McFarlane, Murphy, and Schmeink 1, 4). While it emerged as a subset of science-fiction, dominated by masculinist (and Orientalist) motifs, cyberpunk literature is experiencing a revival in the twenty-first century in response to increasing consolidation of power among high-tech and digital technocrats.¹ According to Fredric Jameson, as an exemplary sign of postmodernism, cyberpunk "is fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself" (38). Corporate practices of obfuscation, single-minded pursuit of profit, privacy infringement, and data collection validate nervousness about current and future manifestations of technocracy. In examining two novels published several years shy of the start of this new century, I want to highlight the first-wave zenith of cyberpunk's literary visions of feminist futures-to-come. I propose that Piercy and Carter's novels herald utopian possibilities for women's full participation in the world, as women, as cyborgs, as fluid in their identities and desires. Piercy and Carter complicate this possibility of expansive subjective freedoms for women, however, with depictions of corporate, militaristic, technocratic domination that constrain women's personhood.

Both novels portray futuristic states as patrilineal, militaristic, and corporatist, reflecting the political economies of the Global North in the 1990s. They also situate sites of resistance outside the Global North, in the Middle East (Piercy) or Africa (Carter). In Piercy's novel, the Jewish "free-town" (3, 7) Tikva is a geographical mirror of Israel and exists as a counterpoint to the North American, patrilineal, and corporatist Yakamura-Stichen (Y-S). With much of the novel unfolding in this utopian city state, Piercy fleshes out the ways in which her protagonists, Shira Shipman, a former Y-S coder, and Yod, a futuristic bio-engineered cybernetic being, learn to challenge the oppressive ideologies and

¹ Lisa Yaszek's "Feminist Cyberpunk" identifies four phases of feminist cyberpunk: Proto-Cyberpunk, from 1818-1979; First-Wave Feminist Cyberpunk Second, 1980-1990; Second-Wave Feminist Cyberpunk, 1990-2005; and the Third-Wave, from 2005-present. Yasek provides an incisive coverage of major trends and concerns of each phase of literary cyberpunk.

governance that undergird the patriarchal and militaristic corporate-state in *He, She and It*. Rafael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* similarly unveils a futuristic geopolitical state, reminiscent of the former Soviet Union, where the earth has been ravaged by capitalism and where technology stratifies society and has turned its protagonist, Maya Andreyva, into a robotic mimic of a citizen. Living under an oppressive state called the Fusion of Historical Nations, which has surveillance nano-tech capable of suppressing people's memories as well as national archives, Maya struggles to piece together her country's long history of authoritarianism. In both of these cyberpunk works, state apparatuses mobilize advanced technology to seize power over memory practices. Piercy and Carter suggest that state seizure of memory and memorialization, which includes the silencing of personal and communicative memories and the imposition of one sanctioned narrative of history, ironically produces persistent attempts to uncover alternative ways to remember and commemorate ethical subjectivities.

Globalization, Anti-Genderist Sentiments, and Memory after the Cold War

He, She and It (1991) and *The Fortunate Fall* (1996) were published shortly after the end of the Cold War and during the early days of the globalized technoculture that shapes the new millennium. As some totalitarian states crumbled at the end of the twentieth century, advocates of globalization celebrated the end of authoritarianism, geographic isolationism, and economic inequalities (Gelleny and Richards 871; Neumayer and de Soysa 1067). Since then, however, the world has seen increasing disparities and ecological exploitation. Economic, political, and social equality for women across the globe has remained broadly unsecured, despite proliferating globalization. Twenty-first-century perspectives on globalization that use Foreign Direct Investments and trade negotiations as measures of progress for industrializing nations, particularly in the Global South, postulate that women's participation in the labor market, access to healthcare, and educational opportunities all increased with greater foreign trade and international openness (Meyer 361). However, Allison Jagger and Seo-Young Cho, among others, argue that when coupled with neoliberalism and capitalism, globalization can improve women's economic, political, and social wellbeing *only* within nations where conditions are already in place or at least underway to transform women's subjugated positions in society (Jagger 298; Cho 683). Moreover, even as high finance, technology, commodity flows, and media become increasingly transnational, populist voices in countries like the United States, Hungary, Poland, and France have strived to secure national consensus by silencing women's rights and concerns. The populist challenge to democracy in the first two decades of the twentieth-first century treats (progressive) elites as anathemas to the common

people and “natural law,” masking what Birgit Sauer denotes as a “masculinist identity politics” that reaches for the “charismatic leader [who] might increase the self-confidence of subordinated masculinities” (cited in Graff and Korolczuk 7). Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk judge that the “morally heightened militant rhetoric” (4) of anti-genderists (ultraconservative pundits and right-wing religious groups) proactively frames the struggle for reproductive rights, anti-domestic violence measures, economic parity, and LGBTQ+ rights as illiberal radicalism endangering “traditional family values” (4). My intention in glossing the three decades since the first publications of Piercy and Carter’s novels is to emphasize that the novels’ themes of technological, political, and discursive threats to women’s autonomy and citizenship, exacerbated by patriarchal militarism and corporate control, remain relevant.

In *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), Appadurai notes that nations are often built around a presupposition of “ethnic genius” (3), a characteristic fantasy of national unity that requires the suppression, if not the expulsion or even eradication of minorities. Moreover, in countries without a strong populist presence, Appadurai sees a “social productivity of violence” (7) that engenders fears that globalized migration, information, and economy will bring about a loss of coherent national identity. Globalization, he argues, has concretized a version of nationhood that is destabilized by the “collusion course between the logics of uncertainty and incompleteness” (Appadurai 9). As a result of this uncertainty, Appadurai, suggests

[n]umerical majorities can become predatory and ethnocidal with regards to *small numbers* precisely when some minorities (and their small numbers) remind these majorities of the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure untainted national ethos. (8)

As a result, national memory practices around the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries at times work to shore up national boundaries and practices. For Andreas Huyssen:

As particular nations struggle to create democratic polities in the wake of histories of mass extermination, apartheid, military dictatorship, or totalitarianism, they are faced [...] with the unprecedented task of securing the legitimacy and future of their emergent polity by finding ways to commemorate and adjudicate past wrongs. (16)

Huyssen goes on to emphasize that the “*political* site of memory practices is still national” (16) for the nation constitutes a major boundary of psychic and lived resonances. Memorialization evinces the national conscience, which is why I would like to think through the role of memory and memorialization in illiberal nation-building as represented in late twentieth-century cyberpunk prose and as perform futures-to-come (and in some cases presents) for women and other minorities.

One of the bonding agents of nationhood and its majoritarian “national character” can be seen in the way nation-states enact remembrances of their formation and development; through cultural artifacts and memorials that synthesize national defeats and victories, nations form the foundations of collective memory. In “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” Jan Assmann argues that collective memory is best understood as “communicative memory” as “it lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years” (111). Cultural memory, by contrast, is embedded in the textual, figurative, and narrative symbolization and institutions of a culture. Communicative/ collective memory is “non-institutional” (Assmann 111), for it is “not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions” (111). Whereas cultural memory is sanctioned by official institutions and shaped by those in power, communicative memory is passed on and honored by those often silenced and disenfranchised by those in power. Communicative memory fuels the development of Piercy and Carter’s novels, for this form of memory provides the oppressed and the marginalized with hope and strategies for obtaining power over their lives.

Community and Dissident Memory Practices in Piercy’s *He, She, and It*

Piercy’s work is unabashedly feminist in its politics, as the author herself explicitly addresses in the “Acknowledgments” of *He, She, and It*. She notes that “Donna Haraway’s essay ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’ [sic] was extremely suggestive” (431) for her novel. One idea from “A Cyborg Manifesto” that may have been particularly compelling to Piercy is Haraway’s sense that “[l]iberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century” (149). While *He, She and It* features a destroyed future ravaged by biological and chemical warfare and governed by corporations, the novel and its cyborg women are nevertheless driven by hope for seeds of resistance against patriarchy, capitalism, militarism, and isolationism. In an interview in *Utopia* magazine, Piercy states:

utopia tends to be possible when people are coming to consciousness [...]. I am more interested in the type of utopias women have created. Basically women’s utopias have been places where what women do not have can exist—i.e., a sense of community, since many women are isolated while raising their children. A place where women are not punished for their sexuality, a place where raising children is communal or quasi-communal, a place where in old age people are respected and taken care of. A place where a lot of the tasks that are denigrated in this society are respected. (Furlanetto 421)

For Piercy, then, a promised land for women is characterized by communitarian engagement and networks, sexual freedom, and care and respect for older populations.

While *He, She, and It* hinges on utopian ideals, it renders the power and governance structures as dystopian. Norika, geographically evocative of North America, is juridically governed by the multinational corporation Yakamura-Stichen. Y-S's global reach achieves maximum efficiency and profit by treating citizens as employees, color-coded according to their labor uses. Y-S enacts violence at the micro and macro levels, as it participates with the other major corporate states to monitor the Megaglopolis (Glop), a stretch of ecological wasteland inhabited by those disenfranchised by the novel's corporate nations. When Shira, the protagonist, travels to Tikva with a detour through the Glop, she is reminded that this is where her housekeeper Rosa lives: "Day workers and gang ninos and the unemployed lived in the Glop—the great majority of the people on the continent" (33).² Piercy's quick sketch of Rosa, whose name marks her as ethnically Latina, and the Glop resonates with the message of the Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, who asserted at the Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 that women constituted "70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor" and "work[ed] two-thirds of the world's working hours, but earn[ed] only one-tenth of the world's income and own[ed] less than one-tenth of the world's property" (cited in Stark 339). In Piercy's novel, women and particularly non-white women carry the burden of economic inequality and labor injustice.

Despite the technological innovations in Piercy's future, migrant workers exist as mnemonic threats; they are symbols of the dangers of disobedience and expulsion from corporate states. Wearing color-coded uniforms, migrant workers visibly communicate the state's power to shield its citizen from the toxic environment outside of corporate domes and to provide a comfortable lifestyle. Because no food can be grown in the Glop, the corporate state maintains control over migrants by withholding supplies of vat food, a cheap mixture of algae and yeast (32), and other life-sustaining commodities, including information. The Glop, from which the domestic workers emerge and into which they disappear again after their work is done, is a nexus of travelling memory; as a territory discarded by the corporations and unprotected from the damaged earth by a dome, it houses all those who travel into gated nations to work. Astrid Erll contends that "all cultural memory must 'travel', be kept in motion, in

² While Piercy's novel radically re-centers the geographical and emotional core of the story to a Jewish and female point-of-view, Elyce Rae Helford points to troubling Western biases in Piercy's work that sully portrayals of Latinas, Japanese, and other minorities (128-130).

order to 'stay alive', to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations," and then further explains that "[s]uch travel consists only partly in movement across and beyond territorial and social boundaries" (Erl, "Travelling Memory" 12). To imbue memory with movement and present-ness acknowledges the dialogic and collaborative nature of ethical memory formations.³ Memories pass through, intersect and transact with, and are embedded in national, social, political, and global flows.

An open, ecologically barren wasteland—similar to wastelands found in many feminist's science-fiction novels, from Atwood's *Madaddam Trilogy* (2003-2013) to Sarah Hall's *Daughters of the North* (2007) and River Solomon's *Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017)—the Glop is not merely the home of the disempowered. It also functions as a site of potential resistance. Halfway through the novel, after an attack against Tikva, Shira and a group of volunteers that includes Shira's mother's lover Nili, Yod, the cyborg, and Gadi, Yod's human half-brother and Shira's childhood friend, travel to the Glop on a mission for information about the attack. They meet Lazarus, an information "terrorist," and The Coyotes, an underground resistance fighting to liberate people and knowledge from the corporation states. Lazarus explains to Shira that he and his clandestine movement are building their own information Net, as an alternative to the World Wide Net controlled by the major corporate states, to serve a different citizenry (308). In this exchange, Shira contributes her historical knowledge of labor unions to help the resistance empower workers, an act of dialogic remembering in times of political silencing (309). Raffaella Baccolini argues that Piercy's "recovery of history and literacy, together with the recovery of individual and collective memory, becomes an instrumental tool of resistance for their protagonists" (520). The Coyotes' alternative Net and the transmission of knowledge between those characters involved in resistant movements expand the imaginative possibilities of citizenship and technological access for the displaced and disenfranchised inhabitants of the Glop.

As a corporate town that is also patrilineal, Y-S encourages heteronormativity and gender inequality. Piercy evokes a familiar sense

³ Conceptualizing memory via mnemonic traces, Erl argues for the need to go beyond Pierre Nora's "social frameworks of memory – a notion which implies a certain 'framedness' connected to all memory, and may this connote boundaries and a certain stability," for those who must remember atrocities and mass exterminations do not experience those events as a stable event in the past; they are also not a homogeneous group and instead inhabit a position of "multiple memberships" (see "Travelling Memory" 10). The "five dimensions of movement: carriers, media, contents, practices and forms," submitted by Erl, affords deep insight into Carter and Piercy's representations of state violence. These categories afford a recalibration of the impact of memorialization activated in times of state totalitarianism.

of capitalism's investment in patriarchy, an illustrative practice that calibrates prestige and the individual's worth to consumerism; wives of wealthy and powerful male executives spend their days devoted to cosmetic enhancements and policing class boundaries via their consumption of goods and services. In essence, women of the Y-S upper-class are reduced to passive ciphers for capitalism's flows. Because of rampant infertility in the population, wrought in no small part by the toxins in the environment, much of these women's time is spent trying to conceive. They seek out the help of doctors, who acquire the status of the third parent "who does all the chemistry" (191-21). Reproductive privacy and bodily integrity are abolished, and knowledge about reproduction remains in the hands of the few, while women are treated as vessels for childbearing. For Shira, a gifted coder for whom Y-S "outbid the other multis" (5), the corporate state withholds promotions and prevents her from sharing custody of her son in the wake of her divorce in order to psychologically manipulate her (289). The totality of Y-S's ideological control is captured in its architecture of domination:

The room glittered in black and white marble, higher than wide and engineered to intimidate [...]. But she had enough psychological background to recognize the intent of the chamber where with their assigned lawyers they sat upright and rigid as tuning forks for the blow that would set them quivering into sound. (Piercy 1)

The corporate state memorializes its political authority through its architectural form as well as through ideological practices in order to suffocate alternative ideologies. For Aleida Assmann, political and cultural memories, as materialized in monuments and edifices, ritual practices, and state policies, embody "durability and trans-generational transmission" and work to define the nation (Assmann, "Four Formats" 26). Piercy demonstrates that Y-S's national identity, coalesced in its patriarchal ideologies, class and race hierarchies, architecture, and judicial system, transmits the belief that women are inferior to men.

After losing custody of her son to her ex-husband without just cause, Shira flees Y-S to the free-town Tikva, signaling a narrative break from patriarchal norms of citizenship. In Y-S, heterosexual marriage is seemingly the end-goal for women, in the sense that heterosexual familial structures "serve both to shape and to perpetuate middle-class values, including a gendered vision of citizenship" (Silbergleid 156). The mythic western nuclear family that Y-S upholds as the norm engenders violence against women's struggle for self-actualization and community. By disconnecting Shira from her Jewish grandmother Malkah, Y-S works to promote forgetting and stifle ideological dissent. Shira's belief that the "tradition" of giving up children to grandmothers to be raised is in fact a fabrication by her grandmother to explain the absence of Shira's mother,

Riva, who had gone into hiding many years ago for information terrorism against the multinationals (79). Riva, who eventually rejoins her mother and daughter, carries herself like “a general” (315) and is skilled at stealing high-tech secrets to share with the Glop. A warrior in mind and body, Riva is matched by her female lover Nili.⁴ Nili explains that she is a child of the Black Zone, a geographical area that corresponds to the Middle East, and a “joint descendent of Israeli and Palestinian women who survived” (198). While Elissa Gurman argues that Piercy’s feminism is one of continuity and tradition, where “empowered and technologically-enhanced women are valued primarily for their mothering or reproductive abilities” (460), I see Piercy’s depiction of Riva and Nili as an expansive challenge to patriarchy’s imperialist corporatism. Riva and Nili signify a continuum of female resistance against the interlinked forces of capitalist greed and violent patriarchy. They bear witness to the stranglehold of nation-states on information and knowledge, especially reproductive knowledge. In answer to the question of whether she was “born from a woman,” Nili explains: “We have no men. We clone and engineer our genes. After birth we undergo additional alteration. We have created ourselves to endure, to survive, to hold our land” (198). In a comedic twist, Shira discovers that she is actually her mother’s lover’s aunt because Riva used the same sperm donor that Nili’s mother used to conceive (191). This genealogical remixing is a bold counter-narrative to ideals of “legitimate” sexuality, gender roles, or familial kinship promoted by Y-S for its national success.

As a Jewish free-town, Tikva memorializes several millennia of Jewish persecution, but it also means hope. Malkah and Shira take on the roles of humanist storytellers who craft alternative explanations and myths. For Huyssen, “[t]he real can be mythologized, just as the mythic may engender strong reality effects” (16). In Piercy’s novel, myth bears witness to state-sanctioned brutality against minoritarian cultural and religious identities; it also prepares as well as preparing future generations for possible violence. Malkah’s bedtime story for Yod, the cyborg, is a key example of storytelling as a vehicle for contesting official (cultural and political) memory. According to Aleida Assmann, stories can expand the scope of social memory, which is often circumscribed by generational limits (“Four Formats” 26). In Piercy’s novel, social memory deepens the fault lines between national practices and lived experiences, empowering dissidence against Y-S’s patriarchal ideologies. Malkah’s narrative voice is sensual and tactile, weaving metaphors and images

⁴ Nili may be drawn from Sarah Aaronsohn, who was part of the Nili spy network that battled to free Palestine from the Ottoman Empire. See Sarah Aaronsohn in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/aaronsohn-sarah>>.

delicately to socialize the newly conscious cyborg into a history of Jewish humanist values: “I am telling this story for you as I lie alone in my own huge antique bed in the bedroom shaped to me like an old familiar garment, with the scent of narcissus from the courtyard, in this house of my family with its oasis of green in the desert the world has become” (18). However, Malkah senses that there is a threat lurking outside her “modern ghetto” (18). In weaving an origin story for Yod about Rabbi Judah Loew, his Golem, and the Jewish pogrom of sixteen-century Prague, Malkah commemorates Jewish history and gives to Yod the seeds of Jewish-humanist principles of honour, hard work, community, self-defense. Malkah embodies what Aleida Assmann’s delineates as “remembering to never forget” (“From Collective Violence” 50), that is to say, a therapeutic act of sharing the burden of remembering among all members of a society, allowing victim groups to feel as an integral part of majoritarian constituency. Assmann theorizes that forgetting or silence is a form of conflict resolution to control and contain those defeated by another regime, while dialogic remembering allows for new forms and pathways to emerge without annihilating the past (“From Collective Violence” 3). In Piercy, the ethical imperative to remember communally is also an act to commemorate historical violence.

Piercy molds her characterization of Yod after Haraway’s depiction of the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149). Avram creates Yod, in secret, as a bio-weapon to protect Tikva and its technological advancements from Y-S and other corporate states. Yod is the literary materialization of Haraway’s sense that cyborgs “are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism” (151). Haraway finds promise in this origin story, for “illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (151). While Avram’s intentions in creating Yod are uncomfortably close to that of patriarchal capitalism and militarism, Piercy emphasizes Yod’s potential, as a liminal figure, for interrupting the legacies of these socio-political realities. Yod is socialized by Malkah’s Jewish feminism, surrounded by reverence for both ecological preservation and technological innovations, accepted as a citizen, held responsible for civic duties (such as defense patrolling) in Tikva, and encouraged to embrace fluidity in his sense of gender ideations. Unloved by his creator and erstwhile father Avram, Yod finds a family amongst Shira, Malkah, Gadi, Avram’s biological son, and Ari, Shira’s biological son (349). Yod also embodies every vital human characteristic, including the ability to love and to formulate ethical positions.

Stories of the Golem as well as Frankenstein's creature teach Yod about social relations and sharpen his longing for citizenship and familial bonds (406). The dialogic nature of Piercy's novel weaves Jewish mysticism with Shelley's science fiction to disrupt the masculinist cyberpunk of early William Gibson and Neal Stephenson. As a being without a trove of lived memories, Yod appreciates both the story of Frankenstein's monster and the Golem because they generatively prod self-reflections about justice and belonging (174). Stories and books are pre-eminent technologies of collective, non-institutional memory. Communicative memory is profoundly human. The act of memorialization can be empowering for those who hold the power to enact memorialization practices. Piercy's novel suggests that Tikva nurtures individuals as memory carriers and practices that empower its people to act ethically and to think about their actions' implications for the future. Because Yod fears the "[i]ntense pleasure" (106-7) he experienced during combat against Y-S drones (he feels this pleasure because killing is part of his programming), he blows himself up at the end of the novel. He also destroys Avram's lab and with it the bioengineering intelligence behind his creation to prevent the militaristic expansion of Tikva, Y-S, or other corporate states. Yod's death is also a sacrifice to free Ari, Shira's son. This is a renewal of the novel's ethical commitment to the non-repetition of state and mass violence. An important aspect of ethical memory practices is to prevent past atrocities from re-occurring.⁵ Yod's death commemorates an anti-militaristic social memory; he will become a part of Tikva's memory fabric and its memorialization of the ethical way of life.

⁵ I borrow this idea of non-repetition from transitional justice scholarship that tackles the subject of symbolic reparation and prevention of future atrocities. The 2005 *UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law (the UN Guiding Principles)* stipulates that all victims of gross violations of human rights are entitled to "adequate, effective and prompt reparation for harm suffered," whereby reparation includes "restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition" (IX.18). For me, the salient points of transitional justice is the creation of a political site for equal participation in nation-building as well as an ethos of non-repetition so that militarism, corporatism, and patriarchy do not continue to consolidate absolute power. Greely et. al. suggest that as "a secondary form of redress, memorialization is rarely considered vital to promoting the active participation of victims as equal partners in a political community" (Greely et. al. 168). Bell and O'Rourke argue that the nineteen-nineties have sharpened into focus the need, as the nation remembers and is rebuilt, to ensure that gendered violence against women are not repeated under the expediency of war (Bell and O'Rourke 23).

Memory Suppression and Recovery in Carter's *The Fortunate Fall*

Like Piercy's novel, Rafael Carter's *The Fortunate Fall* represents a violent future of patriarchal, militaristic control, but it is compounded by sophisticated nano-technology. The novel, which borrows its detective-like structure from noir fiction, portrays a long history of state-sponsored atrocities and information suppression. In the twenty-third century, the novel's present day, telepresence, a technology that allows humans to transmit images, emotions, and information to other neuro-altered humans, has emerged as a pre-eminent medium and mediator of information and news. People like Maya Andreyeva, Carter's protagonist, are "wired" and serve as human (cyborg) cameras, or conduits, for an audience that experiences and sees what they see. In the novel, nano-tech prostheses are widespread, though the poor must settle for older versions, and most people tune into the kind of virtual reality Maya provides to escape their dilapidated environs wrought by centuries of war, famine, ecological exploitation, and socio-political stratification. Both the physical and the virtual worlds are surveilled by state-controlled policing bodies keen to "neutralize," meaning to terminate individuals who exhibit deviancy from heterosexuality or resistance to official narratives of history.

Carter's construction of cyclical regimes of state terror is revealed in fragments as Maya Andreyeva exhumes traces of several centuries of terror across a geographic territory reminiscent of the United Socialist Soviet Union. After some devastating decades of political and cultural control under the so-called "Guardians," a political elite in the era prior to the novel's nano-tech breakthrough, whose "McGulags" were spread far and wide, an AI virus emerged with the ability to absorb people's minds into a mega-database. Some inhabitants under the Guardian's control had their memories and identities "erased and filled with data, so the memories of others would remain inviolate" (17), while others were used as cannon fodder whose purpose was to "walk blindly into everything and see if it will kill them" (18). By November 2246, the AI's Unanimous Army's "One Mind" (18) mob had been marching through the Guardians' territory for two years in a genocidal war called the Calinshchina. When victory was at hand, the Army's software "suddenly erased itself from all its component minds, [which meant that] more than half the people in the world found themselves at least a thousand miles from home" (18). In the aftermath of the starvation and displacements wreaked by the UA, a new government called the "Fusion of Historical Nations" emerged as a unifying, authoritarian regime for the former USSR region.

After the genocidal Calinshchina event, the Fusion of Historical Nations used monolithic historical accounts to promote a national ethos for those living under its control. However, these national narratives

sacrificed lived experiences as well as social and individual memories, i.e. communicative memory. The Unanimous Army's massacres during the Calinshchina acts as a collective wound in the world of the novel, a national memory that haunts, organizes, and governs people's expectations and fears about mass violence and sustains the ascendancy of martial and authoritarian law in the Fusion of Historical Nations. Those in power employ the Calinshchina as a national trauma, disabling citizens of the nation from healing or moving on from violence. Individual memory is buried and delegitimized through suppressor devices or threats of eradication by virtual or physical law enforcement officers. Having been arrested by the physical Post-cops for sexual deviance, Maya, who had faced a death sentence for her same-sex relationship, lives with a suppressor implant that reduces not only her libido but also her sensory experiences of food and life in general. Additionally, the other sockets and slots in Maya's head allow the state to surveille and suppress emotions, actions, and experiences it deems threatening to the nation. While Maya says that the suppressor is a comfort after she has lived with it for more than a decade, it is a pre-eminent tool of state control.

Carter's protagonist is an eccentric character who loves to quote Humphrey Bogart, is ironical, and refuses to upgrade her nano-technology, despite working as a journalist who can provide her audience with near-immediate sensory experiences through telepresence technology. Maya's journalistic investigation into the history of Calinshchina can be seen as a means to document and memorialize national silencing. Her reconstruction of the fragmented history of the Guardians' defeat as well as the rise of the Fusion of Historical Nations, via the massacre performed by the Unanimous Army, parallels her fraught technological and psychological recovery of her own suppressed memories. With the help of Keishi Mirabara, her replacement "screener," a wired functionary who mitigates Maya's tangential thoughts or desires during the broadcast so they do not disturb the illusion that Maya is a robotic vessel of news, Maya digs up hidden archives of the Holocaust and the "Terror-Famine"—perhaps a reference to the Holodomor of 1932/1933. Keishi's super-computing power allows the two women to process a vast trove of information and condense it for viewers. There are no first-hand witnesses of any of the Square Mile prison camps employed by the Guardians to imprison dissidents, because the Unanimous Army absorbed the prisoners and haphazardly drilled nanotech into their heads to displace their individual memories (44). By following the women during their investigations, Carter shows that the more Maya mines the past, the more it is palpable that state terrorism breeds more state violence, whether in martial, technocratic, or symbolic forms.

Because the Guardians, the Unanimous Army, and the Fusion of Historical Nations are all authoritarian regimes, to exist while bearing the traces of the atrocities committed by the nation states is the seed for resistance in the novel. However, resistance is more difficult when the multi-generation states of the novel have systematically silenced and suppressed communicative memory for Carter's characters. Keishi leads Maya to Voskresnye, a shadowy dissident and survivor of both the Guardians' and the Unanimous Army's violent regimes. Voskresnye has survived through a Frankensteinian experiment performed by the Guardians' top scientist, Aleksandr Derzhavin, who fused his sentience and corporeal being with the last living whale held captive in a secret lab underground. Nano-tech cables join Voskresnye to the whale, and he keeps her—the whale is female—alive against her will to extend his own life. Voskresnye appears to Maya either as a projection or in cyberspace throughout most of the novel because his physical body is yoked to the long-living whale. The whale's capacious selfhood is eventually also colonized by Keishi, who turns out to be Maya's former lover, who had to disassemble her mind into millions of data parcels to escape the Weavers' justice (that is, death for the crime of sexual deviance). Voskresnye and Keishi sacrifice their bodily existence to be able to continue existing in cyberspace and to carry on their objections against state authoritarianism. Their ultimate plan is to broadcast the existence of the whale on Maya's news program and to expose the Guardians' and the Unanimous Army's history of state cruelty and terrorism as a way of calling on people to overthrow the oppressive Fusion of Historical Nations government.

Voskresnye's and Keishi's sacrifice complicates ideas about heroism. While they perform it to fight state oppression, it is shown to be deeply unethical insofar as it includes the whale. Without a pod, trapped in the underground tank, isolated from her natural environment, mutilated by experiments, and impaired by old age, the whale speaks of her life as a dream of death: "a dream where the water will not hold me up, and I am moving my fluke all the time I wish to be a man, in order to [...] to make die [...] That. Yes. It is a dream come out of hating" (225-26). After the fall of the Unanimous Army, Voskresnye freed the whale by unhooking himself from her subduing hardware to allow her to swim away. The whale found herself in a world where all traces of her kind had been exterminated, and so she returned to her underground tank, as Voskresnye returned to the lab because he remained a hunted dissident and a terrorist under the Fusion of Historical Nations. Carter's critique is poignant and devastating, in that Keishi and Voskresnye's desire for survival includes betrayal, subterfuge, and the arrogation of another living being. For them, their human selfhood and continuous existence

supersedes nonhuman collateral damage as well as multispecies ethics. As Maria Mies theorizes, the consequence of “patriarchal capitalism,” is that “the accumulation process itself destroys the core of human essence everywhere because it is based on the destruction of women’s autarky over their lives and bodies” (2). A system that exploits and terrorizes its people forces people into desperate acts that can lead either to further tyranny, in this case over nonhuman others, or to potential resistance, or, indeed, to both at the same time.

The cultural and political memory of *The Fortunate Fall*, with its totalitarian negation of personal and social memories, engenders cyborg figures (Voskresnye and Keishi) that are, unlike Piercy’s Yod, “single vision[ed]” (Haraway 154). Rejecting dualistic or reductionistic thinking, Haraway alternatively advocates for a cyborgian, feminist approach of assemblage and “partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (Haraway 151) to decode and recode the “systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations” (164). For Voskresnye, telepresence and nano-prostheses have the ability to erase what Haraway describes as “the sins of *locality*, all the errors that arise from being prisoned in one body and no other—as racism, sexism, classism, and of course and especially nationalism” (229). Voskresnye sees himself and those with advanced nano-tech modifications, advanced cyborgs, or as he puts it, as “a race of gods” (Carter 284) superior to unmodified humans prior to the twenty-second century who did not have the ability to store souls in cyberspace or to merge one’s self with that of another. The question of ethics and individual autonomy does not matter to him, and his violence against the whale reproduces old structures of capitalist and patriarchal imperialism. Maya, on the other hand, is not only troubled by the commodification of memories and experience that the take-over of the whale entails, but also by the erasure of individual self-expression and self-actualization. When the whale dies, shredded by nanotech that Voskresnye has implanted in her DNA, Voskresnye screams at Maya for refusing to telecast the event: “You will let this be forgotten?” (282). Maya is also concerned that Keishi helps Voskresnye to turn the “death of the last whale in the world into something you can buy shrink-wrapped off a spinner at a grocery” (229, 284). When Maya remains adamant in her refusal to broadcast Voskresnye’s propaganda about the whale, Keishi steps into tele-broadcast the tragic event. Keishi’s complicity is an ethical ignorance engendered, I argue, from an absence of rich memory transmissions.

The whale represents not what Voskresnye imagines, i.e. his triumph over the Guardians and the Weavers, but the persistence of history. She signifies the history of environmental and ecological exploitation as well as society’s increasing (state-sponsored) dependence on advanced

computing to store or manufacture memory. One consequence of this long prehistory of violence is Voskresnye's hubris; that is, the idea that he has the right to transcend the immanence of his human body by co-opting another body, without consideration for the ethical violence this entails. Carter's rendering of the whale and the protagonist as female adds specificity to the consequences of such violent state ideologies for women. The whale experiences a twofold trauma: her separation from her pod and the oceanic world and the occupation of her body by others. As a symbolic double for Maya, the whale is a living memorial of oppression that the repeated invasion of women's bodies in the world of the novel constitutes.

When the whale dies, taking Voskresnye with her, Keishi begs Maya to be allowed to store the core parcel of her soul in Maya's mind, arguing that this would allow them to be together forever. Maya rejects this proposition, however, commenting: "And will you hold me when I'm frightened, Keishi Mirabara?" (283). This suggests that having uncovered the many gruesome histories of state violence against women, sexual minorites, conscientious objectors, and nonhuman beings, and having witnessed Keishi's and Voskresnye's colonization of the whale's body, Maya is deeply suspicious of technological transcendence. Sherryl Vint suggests that Carter employs the "subversion of cyberpunk tropes" such as the transfer of minds "precisely to restore the repressed body and marginalized material reality" (124). Bronwen Calvert and Sue Walsh reflect that "Cyberpunk science fiction is about the mind," but also note that feminists' "close identification with 'the body' means that it is difficult for women to see liberation in a transcendence which effectively rubs them out" (96, 98). Although Calvert and Walsh focus on Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991) and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), their analysis hinges on the idea that the cybersphere is a site of transcendence while the corporeal world is one of decay and archaism (102). I contend that Piercy and Carter embrace the corporeal and the spiritual, not in opposition to technological transcendence, but in a feminist remediation of the cyborg body, with special attention to the material engendering and exploitation of female bodies. Their versions of cyberpunk trouble the dualisms of science fiction and recalibrate the body question to bring into focus the ethical lapses of nation-states for women and minoritarian groups.

With the ubiquity of nano-technology conjoined with environmental collapse, virtual reality is preferable to the "real world" in Carter's novel. For both Voskresnye, who is bound to the whale by physical cables, and Keishi, who is alive only as a hologram, virtual reality extends their consciousness, but their lives are entirely chimeral. The flatness of their lives is a product of state consolidation of technological control of

personal, social, cultural, and political memories. The Fusion of Historical Nations strategically seizes the technologies of memory and historical traumas to undermine both individual and common histories. Narratively, in making the sign of terror visible on her protagonist's body, Carter calls attention to the lasting harm state violence inflicts on the cyborgian body of his protagonist Maya. Her disfigured cyborg body symbolizes the cyclical repetition and inadequate emotional and existential compensation for victims. Because Maya has been "rehabilitated" by her authoritarian nation-state and turned into a camera medium, she blacks out while driving a car when a memory of her past lover threatens to surface (25). The re-mapping of her cerebral cortex by the suppressor implant intended to obviate personal memories and desires, terrorizes the individual as well as the society to which she belongs. To think this another way, the state suppresses personal and social memory in order to negate self-actualization and autonomy.

Recuperating Communitarian Memory Practices

Read side-by-side and with a focus on memory and memorialization, the overlaps and divergences between Piercy and Carter's novels reveal the dire state of signifying memory practices and lived experiences under authoritarian regimes. Carter and Piercy both demonstrate the dangers of memory technologies that delegitimizes corporeal, lived memories, making minoritarian subject positions all the more vulnerable. The destruction of the cyborg Yod in *He, She, and It* and the destruction of the whale, Voskresnye, and Keishi in *The Fortunate Fall* are accusations fired at futuristic authoritarian states. While Shira insists that Yod is "a purer form of what we're all tending toward" (150), Piercy denies the importance of the singular, perfect (cyborg) being, emphasizing, instead, the strategic union of technologically-enhanced communities and culturally-situated memories. Piercy, more than Carter, embraces dialogic remembering, uniting people across raced, sexed, gender, class, and ethnic lines through conversation, which helps to build communitarian politics.

To different degrees both authors suggest the necessity of connection and coalition politics in the formation of memories and memorials. Piercy's novel emphasizes the role of social and communicative memory as vehicles for combatting political domination. Borrowing from noir fiction to highlight the emptiness of individual's lives under an interventionist, authoritarian state, Carter portrays the devastating fragmentation to the self and society when social and personal memories are obliterated; the Fusion of Historical Nations deploys technology to control what is recorded and remembered of history, in addition to displacing literature and personal testimonials as

holders of memory. If Jan and Aleida Assmann are correct in claiming that collective memory persists for three generations, or eighty years, then Carter's characters exist in a world where persistent state control over memory and history has endured for so long that the powerful "can destroy not just a people, but all memory of a people" (62). It is also revealed that people are educated about but also by way of television and movies, rather than novels or written texts. In "Traumatic Pasts, Literary Afterlives, and Transcultural Memory" (2011), Astrid Erll posits that literature is a technology of memory, producing and shaping cultural memory rather than simply a passive vessel of it (n.p.). When Maya is introduced to Melville's *Moby Dick* and then Shelley's *Frankenstein*, she is stunned at the richness of these written worlds. In both novels, official, i.e. corporate-state-sponsored educational content is the indoctrination tool par excellence.

Employing twentieth-century popular and formulaic film and television programming as the basis of educational curriculum, the Fusion of Historical Nations actively discourages introspective and self-actualizing representations and narratives, especially in written works, in *The Fortunate Fall*. Unlike Piercy's novel, where Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Malkah's storytelling revives a Jewish humanist tradition as a needed antidote to cyber-ahistoricism, Carter's novel does not offer a hopeful vision of ethical correction. In Carter's novel, the Guardians regime was able to "raise new generations that have never known anything but tyranny" (62) through technological appropriation of narrative and memory. However, in a (slim) sketch of the political situation in Africa (represented as one unified nation in the text), Carter acknowledges the potential for communitarian belonging, even as it is stipulated that His-Majesty-in-Chains, Africa's ruler, has rigid rules for keeping out those whose skin does not retain pigment. Africa's high-tech innovations, which has the ability to hold space for the souls of the nation's inhabitants on its own version of the Net, registers the possibility of a technologically-advanced nation-state that does not consign the non-cerebral aspects of human existence to silence and forgetting.

Feminist cyberpunk like Piercy's and Carter's advocates for accountability and the inclusion of voices from the margins through memory work and technologies (storytelling, books, first-person accounts, alternative transmission pathways) that advance coalitions and assemblage knowledges. In both Piercy and Carter, the transition toward an ethical society is one that requires destruction before reconstruction. The destruction of dogmatic and oppressive myths about the nuclear family, heterosexual and reproductive naturalness, capitalistic growth, ecological expendability, powers of the nation-state, and technology's liberatory powers are embraced as a politics of non-repetition and *The*

Fortunate Fall. Yod's death in *He, She and It* symbolizes the power of not non-repetition to disrupt the global hegemonies upheld by the patriarchal, militaristic corporate states. In *The Fortunate Fall*, Maya's refusal to participate in the exploitation of the whale and her denial of Keishi's request to have her life prolonged through virtual colonization upholds a politics of accountability and non-repeating violence. Both novels reject the possibility of a technological utopia because, in the authors' constructions, dominant nations are invested in their citizens' obedience and conformity to patriarchal values, which are concomitant with heterosexuality, militarism, and corporatism. For Piercy as well as Carter, technological advancements are too readily abused by nation states to erase communicative memory. New memory pathways must be forged in order to remake the biological boundaries of the human without reproducing violent memory practices of nation-states.

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“This Is the World We Made”: Queer Metaphor, Neo-Colonial Militarization, and Scientific Ethics in *The Old Guard* (2020)

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Abstract

The Old Guard, an action and speculative film released by Netflix in 2020, is based on a comic book written by Greg Rucka and illustrated by Leandro Fernandez and was adapted to film by director Gina Prince Bythewood. Her adaptation of the violent and bloody graphic novel centers around a group of immortals—of whom half are canonically LGBTQ+ and of color—and their mission to save the world. The film directly questions the representation of queer characters who must die as a way to center the heterosexual hero—also known as the “bury-your-gays” trope. By not only focusing on the subversivity of queer love and the violence that is often predominant in action cinema, but also in subverting queer history by making it unable to die, unable to be killed, *The Old Guard* destabilizes how one might view speculative action cinema. Furthermore, this paper addresses questions of unethical scientific experimentation, as well as the representations and subversions of globalization and neo-colonialism in the ways of militarization, queer metaphor, and the rewriting of history. By investigating these representations, this paper argues that *The Old Guard* imagines a future without queer death, but it also simultaneously interrogates the ethics of neocolonial militarization and western sciences within action cinema through a BIPOC, female, and queer gaze.

Introduction

The Old Guard (2020), directed by Gina Prince Bythewood and produced by Netflix, begins with the sound of bullet-shell casings dropping to the floor, a close-up shot of black combat boots, and glimpses of dead bodies amidst eerie silence. Another series of close-up shots centers on lifeless faces covered in blood—faces later shown to be those of the protagonists of the film. Boots tread amongst the bodies, checking to see if the people on the ground are really dead while a female voice comments on the gruesome scene via voiceover: “I’ve been here before, over and over again, and each time the same question. Is this it? Will this time be the one? And each time, the same answer. And I’m just so tired of it” (00:45-01:10). The echoing sound of the narrator’s voice amidst the uncomfortable silence suggests a solitude in death, a theme further emphasized when the screen cuts to black and the lyrics “we were born alone, and we die, alone” are sung (1:10). And yet, the words spoken by the narrator point beyond death and toward the possibility of rebirth. The narrator’s words mixed with the violent scene implies that the lifeless bodies on screen have dealt with death many times already, to the point where they experience an exhaustion with their endless rebirth. Indeed, as the audience soon learns, the protagonists are a group of immortals who cannot die, or rather, who continue to be resurrected, even when they die a most violent death. By highlighting their inability to remain dead, the movie places them in a queer position in relation to linear time. As we would like to suggest, the concept of immortality works here to queer—as in to make unstable—typical notions of violence within speculative action cinema.

The Old Guard, hereafter *TOG*, is adapted from the graphic novels of the same name, written by Greg Rucka and illustrated by Leandro Fernandez. The film adaptation investigates the ethics and morals associated with violence, death, and American militarism. *TOG* follows the story of a group of immortals who describe themselves as a covert “army of four” (38:05). The group, made up of queer-coded and LGBTQ+ characters, is led by the ancient Greek warrior Andromache of Scythia, known in the film as Andy (Charlize Theron): Andy is accompanied by Booker (Matthias Schoenaerts), Joe (Marwan Kenzari), Nicky (Luca Marinelli), and their most recent addition to the group, Nile (Kiki Layne); together, these immortals have fought for centuries, and continue to fight to protect the mortal world. During a counterfeit emergency mission set up by former CIA officer James Copley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) in South Sudan, their extraordinary abilities are exposed. As a result, Andy and her team must protect themselves by eliminating the threat posed by the CEO of a pharmaceutical empire, Steven Merrick (Harry Melling), who utilizes Copley to capture the immortals and who seeks to research and monetize

the immortals' power. After narrating the events leading up to the confrontation between Andy's band of immortals and Merrick's mercenaries, the film culminates in a crescendo of violence, enacted by the immortals against Merrick himself in an attempt to free themselves from unethical and dehumanizing scientific testing. In the end, Merrick is killed, which suggests a momentary victory, albeit a morally compromising one, of the protagonists over the militaristic and imperialistic system that the CEO represents.

TOG, as a speculative action film, questions many issues related to the traditional action cinema genre. First, it subverts the way traditional action films typically represent queer/LGBTQ+ characters by replacing the "bury-your-gays" trope—which kills off queer characters—with representations of queer immortality. Following a similar argument to J. Halberstam concerning the representation of retributive violence (cf. *Imagined Violence/Queer Violence*), our paper suggests that the violence enacted by LGBTQ+ and/or BIPOC superhumans like Andy and her team, who are routinely ostracized in the traditional American action genre, complicates viewers' understanding of what constitutes acceptable forms of violence and what does not. This is especially true because the movie addresses individual violence in the context of neocolonialism and imperialism, systems of cultural violence that often run as a backbone within Hollywood action productions.

Lori A. Crowe, argues that "[t]he motives, themes, dialogues, and images in superhero films are hypermasculinized, raced, classed, and violent, and the mass distribution of such representations have the ability to influence the way we think about the military, security, and war" (134). Crowe's argument is important because it points to the fact that traditional action cinema, a genre that superhero films are closely linked to, is oftentimes male-centric, hegemonically heterosexist, imperialistic and formatted as propaganda to support the military services. While a film like *TOG* subverts some of these narrative structures through the queer metaphor of immortality and LGBTQ+ existence, the hegemonic structure of American action cinema and the representations associated with it cannot be fully overturned by a film still produced within the same framework. However, insofar as it "challenge[s] the dominance of heterosexist discourses" (Beemyn and Eliason 165) by foregrounding a queer and female gaze and insofar as it relies on "a distorting, a making the solid unstable" (Corber and Valocchi 25), Bythewood's adaptation engages in an act of queering that works to subvert traditional action cinema. The existence of queerness and the action of queering is related to how violence is portrayed and how it must be viewed critically. By inventing a queer history reaching back to the beginning of "western" civilization through the character of Andy, and by subverting the kind of

homophobic plot in which LGBTQ+ people must die either as a form of punishment or as a form of sacrifice to make room for a heterosexual future, the film critiques “the world we made”—a line taken from Ruelle’s song of the same title—through violence. Our analysis of *TOG*, therefore, allows a nuanced debate about ethics and violence to take center stage.

LGBTQ+ Representations in *The Old Guard* (2020)

Lisa Purse explains that containment strategies are used in action films to suppress and control women and/or BIPOC characters on the cinematic screen through “comic framing, marginalisation, [...] narrative closure and demonisation” (133). She adds that when this is done to a queer character, it is done “by removing [queerness] completely from the screen and thus from the space of action” (137-38). When containment strategies are employed alongside queer-coding, they often work to hide LGBTQ+ love, desire, and gender diversity by erasing it from the screen. Instead of using such strategies of containment and queer-coding, *TOG* turns them on their head by focusing on queer characters that love each other and profess their love as well as including characters that are coded as queer, rather than being identified as queer. Hence, although there are actual queer characters in *TOG*—specifically Joe and Nicky—there also exists an implicit queer-coding of the female characters Andy and Nile through their dress and gender presentations. In addition, the implied relationship between Andy and Quynh, fighting partners for several millennia before they were separated during the witch trials of Europe, further paints the leader of the immortals as a queer hero. Queerness in *TOG* is thus not contained; it is out in the open both because it depicts a homosexual relationship between two immortal men and because it depicts immortal women who defy traditional gender expectations and heterosexual desire and desirability.

Andy and Nile both portray nontypical understandings of heteronormative and patriarchal femininity that have traditionally been object to the “male gaze” within action cinema. Both Andy and Nile initially present as rather androgynous and even perhaps gender non-conforming in terms of their behavior, style, and stature. Andy has short hair, slight muscles, and spends the bulk of the film in a black tank top and black jeans, even though her counterpart in the graphic novel is portrayed as feminine in a rather stereotypical and sexualized way. This shift in the movie toward a more masculinized and androgynous representation of the leader of the immortals helps code Andy as queer, mainly, through her androgynous gender presentation, which later morphs into queer-coded homoeroticism with Quynh as her story progresses in both the film and graphic novels.

Nile portrays a slightly different form of gender non-conformity, one that is also related to her identity as a Black woman. She is more feminine than Andy, yet she also represents a constrained and contemporary military style. Throughout the movie, Nile's hair is braided tightly; initially, she is dressed in clothes that are reminiscent of her uniform during her time in the Marine Corps, but as the film progresses, Nile wears increasingly casual as well as colorful clothing. Her brightly colored clothing, compared to Andy's dark ones, eventually turns her into a counter-image of the masculinized leader of the immortals, yet it similarly allows Nile, the soldier, to diverge from sexualized and objectified femininity. Her presentation also works to juxtapose the old—the antiquity of Andy and her team—with the new, aligning her with a modernity that is also criticized within the film when it is also represented through capitalist greed associated with Merrick. Nile shows that fluidity is required within modernity, specifically as a Black woman existing within a postcolonial world, which highlights the contemporary setting of the film. Thus, she works as a character who actively queers the action film genre and its typical gender roles because she does not adhere to patriarchal notions of gender and therefore convolutes the boundaries that comprise it.

Initially the two women also exemplify a form of militarism that works hand in hand with traditional, hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, the film portrays both the women's bodies as "functional weapons" along the lines of Jeffrey A. Brown's reasoning that,

[W]hile the well-toned, muscular female body is obviously an ideal in this age of physical fitness, it is presented in these films as first and foremost a functional body, a *weapon*. The cinematic gaze of the action film codes the heroine's body in the same way it does the muscular male heroes, as both an object and subject [...]. Hers is not a body that exists solely to please men, it is designed to be *functional* (56; emphasis added).

Although Andy and Nile's bodies are designed to be functional (i.e., deadly) and not sexualized, they are still objectified, albeit for the purpose of male-coded militarization, not male pleasure. The fetishization of the weaponized female body works within the heteronormative ideals of patriarchy, while it also subverts the ways in which hegemonic femininity has traditionally been sexualized in action cinema. The film shows that the weaponization of Andy and Nile does not fully diverge from representations of femininity within the action genre, because they too must adhere to these masculine norms or else risk being contained. Yet, when one reads the two female heroes' immortality as a metaphor for queerness, we can see that their functionality is exploited by an even higher order of power: capitalism in the guise of "scientific research" for the betterment of humanity. Existing as superhuman beings to be tested upon and exploited, both Andy and Nile fulfill their roles as female action heroines by becoming weaponized, being exploited for this

weaponization, and then breaking free of both restraints to assume full control of their lives, bodies, and powers (of im/mortality) through the queer-coding of their gender presentations.

The Sexually Queer Action Hero

In *TOG*, the sexually queer hero is used to disrupt representations of the “functional”—that is, weaponized—superhero body. Analyzing the relationship between Joe and Nicky as well as the implied relationship between Andy and Quynh exemplifies this disruption, as both relationships defy the heteronormative system that constitutes the backbone of traditional action cinema. Joe and Nicky’s relationship insistently and actively subverts the action genre; what is more, it does so while avoiding stereotypical, racial, and patriarchal notions of homosexuality. The crucial scene in which this subversion of the genre is found is when Joe and Nicky are captured by Merrick and transported to London to be experimented on. Stuck in an armored van, surrounded by soldiers in tactical gear, Joe checks to see whether Nicky has reanimated beside him. The soldiers hold Joe back and one of them even tells him to shut up, leading Joe to ask provocatively: “What are you going to do, kill me?” (59:00). This scene once more confronts the soldiers as well as the spectators with the fact that, in contrast to so many queer people before them, these queer characters cannot be killed. Yet even though they cannot suffer the deadly consequences of homophobia and anti-queer violence, they are not entirely safe from it either. When Joe insists again that he needs to check on Nicky after the latter has revived, the soldier retorts condescendingly: “What is he, your boyfriend?” (59:08-21). Noticing Joe’s reaction to the soldier’s homophobia, Nicky sighs dramatically as Joe begins his rant:

Joe: You’re a child. An infant. Your mocking is thus infantile. He’s not my boyfriend. This man is more to me than you can dream. He’s the moon when I’m lost in darkness and warmth when I shiver in cold. And his kiss still thrills me even after a millennium. His heart overflows with the kindness of which this world is not worthy of. I love this man beyond measure. He’s not my boyfriend. He’s all and he’s more.

Nicky: You’re an incurable romantic. (59:33-1:00:07)

Directly after this declaration of love, the two kiss as the soldiers watch in shock. After a few seconds, the couple is pulled away from one another and the scene closes. When Copley and Keane open the doors of the armored van in the next scene, they find all the soldiers in the car killed with Joe and Nicky still chained and their hands tied, humorously watching the surprise on their captors’ faces. Instead of repeating an anti-queer narrative in which the harassment of two gay men leads to their violent death, the scene implies that the soldiers’ attempt to stop Joe and Nicky from being together resulted in their untimely deaths. Violence,

here, is enacted by these queer heroes as a form of retaliation against homophobia.

Instead of being openly queer, Andy's relationship with Quynh is merely coded as such in *TOG*.¹ In contrast to the comics, there is no outright declaration of love between Andy and her partner, Quynh, other than hints at their eternal promise spoken to each other after being captured and jailed as witches: "Just you and me...to the end" (50:19-23). When talking about Andy's and Quynh's history to Nile, Nicky describes how the two women came to be regarded as witches when they would not stay dead after enduring the torture inflicted on them during the witch trials. The separation of Quynh and Andy as a result of the witch trials is also shown to be one major reason why Andy has lost her desire to live forever. Andy and Quynh's queered position, therefore, does not only lie in their immortality and their revolt against patriarchal gender roles, which positions them as "evil" within the traditional logic of European Christianity, but also in their subtly coded homoerotic love. In Andy and Quynh's relationship as well as in Joe and Nicky's relationship, then, queerness is, first, the center, even when coded, and, second, used to challenge a long and ongoing history of homophobia and the violence related to it within the patriarchal, European system as well as the imperialist Euro-American system that it developed into.

Queering Traditional Action Cinema

The "bury-your-gays" trope originates in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tragic literary narratives in which queer characters had to die to be punished for their alleged moral infringements or to show that there was (regrettably) no place for them in the world, let alone a happy ending. The trope dictates "that in a narrative work [...], which features a same-gender romantic couple, one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the story" (Hulan 17) and it happens "often violently, in service of someone else's character development" (Cameron 2). Haley Hulan remarks that "straight creators will often use *Bury Your Gays* as a tool for exploitation or for the perceived shock value that queerness's depiction can have for straight audiences" (21). This exploitation of LGBTQ+ characters and queer death as a shocking spectacle in TV series and films written and/ or directed by cis-gender and/or straight creators continues to shape LGBTQ+ representations and is still popular to date in cultural media, however, not without consequences.

¹It is only in Rucka's second graphic novel within the series *The Old Guard: Force Multiplied* that the homoerotic coding between the two women is solidified with a kiss.

One of the most prominent examples of “bury-your-gays” can be found in director Jason Rothenberg’s post-apocalyptic science fiction drama TV series *The 100* (2014-2020), where the character Lexa is suddenly killed off by a stray bullet meant for the protagonist, Clarke, her love interest in season three, episode “Thirteen,” immediately after the two spent their first night together. Although the episode caused viewing figures to rise, the queer death that abruptly ended “Clexa,” as fans named the two women’s “ship,” remained not without consequences. Immediately after the episode aired, “#LGBTfansdeservebetter” began trending and quickly metastasized into the website LGBTfansdeservebetter.com which tracks gay and lesbian deaths as well as the use of the harmful, anti-LGBTQ+ tropes on television” (Hulan 23). Films like *TOG* showcase how not engaging with this trope, or better yet subverting it completely by allowing LGBTQ+ characters to live without being killed off solely for shock value, has proven to be highly successful amongst fans. In the case of *TOG*, 78 million subscriber households watched the film about queer and queer(-coded) immortals within the first four weeks on Netflix, making it the platform’s “most popular title of the summer quarter” in 2020 (Low).

TOG most prominently subverts “bury-your-gays” by making violent death non-permanent. Although the characters of the film do experience violent death multiple times, it is not done so for the betterment of heterosexual characters, and ultimately, the queer heroes do not *stay* dead. Likewise, their immortality and consistent reanimation further, rather than limit, their evolution as characters within the narrative frame of the film. The film not only offers positive LGBTQ+ representation—in the sense that the queer characters do not die and are painted as “heroes”—but it also completely overturns the harmful tropes that limit the development of queer characters, making them nonsensical. Bythewood and Rucka have thus created a highly interesting—though not entirely unproblematic—movie for LGBTQ+ representation in action cinema.

Neo-Colonialism and the Militarized Superhero

Since *TOG* is an American action film that depicts scenes of global conflict, it is placed in a long tradition of genre films that promote U.S. militarism abroad and hence fosters the neocolonial violence associated with western military invasions. Relatedly, Lori A. Crowe argues that, according to the conventions of Hollywood action cinema, “[t]oday’s heroes often work for the US government, ‘serve’ their country on the ground and abroad, brandish military weapons and armor, do not hesitate to utilize violence, and espouse neoliberal values” (134). Although the immortals fit some of Crowe’s descriptions of the typical action hero—for

example, Nile is employed by the U.S. Marine Corps—the immortals simultaneously confirm and contest conventional celebrations of American neo-colonialism and militarism. Analyzing the heroism that Andy, Joe, Nicky, Booker, and Nile portray allows one to examine the complex positionality of these queer “heroes” within the unstable geopolitical system that the movie depicts.

First, there is Andy, an ancient Greek hero who speaks with an American accent and is described by Booker as a woman who “has forgotten more ways to kill than entire armies will ever learn” (58:28-30). Andy is quite literally linked to the origins of western² civilization, but she is also a warrior/soldier who has killed more people than she can remember. The inherent violence of the west is also represented in Andy’s weapon, called a labrys, which is a double-sided ax. Her usage of the labrys consistently links Andy to an antiquity that is filled with violence, an antiquity that cannot be separated from the actions Andy performs with the weapon. The double-sided weapon, along these lines, also symbolizes Andy’s liminality, and her straddling an ethical and moral line as well as past and present. Andy’s usage of the weapon is also intertwined with the violence that she enacts in *TOG*, showing that she cannot fully detach from the violence of western culture that she represents as an ancient Greek warrior. Another integral aspect of Andy’s persona is that she refuses to work with one geopolitical power more than once to stay invisible as well as to avoid linking her team to one nation or political movement specifically. This shows her wish to work independently of the power structures that exist in the world of *TOG*, neocolonial structures that dictate who is a victim and who is an aggressor within the film due to histories of colonization. However, by not aligning herself, Andy inevitably also enacts violence in support of her own conceptions of “right and wrong,” that is to say, according to her own moral compass, which she then uses to justify the deaths of many soldiers that she and her team kill.

Joe and Nicky, lovers and partners from two separate sides of the “Holy Wars” around 1000 AD, share a past that is rooted in western European as well as Middle Eastern history; the division between the west and the east also constitutes a conflict between the two. Although explored in more detail in the graphic novels, their love story in the film is only described by Joe as one in which “the love of my life was of the people I’ve been taught to hate” and by Nicky as “we killed each other...many times” (45:28-36). The declarations of the two men emphasize how war is used to divide people in an effort of religious

² As an intentional deviation from standard grammar and rules of English, we choose to not capitalize west/western as a way to decenter and de-emphasize the west.

(Muslim vs. Christian) and cultural (orient vs. occident) control. Booker, the youngest member of the immortals before Nile joins the team, was part of Napoleon's army and, like the others, died fighting enemy forces before resurrecting as an immortal. For Booker, Joe, and Nicky, their initial deaths demonstrate that only after resurrecting could they free themselves of the cultural, religious, and/or national restraints attributed to the geopolitical wars and violence of their past lives. Like Andy, the other immortals are consistently involved in one war after another, because they choose to fight for whoever they believe to be on the right side of history, thus remaining in geopolitical struggles throughout their immortality.

The character most obviously linked to a neocolonial cause is Nile, the newest member of Andy's team and a former member of the U.S. Marine Corps. In her opening scene, the viewer is presented with a military conflict set in Afghanistan, in which the Pashtun people are identified within the film, harkening to the very real situation of neocolonial invasion that marks U.S. military history since 2001. Similar to other American action films, *TOG* utilizes the "third world aesthetic" (Ullmann n.pag.) to portray the lived realities of people in conflict zones, but they only use this aesthetic to portray the military invasion of Afghanistan and not other places the immortals visit like Marrakesh or South Sudan. Important, then, is that the film presents the US neocolonial conflict with a "yellow filter" that "intend[s] to create a space that would make their intended viewers (i.e., viewers like themselves) associate it with poverty, 'pre-modernity', [and] lawlessness" (Fan qtd. in Ullmann n. pag.). It is through this opening scene in Afghanistan too that the link between the U.S. military and the pharmaceutical CEO Merrick is established, the connection between the two is shown in a quick shot at the Marine base camp in which the U.S. military's weapons are revealed to be produced by Merrick Industries (26:47). This sequence indicates how UK and U.S. entities of power do not work alone but are interrelated within a system of imperialism and neocolonialism that exploits the marginalized bodies of the "Other," here both the Afghan people and Nile, an African American woman fighting in Afghanistan.

While all the immortals were linked to some form of military in their first life, what is shown within *TOG* is that the immortals must *de-link* from these structures to survive after they have been resurrected. Notably, Nile, who could have continued to serve in the Marine Corps and (if undetected) have risen in the military's ranks as a type of super soldier, leaves the U.S. military to join the immortals. Because Nile has gained immortality and is thus relegated to the queer position—meaning she is pushed into the periphery and becomes subjectified—she can no longer be associated with the U.S. military. She is "outed" for her reanimating

powers and must leave her unit almost immediately due to these powers, a plot development that harkens back to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policies that operated within the U.S. military until 2011. Due to their queered positions, the immortals, like Nile, are also pushed to the periphery of their respective military cultures and are forced to hide to avoid capture and torture. All heroes are forced to disassociate from their militaristic history and are propelled into a present in which hiding, running, and forced invisibility are the conditions if not for survival, then for a life free of abuse. Yet, instead of completely turning the notion of neocolonial militarism on its head, *TOG* is also complicit in its destruction of other cultures through representation—that is, through the production of cinematic aesthetics that are relegated to “third world” cultures, painting them as if they are in need of aid from western nations. The world within *TOG* is also one in which our heroes cannot survive without running from the structures that wish to confine them. By centering queer heroes who work to defy the structures while also being entangled with them, the film shows the nuance attributed to the immortals’ inevitable connection with western history and violence.

Violence and Queer Immortality as Metaphor

A significant question that overshadows the representation of “heroism” enacted by the immortals then is: can violence be ethical depending on who enacts it in specific situations? This is a question we do not attempt to answer comprehensively with this paper as it is neither possible to give a generalized answer nor does it serve any purpose to our overall argument. However, when applied to *TOG*, this question exposes systematic and systemic uses of violence as tools of power, which shape cultures and societies based on humanist and heteropatriarchal ideas. Oftentimes, what western culture considers to be ethical is based on the laws and social rules put into place by those in power, which have historically been white, cisgender, men. The question further opens the debate to more complex and nuanced views on collective ethics, including individualized morality as well as violence as a form of queer liberation.

Martha McCaughey and Neal King argue that films that represent female-enacted violence cannot simply be regarded as “hegemonic (bad) or subversive (good)” because “one’s victorious fantasy will send another away unsatisfied in a manner unlikely to be captured by intensive interpretation” (19). Following their argument, our paper interprets the representation of female and queer violence within *TOG* to be neither wholly subversive nor hegemonic, but we instead position retributive violence on a spectrum. Halberstam maintains that “[i]t is by imagining violence that we can harness the force of fantasy and transform it into

productive fear” (*Imagined Violence/Queer Violence* 246). By employing violence for the purpose of “revenge,” a trope often used in cinema to allow queer, BIPOC, and other intersecting marginalized communities to subvert power structures, one can analyze how *TOG* queers—in the sense that it destabilizes and disrupts the solidity of meaning—typical notions of violence by reclaiming and reversing these actions. Another question that arises, then, is: how does the historically marginalized queer hero subvert the intertwining systems of capitalism, western militarism, and imperialist science which are prevalent in the world the movie depicts?

One answer to this question is found in *TOG* when the group of immortals have been imprisoned by Merrick and try to escape the torture of his scientific testing. In the scene in question, the group has been blasted with a smoke bomb, causing the immortals to be separated. While Nicky and Joe try to regain consciousness, they are confronted by Merrick’s bodyguard, Keane. A fight ensues between Nicky and Keane, in which the bodyguard kicks Nicky down while Joe is still unconscious. The camera focuses on the two opponents engaging in hand-to-hand combat and, ultimately, Keane overpowers Nicky and shoots him in the face. The sound of the gun goes off as Joe awakens and screams in horror at the violence committed against his lover. For the audience, his reaction conjures the dread that the “bury-your-gays” trope commonly produces in mainstream films, as both the viewer and Joe must fear that this might be the time Nicky does not reanimate. This scene shows the brutality of hegemonic violence enacted on queer bodies and it is only later when Joe and Keane meet again that a subversion of this anti-queer violence occurs. In a final and vengeful fight, Joe wins hand-to-hand combat with Keane, and pauses, which is when a close-up shot focuses on his bloody and tired face; Joe grabs Keane’s shirt collar and says: “You shot Nicky. You shouldn’t have done that” (1:43:47). Right thereafter, he pulls Keane over his shoulder and drops him onto the floor, effectively breaking his neck and exacting retribution for what Keane did to his lover minutes earlier in the movie.

This brutal scene shows that Halberstam’s idea of represented vengeance is integral to reading instances of hegemonic violence enacted against queer bodies such as this one. Keane, the hyper-masculine, hegemonic opponent—who does not fulfill the heroic role in a movie that ultimately favors the outlaws over those remaining within established power structures—is turned into a victim by the queer hero. This role reversal of the hegemonic hero vs. queer-coded villain into the hegemonic villain vs. the queer-coded hero is not portrayed as fully acceptable or, indeed, as completely positive in *TOG*, instead, its logic follows Halberstam’s assessment that “role reversal never simply

replicates the terms of the equation” (*Imagined Violence/Queer Violence* 251). We can interpret this queered violence as one that “transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity” (251). Joe’s enactment of ruthless vengeance as the queer hero, who in other scenes has been shown to be romantic and poetic in his love for Nicky, works to obscure the clear binary dynamics that pit masculinity against femininity, queer against straight, and hero against villain. By killing Keane and enacting the vengeance he deems necessary to protect his relationship with Nicky, Joe’s revenge queers the representation of heroic violence within *TOG* due to his marginalized position. His killing of Keane is not conventional violence utilized on-screen to promote the heterosexual vs. queer binary and hierarchy that runs like a backbone to traditional action cinema, but it instead works as a complicator of this hierarchy by making fluid the power dynamics at play.

Temporality and Immortality

When one compares plots that lead to the frequently untimely violent deaths of queer characters in older films to the plot of *TOG*, it becomes clear that the temporal logic of the film is rather unconventional, as is the movie’s portrayal of what one might imagine of queered or queer time. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Heather Love maintains that “[t]he history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants. Those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead; if they manage to survive, it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive” (1). Death, she continues, is inevitable when researching and understanding the past of queer history and thus the future that can be found in it (1). In *TOG* non-permanent death helps to integrate a sense of “backwardness”; the movie imagines time existing within the past and future simultaneously, producing a queer temporality. For Andy and her team, along with the promise of death also comes the concession of linear time, in which their reanimation *contests* a queer history riddled with violence and “final” death, that is, death with no chance of revival. This is especially true because the queer heroes of *TOG* are both victims of violence and harbingers of it through revenge, yet they do not stay dead as opposed to the non-immortal victims of their violence.

One such complication of linear time within the film occurs, then, when it is revealed that the immortals are not truly “immortal” at all and will simply stop reanimating or healing at a random moment in the future, no matter how long they have lived. Rather than standing outside time or being untouched by human temporality, these heroes are placed in a

queer temporality, which we interpret to mean that they are positioned in a liminal space between the past and present as it moves into the future, with the threat of final death always hanging in the air. Because they occupy the liminal space of queer temporality, their heroic existence works as a symbol in which premature queer death is subverted by the illusion of immortality, due to the ongoing threat of “final” death occurring at any time. When the immortals finally come to the realization that they can die and eventually become mortal, they leave the queered positions they had previously occupied through their immortality and solely exist as LGBTQ+ and queer-coded characters who grapple with the threat of “true” death. However, this loss of immortality does not erase the queer temporality of their pasts, but merely implies a shift in their lived experiences as queer characters.

The process of reanimation is representative of the queer temporality of LGBTQ+ lives and non-permanent deaths in the movie. Most noticeable here is the fact that the horrific and violent nature of the immortals’ deaths is undone by the quick healing of their bodies, but not erased. Despite reanimating, the aftereffects of their deaths are clearly visible in their torn-up clothes, in the blood-splattered across their skin, and in the pain the immortals experience during the healing process. This representation of the aftereffects of the violence enacted against the queer hero’s body differs vastly from many versions of violence depicted in the traditional action genre, in which hyper-masculine male protagonists—such as Tom Cruise’s character in *Mission Impossible* (1996) or The Rock’s in *The Fast and the Furious* franchise (2011)—hardly seem to be affected or hurt by bullets or punches. *TOG*’s depiction of a brutal and painful process of resurrection and of superhuman bodies that are hurt, even if they do not give out, turns its immortal queer heroes into victims of the kind of violence that is commonplace in LGBTQ+ narratives: the ongoing direct and indirect physical and psychological violence that makes it painful, dangerous, and even deadly to exist as a recognizably queer person within a hetero- and cis-normative world.

The symbolism of immortality in *TOG* works to introduce imperfect heroes, heroes who are queer and commit terrible acts of violence to survive as well as to exact revenge. Yet, these imperfect heroes must suffer for their difference—for their marginal status—which is what both complicates and subverts the representation of violent queer histories and futures in the movie. As Love explains: “For groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (1). The challenge the immortal heroes face is that of coming to terms with their violent pasts—the many violent deaths and rebirths they have suffered. In order to do so, they must engage with this

past while continuously trying to survive in a world that wishes to destroy and exploit them due to their queered position as immortals.

Scientific Ethics: The Morality of Western Sciences

TOG's queer-coding of its immortals links to the movie's representation of western sciences and humanism because within this logic the immortals' bodies are not considered "normal" bodies and are thus portrayed as "objects" to be tested on by the powers at hand. The colonial, humanist, and rational(ized) history of western sciences informs our analysis of *TOG* and therefore allows us to pinpoint its legacy within the film. As a Eurocentric and anthropocentric concept, humanism has created a binary logic of identity and otherness, implying a universality of humankind: humanism promotes "an ideal of bodily perfection and a set of mental, discursive, and spiritual values" (Braidotti 13) that needs to be protected at all costs. On the basis of this ideal, the male body and maleness have become the center and the norm, and all that is not male as well as white and/or European has been pushed to the margins. This naturalization of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality becomes vital when we look at the scientific practices portrayed, and the scientific ethics explored in *TOG* because it is precisely the people who have been pushed to the periphery that are being exploited and therefore *must* struggle to disrupt the system or otherwise be confined, if not destroyed by it.

Within scientific ethics the question of good vs. evil often arises in relation to the harm that research or the results of unethically obtained science can do in the world or to certain groups of people. This question of harm opens debates about scientific ethics to intersecting discourses of scientific, political, societal, and philosophical nature. Because *TOG* centers on a group of outsiders who are either queer, female, non-white, or intersectionally positioned, who intervene internationally in areas of conflict, and who are persecuted both by the warlords they fight as well as the ruthless CEO of a capitalistic, pharmaceutical company, we need to differentiate between laws, ethics, and morals. Courtney Weinbaum et. al explain that "[l]aws are geographically based *and* biased by local cultural norms" (3; original emphasis), meaning "each country, state, and locality can pass its own laws legalizing or banning any behavior" (3). Ethics reflect the values of a collective or cultural group and "may or may not agree with local laws" (3). In comparison to ethics, morals are defined as "a person's lifestyle or self-conduct (esp. in sexual matters) considered regarding morality; a set of personal standards relating to right and wrong conduct" ("Moral" n. pag.). Thus, a small but vital distinction can be made between ethics and morals, a distinction that confines ethics to a larger scale of a collective—that is, "the greater good"—and morals to a personal and individual realm. Due to the complex geopolitical situations

portrayed in *TOG* and because the protagonists are centuries, if not millennia, old and come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds while having lived in many more cultures still that they have seen change over time, the debate regarding collective ethics and individual morals frequently clashes in the film.

In *TOG* the question of good vs. evil—and the many gray areas in between—is present throughout the film, not only navigating larger ethical debates but also appealing to and questioning the viewer’s own moral compass. When Nile, the newest member of the immortals, questions *why* the immortals spend their unending lives saving people through violence, who will die shortly after anyway, the cultural dimension of this ethical dilemma becomes evident:

Nile: So, are you good guys or bad guys?

Joe: Depends on the century.

Nicky: We fight for what we think is right. (44:08-40; emphasis added)

Nicky’s response pushes to the forefront the main issue at hand with the immortals’ use of violence; they judge its necessity on their own terms while acting in a world that is constantly changing. Nile, the only immortal who comes from the time in which the movie is set, functions much like the polar north, in that she centers the group’s moral compass by reminding them what is temporally considered “moral” in the twenty-first century. Nile’s shifting morality, and her influence on the group of immortals, reflects her lived experience as a U.S. American soldier. Her position as a center for the immortals exists because she embodies the duality of being both an ex-Marine having worked for the military and a newly resurrected immortal warrior who is thrust into the position of the superhuman and threatened with dehumanization through scientific testing. While she struggles with this dual role at the beginning of the film, she ultimately dedicates herself to Andy and her team, as she comes to realize that the military is willing to deprive her of all human rights to weaponize her newly found immortality. Nile stands for a particular kind of modern, individualized female (and racialized) agency within the film; her choices and the choices she leads the other immortals to make are grounded in her positionality as a Black, female, and queered hero born and raised in a postcolonial world. Developmentally for Nile, her choices and shifting morality occurs due to a change of mind and a forced change of perspective and realization by turning into the prey herself when she assumes her immortal powers. This is important because it contrasts with the initial representations of the immortals in that through the years, they seem to have lost their way regarding morality, due to their liminal placement and queer temporality.

When Andy realizes that she is in the process of losing her immortality, the implication is that this has occurred because she no longer believes humanity is worth saving. As she tells Nile, right before a final confrontation with Merrick:

Andy: I think you showed up when I lost my immortality, so I could see what it was like; so I could remember.

Nile: Remember?

Andy: Remember what it...what it was like to feel unbreakable. Remarkable. You reminded me there are people still worth fighting for. (1:44:45-45:47).

Andy believes that she has lost her immortality because she has lost her belief in humanity, something that Nile's introduction into the group makes her aware of. This is especially evident when Nile confronts Copley near the end of the film prior to saving the other immortals from Merrick. Copley shows Nile a bulletin board of articles and notes that connect all the "good" that Andy and her team have done throughout the centuries. He says: "She saves a life, two, three generations later we reap the benefits," to which Nile responds: "She's in it, she can't see it" (1:29:20-55). The exchange between the two shows the outside and "modern" perspective of people like Nile and Copley that helps justify the immortals and the work they have done; despite the violence they enact. The immortals' violence is shown in this instance to display the complexity of individual morality, and it is only through the character of Nile that they, as well as the spectator, are made aware of this struggle.

Unethical Testing and Postmodern Terror

The scientific testing depicted in the movie is not entirely fictional. Unethical experimentation on individuals as well as on specific marginalized groups has existed ever since the emergence of natural philosophy and science. These experimentations have been and are usually still justified by scientific ambitions of "curing" and "saving" humanity with the help of racialized "science" that was created by the west. In *TOG*, Merrick stands in for the kind of person who is willing to harm individuals for his own personal gain, using the allegedly "universal" justification of wanting to "save" humanity in the name of science. In a meeting with one of the scientists working for him and Copley, the following conversation reveals this ideology:

Merrick: What do you see?

Scientist: The Nobel Prize.

Merrick: And a fair few quid to boot. We brought a cancer drug to the market last quarter. It's already saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet, in development, it killed a quarter of a million lab mice. Now I didn't ask for their little permissions. I'm not gonna ask for yours. [...] There is a genetic code inside

you which could help every human being on Earth. We're morally obliged to take it. [...].

Copley: Mr. Merrick, this is about science, not profits [...] or sadism. (01:05:34-59)

Like Nile, Merrick refers to a personal moral code regarding his own actions, exposing science in *TOG* as heavily influenced and controlled by powerful individuals and the companies that invest their money into research. Moreover, the question remains, whether his explanation that “this is about science” is a valid justification for his actions, considering that western science has always been biased and frequently worked to uphold hegemonic power structures, instead of working to create a “better world.” John Grey remarks in this regard that “Western societies are ruled by the myth that, as the rest of the world absorbs science and becomes modern, it is bound to become secular, enlightened and peaceful—as contrary to all evidence, they imagine themselves to be” (118). Although Copley believes in the innocence of scientific research conducted by the “enlightened” west, the film shows that contemporary western science does not exist in a vacuum, meaning that it is influenced by corporate interests and capitalistic exploitation. This relates to what Walter Mignolo argues in “The Darker Side of Modernity” (2007), in which “the expendability of human life [...] and of life in general from the Industrial Revolution into the twenty-first century” (41) was and is integral to conceptualizing modernity, since knowledge systems such as western science were produced within and remain entangled with coloniality. Merrick’s placement in the film as a white, British, CEO of a pharmaceutical company brings this history front and center by presenting his position as that of a capitalistic and neocolonial villain.

While Merrick is clearly a neocolonial villain linked to the darker side of modernity, his actions represent a postmodern terror as explained by Halberstam: “What if we imagine a new violence with a different object; a postmodern terror represented by another ‘monster’ with quite other ‘victims’ in mind?” (*Imagined Violence/Queer Violence* 249). Merrick’s actions not only represent the capitalist violence of modernity, but they also represent postmodern terror through his journey of becoming a supreme, superhuman entity within the film, moving *beyond* the categories of capitalist modernity. Michael Peters in “Postmodern Terror in a Globalized World” (2004) explains that “[p]ostmodern terrorism seemingly has no limits, no inside or outside: it is transnational, truly global, highly mobile, and cellular. [...] It can also be small-scale yet ‘high-tech’, especially in the new areas of biotechnology and its application in biological warfare” (Peters, n.pag.). The postmodern terror associated with Merrick’s actions is explicitly shown when he introduces his company’s research project. In this scene, he eventually proves that he

is more than willing to violate the immortals' queer bodies to expand the human life span, while also pushing himself beyond everyone else in this endeavor. Merrick realizes that the immortals are a threat to the systems that bind them to him, and he wishes to exploit their immortality so that he will not lose his position of power and instead expand it. In his attempts to move towards (post)humanity by extracting life itself from the immortals, he becomes a threat to modern ethics within the west, not *just* the immortals who he tests on. Through the extraction of life, Merrick wishes to gain immortality without also gaining the queered position of otherness within the film. *TOG* implies that if Merrick were to gain immortality, he would use it to continue profiting off of the "Other" as he does with his pharmaceutical company on a larger and more powerful scale.

If one looks closer at the scientific practices portrayed in the film, one notices that Merrick's postmodern terrorism is also emphasized through the violation of ethical principles regarding human experimentation in his research. Out of ten *Ethical Principles for Scientific Research* discussed by Weinbaum et al., Merrick and his team violate seven in their research project: beneficence, conflict of interest, informed consent, disguised nondiscrimination, non-exploitation, privacy and confidentiality, and professional discipline (6). One example of such a violation can be found in a conversation between Merrick and Copley after he has captured Nicky and Joe:

Copley: You got the samples, blood, tissue, DNA.

Merrick: Well, you know the concept of proprietary data, and they are the product. They go in the vault. They stay there under lock and key.

Copley: For ...ever?

Merrick: We can't have them strolling back out into the world...into my competitors' laps. If this takes years, maybe decades, what does it matter to them? If we can unlock their genetic code, the world will be begging us for the key. (1:13:39-14:49)

Merrick is not only driven by personal greed and a strong desire for fame, he also wishes to place himself in a geopolitically monopolized position of power. Immediately after the interaction between Copley and Merrick quoted above, a conversation between Nicky and the scientist testing on him occurs. The scientist conducting the research truly believes that her work benefits "the greater good," and neglects socially established ethical principles in order to pursue her goals:

Nicky: You will not be able to give him what he wants.

Scientist: What? You think I am going too far? That I am unethical?

Nicky: I would say immoral.

Scientist: I believe this can change the world.

Nicky: A fine justification. I've heard this so many times before. (01:14:49-57)

What is striking in this scene is that the scientist refers to *unethical* behavior. Nicky, however, considers the situation to be *immoral* behavior. What Nicky perceives as a violation of his own moral compass as well as his own body, the scientist approaches from an allegedly objective, distanced standpoint. It is exactly this conflict of personal morality and collective ethics that complicates the idea of “the greater good” in the film. According to her own morality, the scientist working for Merrick compromises life by testing on Nicky to “save” humanity, while Andy and her team utilize violence for the “greater good” as they have fought and continue to fight in many geopolitical conflicts around the world. So, how are Andy and her team different from the scientists testing on them, when both groups act according to their individual morality?

In this case, the power dynamics at play position Andy and her team at the margin, yet through their violence the immortals find themselves able to break free of their confines, a fact that problematizes ideas of an overarching “ethics” of violence within the film through role reversal. The emphasis on the immorality and unethicity surrounding the violence enacted *against* LGBTQ+ bodies in the movie actively *queers* the representations of the immortals and the violence they enact against those who subject them to scientific misconduct. In line with what Halberstam remarks about the posthuman/cyborg body, one can also conclude that the superhuman bodies of the immortals are inevitably “queer: not as an identity but because [they queer]” (“Automating Gender” 14). What the film does, then, is portray how immortal heroes who are queer-coded, LGBTQ+, and exist within the queered position, question and destabilize the biases of western scientific practices as well as ethical principles that are influenced by colonial concepts of power in the west. The representation of violence within the film also depicts the complexity of morality and ethics within action cinema, through the juxtaposition of the immortals vs. Merrick and his team who wish to exploit them for their powers.

Conclusion

Bythewood’s adaptation of the graphic novel *The Old Guard* is a complex film that does significant work to subvert normative and hegemonic representational practices within traditional action cinema. However, there are limits to *TOG*’s representation of violence, especially regarding the normalization of militarism and the revenge-induced killings the queer protagonists enact for the “greater good” and their own personal morality. Our argument concerns the negotiation between the binary divide of hegemonic vs. subversive representations of violence. The cinematic action genre profits off the harm and destruction of the undesirable and

queer/ed body which places the movie's heroes and other characters like them at the margins of history and representation. Yet, *TOG* also responds to this hegemonic violence by depicting queer retaliatory violence that perpetuates certain binary logics of the genre while also disrupting them simultaneously. *TOG* is subversive in the way it centers queer heroes and their strengths through the metaphor of immortality. They are represented as heroes to be revered and celebrated due to their superpower, a superpower that actively does not allow them to fully die within the film, thus subverting the "bury-your-gays" trope. Queerness, in this case is placed in a position filled with vindication that disrupts hegemonic power structures.

Our reading of *TOG* is based on the subversion of representational practices that depict queer and non-normative bodies as threats that need to be contained by scientific practices. The representation of violence, the discourses within the film that are used to justify violence, and the questioning of western ethics, are shown within the film to be subjective, which in turn causes the viewer to examine the ways in which violence is utilized either retributively or hegemonically within the film by LGBTQ+, queered heroes. By contextualizing the violence utilized within *TOG*, our analysis shows the complexity of discourses surrounding represented and "imagined" violence within action cinema. Thus, despite the fact that *TOG* attempts to disrupt typical notions of action cinema, it cannot fully detach itself from the legacy of violence within the genre it belongs to, making it a film that is highly relevant to discussions about systemic, ethical, personal, and moral forms of violence, especially in relation to the queer and queer-coded immortals who simply cannot and will not stay dead within the film.

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