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Table of Contents

Editor’s Note .................................................................................................................. 1
Amy M. Green

Interview with Dr. Heather Humann, The 2023 recipient
of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to
Popular Culture Studies Award ........................................................................ 3
Amy M. Green

What It Means to Be a Talking Object: Ishiguro’s Use
of AI Narration in Klara and the Sun .......................................................... 11
Heather Humann

A Lack of Joi: Hegemonic Femininity and the Male Gaze
in Blade Runner: 2049 ................................................................................. 51
Ashley McCann and Erika Engstrom

Where Epistemology and Metaphysics Touch in
Lois Lowry’s The Giver and Gary Ross’s Pleasantville ............. 85
Seth Vannatta

Black Parallax: Hollywood’s Recent Approach to
Mitigating Racial Excess ............................................................................. 111
Felicia Cosey

Protest, Humor, and the Nigerian Establishment in
Selected COVID-19 Facebook Texts ................................................... 153
Nurudeen Adeshina Lawal and Rabiu Iyanda

Pepe versus Kermit: A Memetic Battleground about
Latina/o/e-centric Immigration and Policy ......................... 207
Kaitlin Thomas

Book Reviews

Forms of Defiance by Cynthia Sample ............................................. 235
Reviewed by Karyn Stacey Panem

Latinx Teens by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera ........ 239
Reviewed by Erika Abad

Author Bios ........................................................................................................... 245
Our first issue of 2023 features varied perspectives on popular culture both in America and internationally.

First, I want to recognize Dr. Heather Humann, who is the 2023 recipient of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award. She has written numerous books and articles across an array of popular culture topics, including detective fiction, reality simulation, and the depiction of domestic violence in fiction. I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Humann about her work. In addition, she has contributed a compelling article about narration in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel Klara and the Sun. I am certain that she will continue to be a strong voice in popular culture studies.

Ashley McCann and Erika Engstrom consider the male gaze in Blade Runner 2049, especially as it centers on the character Joi. They argue that although the film appears at first to be progressive with regards to how it depicts its female characters, the truth is more regressive.

Seth Vannatta writes about the intersection of epistemology and metaphysics in the novel The Giver and the film Pleasantville. Vannatta’s insightful and in-depth analysis of both the novel and the film ask readers to consider their philosophical underpinnings in new ways.

Felicia Cosey argues that there is significant work that remains to be done in both the Hollywood and British film industries with regards to representation and racism. Her article does not shy away from the complexities of this issue.
Nurudeen Adeshina Lawal and Rabiu Iyanda provide a Nigerian perspective on COVID-19 and how social media posts, especially on Facebook, were utilized by Nigerian citizens to critique the government’s response to the pandemic. They further argue that social media posts like this serve as important documentation of an event like the pandemic.

Finally, Kaitlin Thomas also considers social media posts, specifically memes of the characters Pepe the Frog and Kermit as they were utilized in debates about immigration and immigration policy. Thomas also considers how hashtags and emojis of frogs furthered the debate and identified posters’ political views.

This issue features two book reviews. The first is a review of *Forms of Defiance* by Karyn Stacey Panem. The second is a review of *Latinx Teens – U.S. Popular Culture on the Page, Stage, and Screen* by Erika Abad.

I am grateful to our authors for contributing their wealth of knowledge to the journal, and to our peer reviewers for their dedication to the journal. I hope that you enjoy the contents of this issue.

Dr. Amy M. Green, Editor, *Popular Culture Review*
Amy Green’s Interview with Dr. Heather Humann

The 2023 recipient of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award

Editor’s Note: I am pleased to share with our readers my interview with Dr. Heather Humann for this issue. She is the 2023 recipient of the Felicia Campbell Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award. Her work covers a wide-ranging number of topics related to popular culture and her recent work with the concept of virtual reality and identity is especially fascinating. ~ Amy M. Green, Editor

Your research interests related to popular culture are diverse, as you have published in numerous areas including reality simulation, detective fiction, and the depiction of domestic violence in fiction. Why is Popular Culture Studies important to you as a scholar? How do you counter attitudes sometimes found in academia that the study of popular culture is not important?

First of all, thank you for taking the time to interview me. I am grateful for you giving me a forum to share my work. I have been—and remain—interested in a range of topics related to popular culture studies. In the case of my work on literary depictions of domestic abuse, I focused on that because of how popular culture shines a light on the persisting problem. Certainly, problems relating to domestic abuse—and society’s
shifting attitudes towards violence in the home (concerns which are still being debated in legal discourse as well as in the medical and psychological communities)—get reflected in the fiction that features incidents of family violence.

In the case of my other scholarly pursuits (such as detective fiction, reality simulation, doubles, etc.), these subjects are not only interesting to me, but they tie into ongoing debates that are culturally relevant. The works I examine share in common the fact that they highlight what matters to us as a society even as they reveal ongoing debates of cultural significance.

Given all of this, I do think that popular culture studies remain quite important. While it is true that some academics suggest that popular culture does not merit scholarship—or any kind of sustained discussion in academia—I have found that their main argument (which hearkens back to debates about so-called high art versus so-called low art) tends to rest on the fact that pop culture appeals to the masses and is therefore not deserving of academic consideration. Yet, I believe that it is precisely the fact that pop culture has such wide-reaching appeal that makes it relevant and worthy of critical discussion.

Popular culture calls attention to what matters to us as a society and reveals societal values and norms, even while shaping them and tracking the ways they shift over time. Not only does popular culture influence us (directly and indirectly), but it responds to social forces. In this respect, popular culture provides an important lens through which to view the challenges and concerns of a given place during a specific era.

Studying popular culture allows us to adopt a critical perspective on these issues as well as provides opportunities to
think more deeply about culture and the forces which influence it. These same reasons make the field important to me as a scholar.

In your book *Another Me: The Doppelgänger in 21st Century Fiction, Television and Film*, you consider that “literary treatments of the double call attention to the anxiety that has long-been associated with the figure of the double. Moreover, these stories frequently hint at what underpins this anxiety by suggesting that both fear of self and fear of death are at its root.” Can you say a bit more here about these two fears and why they manifest in this concept of the double? How do fears related to the doppelgänger differ from fears about monsters?

This is a great—and rather complicated—question. I do believe, as many other scholars have also argued, that much of the anxiety surrounding the figure of the double derives from fear of self. In the conclusion to *Another Me*, I cite an anonymous source that claims the definition of hell is when “the person you became will meet the person you could have become.” What this gets at is how we fear both our mistakes and missed opportunities. There is anxiety that surrounds not only encountering a (so-called) darker version of ourselves, but also a “better” version of what we could have become. Given these widespread fears, it makes sense that these concerns would take center stage in popular texts.

Of course, much has also been said about death being a motivator as well as a source of terror (notably, both Heidegger and Freud offer insights into our fear of death). Depictions of doubles frequently rely on these anxieties even while they reflect these widespread sentiments.
With respect to monsters (and fears about monsters), there does seem to be some overlap insofar as the fact that twins (a form of doubles) have been, at various points in history, seen as monstrous. Not only were they sometimes seen as “monstrous births,” but they highlight the erosion of clear boundaries between self and other. Until recently, of course, twins were cases of naturally occurring “doubles” (so to speak), but in the last several decades, they have emerged more frequently as a result of the many kinds of fertility treatments that are now so readily available—in fact, the so-called “IVF effect” has created a higher rate of twin births (a phenomenon I discuss in *Another Me*). Coinciding with these developments in reproductive technologies, the successful cloning of Dolly (the sheep) in the late 1990s also ushered in widespread speculation (along with a dose of anxiety) about whether the ability to clone mammals (and thus possibly human beings) might make us re-cast our assumptions about identity.

3 In your book *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film and Television*, you write in reference to the film *Uncanny Valley* that it is an example of “a timeless debate about the nature of reality.” Throughout the book, you focus on the anxieties that many raise about evolving Virtual Reality (VR) technology, from authors to researchers. To what extent do you think that these anxieties relate to the possibility that some members of society will find more meaning and/or fulfillment in a virtual space than a real one? Do you think that is perceived as a threat and if so, why?

The fear certainly exists and has been the source of speculation in a lot of science fiction texts. This is the case not only in science fiction literature, but also in sci-fi films and tele-
visions shows (*Black Mirror* has addressed the concern in several of its episodes, for example). While these concerns might become relevant in the future (as the technology advances), for right now, I do not think there is much danger in virtual spaces providing significantly more fulfillment than real spaces (as the failure of the Metaverse suggests).

Nonetheless, I do see there is an ongoing erosion of the distinction between the real and the virtual. As the question mentions, I do address this topic in *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film, and Television*, and think that the subject deserves to be further explored, especially as we move toward a society where our presence and experiences are increasingly digitized and technologically mediated.

*Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film, and Television* presents readers with compelling and in-depth examples of how different stories have contended with virtual or simulated realities. In what ways do the particular socio-political circumstances out of which individual stories arise change over time – or do they? For example, what connects works like *The Neuromancer* (1984), *The Truman Show* (1998), and *Westworld* (2016–2022) along common themes? What might set them apart in distinct ways reflective of the time of their creation? You aren’t limited, of course, to just these examples.

With the examples cited above, there are obvious and important overlaps in terms of these texts’ thematic engagements with simulated reality. Moreover, these examples all probe the degree to which our concept of reality is constantly being re-written and re-imagined. That said, each of these texts make both implicit and explicit connections with the ongoing debates of their respective time periods, meaning
that *Neuromancer* provides a snapshot of the cultural concerns of the 1980s whereas *Westworld* highlights present-day concerns. Political issues and cultural preoccupations have shifted so much from 1984 (when *Neuromancer* was first published)—for example, anxieties surrounding the Cold War were still predominate in the 1980s, while the 21st century (and particularly in recent years) has been more concerned with globalization (both the challenges and opportunities it ushers in).

In your book *Gender Bending Detective Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works* you include a chapter on JK Rowling’s *The Silkworm* and her depiction of a transgender character in that novel. In light of Rowling’s increasingly more vitriolic anti-transgender rhetoric, how does that shift how the character Pippa might be interpreted?

Yes, recent and well-publicized debates about Rowling (in particular, the allegations that she is transphobic) certainly pushes us to re-consider her depiction of Pippa. There has been a good deal of activity of Twitter and other social media outlets about the degree to which Rowling’s portrayal of Pippa reveals stereotypes about nonbinary individuals.

As I suggest in *Gender Bending Detective Fiction*, surveying how gender gets depicted, concealed, criminalized, punished, and praised within detective fiction underscores shifting attitudes about not only gender but also identity and sexuality, thus marking the evolution of cultural change that has taken place since the mid 20th century. While *The Silkworm* (which Rowling published using the pen name Robert Galbraith) bears discussion as part of a continuum of cultural texts which reveal attitudes about gender (in particular, those
about transgender and nonbinary individuals), it needs to be assessed critically and must be considered while bearing in mind the allegations that have been made about Rowling’s potentially transphobic statements.

What trends do you see in detective fiction today across all storytelling formats - literature, television, film, and etc.? Are there particular points of thematic emphasis in these newer stories? Why does the detective genre continue to capture our imaginations?

I have been particularly fascinated by, and drawn to, the notion of “hybridization” as it relates to both detective fiction and storytelling in general. This trend, which is not new, but has been gaining steam, speaks to the elasticity of the genre as well as the broader tendency to mix and meld different forms together (in literature, film, television, and other modes of expression). Part of the reason that detective fiction continues to captivate is that it’s so engaging and readable—the stories themselves come across as compelling and they tend to have mass appeal. Yet the genre also bears discussion for the way it brings important cultural concerns to the forefront.

What research projects are you working on now?

The biggest research project that I have been working on lately is the manuscript of my fifth book, *A Tale Told by a Machine: The AI Narrator in Contemporary Science Fiction Novels* (under contract with McFarland Books). This study addresses AI narration, specifically the trend of contemporary science fiction novels relying upon the perspective of intelligent machines.
Given that narrative is more complex, and ultimately more problematic, than simply recounting events, and considering that attempts to theorize narrative often reflect deeply embedded assumptions, AI narratives test established (and taken-for-granted) frameworks. This book thus offers a re-examination of these frameworks. Additionally, this book argues that, since adopting the narrative voice of a nonhuman assumes the existence of nonhuman agency, AI narratives trouble the distinction between subject and object. In this regard, AI narratives inevitably foreground dilemmas related to identity and selfhood, concepts being reassessed in the 21st century.

By using selected novels as case studies, this project shows how debates about agency and subjectivity are dramatically rendered vis-à-vis their reliance on AI narrators. Thus, the examination ponders what it means to be a subject, ultimately arguing in favor of extending moral consideration to nonhumans while reaffirming the importance of (what is typically thought of as) human rights. Tied to these debates, questions arise about the nature of AI narration: What, in essence, is at stake with nonhuman narration? What are the constitutive qualities of AI narratives? What might it mean to relate to a narrator when the voice adopted is that of an AI?
What It Means to Be a Talking Object: Ishiguro’s Use of AI Narration in *Klara and the Sun*

By Heather Humann

**ABSTRACT**

Set in a dystopian version of the United States, Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* relies heavily on the narrative technique of de-familiarization. This sense becomes clear from the novel’s opening passages, which take place in a store that displays Artificial Friends (a form of AI) for sale to the public. Since Ishiguro illustrates this setting from the vantage point of Klara, one of these Artificial Friends, the details divulged highlight much about Klara’s nature as well as her precarious position in a landscape populated by humans, genetically altered humans, and Artificial Intelligence alike. Though this novel operates as a critique of humanity, it also sympathetically renders both humans and Artificial Intelligence, all while probing existential and ontological questions about what constitutes personhood and the self.

**Keywords:** Dystopian fiction, Narrative theory, Artificial Intelligence, Subjectivity, Agency, Sentience, Selfhood, Human rights, Posthumanism

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Lo que significa ser un objeto parlante: el uso de Ishiguro de la narración de IA en *Klara and the Sun*

**RESUMEN**

Ambientada en una versión distópica de los Estados Unidos, *Klara and the Sun* de Ishiguro se basa en gran medida en la
técnica narrativa de la desfamiliarización. Este sentido queda claro en los pasajes iniciales de la novela, que tienen lugar en una tienda que exhibe Amigos artificiales (una forma de IA) para la venta al público. Dado que Ishiguro ilustra este escenario desde el punto de vista de Klara, uno de estos amigos artificiales, los detalles divulgados resaltan mucho sobre la naturaleza de Klara, así como su posición precaria en un paisaje poblado por humanos, humanos genéticamente alterados e inteligencia artificial por igual. Aunque esta novela opera como una crítica de la humanidad, también presenta con simpatía tanto a los humanos como a la Inteligencia Artificial, todo mientras investiga preguntas existenciales y ontológicas sobre lo que constituye la personalidad y el yo.

**Palabras clave:** Ficción distópica, teoría narrativa, inteligencia artificial, subjetividad, agencia, sensibilidad, individualidad, derechos humanos, poshumanismo

**成会会说话的物体意味着什么：**石黑一雄在《克拉拉与太阳》中对AI旁白的运用

**摘要：**以反乌托邦的美国为背景，石黑一雄的著作《克拉拉与太阳》大量依赖陌生化这一叙事技巧。这种感觉在小说的开篇段落就变得清晰，这些段落发生在一家展示人工朋友（人工智能的一种形式）并向公众出售的商店中。由于石黑一雄从克拉拉（人造朋友之一）的独特视角来阐述该背景，因此泄露的细节在很大程度上强调了克拉拉的本性，以及她在由人类、转基因人类和人工智能创造物等居住的环境中所处的危险境地。尽管这部小说对人性加以批判，但也同情地描绘了人类和人工智能，同时探讨了关于“什么构成人格和自我”的存在论和本体论问题。
An emerging form of technology, Artificial Intelligence already exists in meaningful ways—this becomes clear when we consider the prevalence of chatbots, smart cars, and voice assistants (such as Apple’s Siri and Amazon’s Alexa)—and many argue that it is set to dramatically alter other aspects of our world, as well. As Ben Pring puts it, Artificial Intelligence is set to “revolutionize just about everything we can think of, in the way that technologies like the microscope changed medicine. In another generation, using non-AI infused technology will seem as barbaric as using leeches does today.” The kinds of radical shifts happening now, and those likely soon to take place, represent a paradigm shift, one that will push all of us to reassess our understanding of the world. In this sense, we are experiencing a cultural moment.

While it is not difficult to spot the fact that there are changes on the horizon, it is more challenging to gauge exactly what shape they might take. Nonetheless, popular culture (conceived broadly) and, in particular, science fiction narratives, dramatically render some of these many possibilities. A quick survey of their depictions in science fiction literature, television, and film, highlight the degree to which AIs get perpetually rewritten and recontextualized in the science fiction imaginary. In the many ways AIs get represented in science fiction, their emergence (and constant re-emergence) calls attention to timely concerns, including ongoing dialogue surrounding scientific research on Artificial Intelligence, de-
bates about the social impact of AIs, and the development of social policies concerning intelligent machines. Such reflection makes sense given how the proliferation of these texts coincides with recent technological pursuits related to machine learning. Besides these features, contemporary narratives about Artificial Intelligence also often function as allegories to discuss “Otherness.”

Exemplary of this trend is Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2021 *Klara and the Sun*, a dystopian science fiction novel which not only features a form of Artificial Intelligence, but one that is narrated from the perspective of a sentient machine. An “Artificial Friend,” Klara, the novel’s non-human storyteller, is one of several different AI models created to serve as companions for humans. So human-like in certain respects—and able to give voice to her experiences via first-person narration—Ishiguro’s Klara emerges in the text as a metaphor for Otherness and marginality. Yet her presence in the novel also raises additional questions, including the myriad ways sentient machines might impact human society. Moreover, her role as the novel’s narrator foregrounds other issues: For one, Klara’s ability to tell her own story complicates traditional understandings of agency and subjectivity. Additionally, her portrayal poses challenges to humanist principles about selfhood. Finally, the fact that readers are prompted to relate to a nonhuman such as Klara, de-centers humans from the central (and privileged) position they so-frequently occupy in fictional narratives.

**AI NARRATION IN KLARA AND THE SUN**

What further complicates Klara’s depiction in the novel is that, even as her presence belies traditional humanist principles about selfhood, her existence makes the case for extend-
What It Means to Be a Talking Object

...ing those same principles to sentient machines. Opening the narrative in a store that displays Artificial Friends (or AFs), a version of Artificial Intelligence, for sale to the public, Ishiguro illustrates this setting from the vantage point of Klara, one of these AFs. These early scenes transport readers to a society that is technologically advanced. Yet as Klara’s observations reveal, in this world, many of the problems we face today in the early 21st century—namely environmental woes, such as climate change and pollution, and class warfare—not only still exist but seem to have worsened beyond their current states.

As Isabelle Senechal emphasizes, Ishiguro creates a dystopian version of the “United States encumbered by surging social inequality, fascist terrorism, and controversial scientific advancements.” In what she terms a “bleak future,” many parents “‘opt in’ their children for a risky genetic modification treatment called ‘lifting’ that boosts their social standing and academic prospects. ‘Lifted’ children follow a strict home education and socialization regimen. ‘Unlifted’ children are ostracized by their peers, essentially left to their own devices” (Senechal). Due to the book’s narrative construction, these features get rendered through the perspective of Klara. Besides these revelations, Klara’s watchful eye also picks up on the goings-on of day-to-day life. She observes “taxis as they slowed to let the crowd go over the crossing” and peering into the high-rise offices full of people “standing, sitting, moving around” (Ishiguro 9). She notices how people dress and act, spotting differences, for instance, between the “office workers” and the “Beggar man” she sees outside the storefront window (Ishiguro 19). In this respect, Klara’s perspective is also to capture details that a human narrator might overlook or take for granted (thus, Ishiguro relies on defamiliarization as part of his narrative style).
Klara also makes frequent mention of the sun, noticing the “Sun’s pattern” and observing when it is an especially “bright” day (Ishiguro 4). To a degree, Klara is attuned to this since she regards the sun as a source of energy. However, she views it also as a sort of deity (thus personifying the sun, a fact which is also evidenced in the way she always refers to the “Sun” as a proper noun). While her worship of the sun may be inspired, at least in part, by the fact that, as a solar-powered being, she relies on its light for “nourishment” (as she puts it)—a quality that she shares in common with the other models of AFs in the story—her reverence goes beyond what is common for AFs due to the fact that she later pleads with the sun to cure Josie (Ishiguro 4).

As these details highlight, Klara takes in much of her surroundings. Not only does her perspective tell us about her, but her vantage point shows what she sees as important. Thus, it works to offer insights into the kind of minutiae found in her world even as her narration brings into focus the science fictional elements of Ishiguro’s imaginary world. These include, most notably, the solar-powered sentient machines that exist in Ishiguro’s imaginary society and the many forms of advanced medicine and other futuristic technology described that is, for us, still the stuff of science fiction. Balanced with this sort of speculation there are other, more realistic descriptions of ordinary features found in contemporary life—elements that would belong in any industrial city, such as high-rise buildings and crowds of city-dwellers and workers. In this manner, Ishiguro depicts a society that shares certain similarities with our own but is more advanced technologically. Being a careful observer, Klara thus presents a picture of Ishiguro’s dystopian society which reveals both the contrasts and similarities between our world and the world she and Josie inhabit. Even so, because she is an Arti-
ficial Friend (a form of AI) and unaccustomed to the world of humans, there is also much that she does not know (her naivete and precarious position shine through).

As Swaminathan Bavetra and R. Ravi note in their article, “Hope, Faith, Love, Human and Humanoid: A Study of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*,” *Klara and the Sun* “raises several pertinent questions about human beings” in the ways Ishiguro’s other novels do (295). Nonetheless, these concerns “gain poignancy, thanks to the fact that the human experience is narrated through the eyes of Klara, an artificial friend and a robot” (Bavetra and Rav 295). Klara, being a keen observer and a quick learner, “is tuned well enough to become a good and genuine artificial friend. She walks into the life of Josie when Josie was fourteen and half years old and stays with her till Josie no longer required her” (Bavetra and Ravi 295). Indeed, as the human manager of the store where Klara first appears in the novel remarks on the fact that Klara seems particularly well-suited to serve as human’s companion. Moreover, the store manager was one of the first to notice that Klara had started to evolve sentience, a crucial observation given how the store manager bookends the narrative (since she appears in the novel’s opening as well as closing passages).

After the opening scenes from the urban storefront (where Klara is waiting to be selected by a human), the story spans the years Klara spends with an adolescent girl named Josie who chooses her as a companion. The story continues up until Josie leaves home for college and Klara gets sent away to have her “slow fade” in the “Yard,” a junkyard full of other deteriorating AFs, who are allowed to remain outside, and thus are exposed to the sun, receiving nourishment for as long as their systems will operate, and other discarded items (Ishig-
uro 294). In this manner, the novel gives voice to almost the entirety of Klara’s existence.

It becomes clear, however, observant though she may be, what Klara sees as meaningful does not always turn out to be that important in the big picture. Edmund Gordon, who discusses Klara’s vantage point in “Faith in the Bildungs-robot: A Tale of AI and a Diminished Yet Hopeful Humanity,” goes as far as to suggest that the “limitations of the narrator’s viewpoint are made obvious from the start.” As he explains, the “smallness of her world, analogous in some ways to the sheltered situation of early childhood, is emphasized by her tendency to treat as proper nouns such local points of interest as ‘Red Shelves,’ ‘Striped Sofa,’ and ‘Glass Display Trolley’” (Gordon). In this regard, Klara pushes readers to consider the limits of narrative, both as they relate to the fact that her perspective is that, not of a human, but of a sentient machine, and more generally (since narrative is a form of representation).

Even so, Klara’s perspective works well to cast the familiar in a new light. As James Wood points out in “Kazuo Ishiguro Uses Artificial Intelligence to Reveal the Limits of Our Own,” estrangement is “powerful when it puts the known world in doubt, when it makes the real truly strange.” Yet as he clarifies, it is most effective “when it is someone’s estrangement,” and in much of Ishiguro’s fiction, this sense comes through, whether it be because of “a resident alien, or a butler, or even a cloned human being doing so” (Wood). Klara and the Sun likewise provides a meaningful supply of this type of observation and reflection. In fact, her programming—which makes her naive in certain regards—and her developing self-awareness vie with each other, a friction that becomes so apparent in the text as to characterize her worldview.
In her role as a nonhuman storyteller, Klara also recounts much of Josie’s story. Even though the novel is in many ways about Klara, much of the tension revolves around Josie’s health issues—the doctors at one point seem to concern that Josie’s is a hopeless case. Besides working as an important plot point—Klara takes it upon herself to not only care for Josie, but also to try to “save her” by devising an elaborate plan to convince the sun, who Klara reveres as a deity, to intervene on Josie’s behalf—the mysterious ailments Josie suffers from also foreground concerns about the limits, ethical and otherwise, of tampering with human DNA. In the speculative future that Ishiguro imagines, Josie and many other children have been genetically modified (or “lifted,” as the process is referred to throughout the novel) for superior intelligence and academic ability; this genetic altering promises more opportunities for children like Klara and promotes their social capital, but it comes with the risk of adverse health effects. Josie is one of the unfortunate children for whom the process has negatively impacted her health.

In this manner, Ishiguro presents the practice of “lifting” as multi-faceted in the novel. Parents come across as feeling quite torn about the decision of whether to subject their offspring to the process. Those who do, like Josie’s mother, who has already lost a child due to “lifting”—Josie’s older sibling passed away as a result of the process- often second-guess the decision to risk their children’s health in order to improve their chances for success in society. However, as the case of Josie’s “unlifted” friend and neighbor Rick, a boy her own age, demonstrates, there are also real-world consequences for those who do not undergo the process. For Rick, not being lifted means that he faces discrimination and only has limited academic and career opportunities.
Significantly, these details get rendered from Klara’s point of view. While Klara comes across as an unreliable narrator in some ways, in this situation, her understanding of the dynamic between the “lifted” and “unlifted” humans proves insightful. Moreover, Klara, as a nonhuman, views the process more objectively than her human counterparts. She can likewise report dispassionately about the ambivalence felt by many humans in this society. Klara’s unflinching gaze can be seen, for instance, when she relays a tense exchange between Rick and Mrs. Arthur, Josie’s mother:

‘I was wondering if right now you might be feeling like you’re the winner. Like maybe you’ve won.’

‘I don’t understand, Mrs. Arthur.’

‘I’ve always treated you okay, haven’t I, Rick? I hope I have.’

‘You certainly have. You’ve always been very kind. And a great friend to my mother.’

‘So, I’m now asking you. I am asking you, Rick, if you feel like you’ve come out the winner. Josie took the gamble. Okay; I shook the dice for her, but it was always going to be her, not me, who won or lost. She bet high, and if Dr. Ryan’s right, she might soon be about to lose. But you, Rick, you played it safe. So that’s why I am asking you. How does this feel to you just now? Do you really feel like a winner?’ (Ishiguro 276)

Besides showing the resentment Josie’s mother harbors, this scene proves pivotal since it exposes the great dilemma that parents face in Ishiguro’s dystopian society: is it better to take the gamble and subject children to genetic altering, which will greatly improve their prospects, or is it better to play it
“safe” and forego the process, even if it means severely diminished opportunities? The fact that Josie’s mother casts the choice in terms of winning and losing shows how much is at stake even as it highlights the divisive and highly competitive nature of their society.

In terms of narrative technique, this scene proves significant, as well. While Klara recounts this heated conversation in a straightforward manner, seemingly without passing judgment, her perspective nonetheless conveys how emotionally fraught the decision (to “lift” or not) can be. In this manner, Ishiguro relies on the dual dialectics of empathy and de-familiarization. He creates a scene that shows Josie’s mother experiencing deeply personal feelings about her decision—emotions clearly also bound up with hope for her daughter’s future, guilt for taking what she sees as a gamble, and fear over what that decision might cost them. Further complicating matters, the novel makes it clear that the process may be deemed necessary by some parents who have decided that they must take such a gamble considering that there are so few opportunities in Ishiguro’s fictional society and their offspring thus need this additional advantage in order to compete (for jobs, resources, and a place in society).

While, for Josie’s mother, this dilemma is intensely personal, the larger debate she references is connected to a broader platform of human experience. To be sure, her feelings illustrate a more-universal dilemma faced by others in Ishiguro’s speculative future—and it also emphasizes the divide in their society between those who have been genetically altered and those who have not. Moreover, Josie’s mother’s dilemma prompts questions for us about the direction we are heading in our own world, especially with respect to the limits (ethical and otherwise) of editing or manipulating human genes.
(POSTHUMAN) IDENTITY: TECHNOLOGY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN KLARA AND THE SUN

Connected to the decision to “lift,” the narrative foregrounds questions about identity. Namely, the novel pushes us to consider what effects technological changes—including so-called medical “advances”—might have on concepts such as selfhood, identity, and subjectivity. The process of “lifting,” as described in the novel, serves an example of what is referred to as enhancement technologies, that is, technologies designed to enhance human physical, cognitive, emotional and moral abilities (these can include implants, drugs, genetic modification, and/or interaction with machines, and they can bring about temporary and permanent effects).

As David DeGrazia emphasizes in “Enhancement Technologies and Human Identity,” there has been a tendency to put forth “two identity-related challenges to biotechnological enhancements: (1) the charge of inauthenticity and (2) the charge of violating inviolable core characteristics” (261). These concerns that DeGrazia calls attention to here serve as the precise dilemmas that emerge in Klara and the Sun, since the novel brings up debates about the nature of humanity (as well as the direction humanity is headed) by presenting a scenario wherein genetic engineering is widely practiced, but still controversial. Moreover, because the novel takes care to highlight the real divide between the “lifted” and the “unlifted” humans in their fictional society, the narrative also prompts a re-definition of what it means to be human. Since such a reassessment is already taking shape in our own society, Klara and the Sun provides a glimpse of changes that could happen soon, and the challenges that might come along with such changes.

Just as Philip Brey outlines in his article, “Human Enhance-
ment and Personal Identity,” the “possibility of human enhancement requires a rethinking of the aims of medicine” (169). Enhancement brings with it many questions, chief among these being: should medical care be used simply to maintain health, or should technologies push the aim of medicine even further? Brey explains the dilemma thus:

The primary aim of medicine has always been the treatment of illness and disability. That is, medicine has traditionally been therapeutic: it has been concerned with restoring impaired human functions to a state of normality or health. Human enhancement aims to bring improvements to the human condition that move beyond a state of mere health. Part of the contemporary debate on human enhancement therefore concerns the question whether the traditional aims of medicine should be expanded to include human enhancement as one of its aims. (169)

Along with the development of medical technologies that augment humans, there are significant questions that arise regarding whether such alterations fundamentally change humans to the degree that they become posthuman (or something beyond human). This question, which has long appeared in discussions about the posthuman predicament that we will soon be (or already are) faced with, gets to the heart of the issue about what it means to be human, and the degree to which human have been inextricably linked to their tools and technologies.

In this manner, the novel comes across as a decidedly posthuman text. As Victoria Flanagan emphasizes, “Posthumanism
uses technoscience as the impetus for a radical revaluation of human subjectivity” (1). Such a reassessment is necessary, because “being and experience have been changed by technological development” (Flanagan 15). Ishiguro’s engagement with this kind of reconsideration can be located in the passages that describe how advanced technologies have shaped the social order in Klara and the Sun.

In Ishiguro’s fictional society, these changes get represented most pointedly through characters like Josie and Klara. For Josie, the posthuman predicament applies since term posthuman can “indicate the condition of existing in a world that has been irreversibly altered by technology” (Flanagan 15). Josie undoubtedly exists is such a world since Ishiguro portrays her society as so technologically advanced that intelligent machines are part of the landscape and genetic engineering is practiced routinely on the human population. Of course, Josie herself has been subject to genetic modification (via the process of “lifting”). While she benefits from the procedure by being afforded more opportunities, it comes with a cost: her health. In this manner, Ishiguro presents the practice as multi-faceted. It is worth noting that since her mother made this decision for her, Josie was not an altogether willing participant in the process—thus further complicating the already difficult question of subjectivity.

In Klara’s case, posthuman concerns prove germane because, as an Artificial Friend, a sentient machine, she represents a form of being that has come along after the human. Hence, she is posthuman. In fact, with Klara, the possibility is explored if she might one day literally take the place of a human, since the novel dangles the prospect that she may one day serve as a replacement for Josie, thus bringing to the surface deep-seated fears that the self is not stable and fixed but
unstable and infinitely malleable. This issue gets cast as complicated in the novel due to the fact that specific “problems” with Klara’s particular model line have potentially led to certain AFs (like Klara) being designed to potentially achieve sentience (later models were developed who were supposedly more compliant and less able to adapt/evolve, thus making them less likely to achieve sentience). Moreover, this idea that Klara could become Josie also recalls Myra J. Seaman’s words of warning, that, in a “posthumanist world, this human is an endangered species” (246). Thus, the novel challenges the hold anthropocentrism has had on the way we view potential manifestations of subjectivity, phenomenology, reasoning, and cognition.

Interestingly, in *Klara and the Sun*, it is Josie’s mother who pushes Klara to consider the possibility of taking Josie’s place. Fearing Josie will pass away as her older child did, Mrs. Arthur envisions Josie “living on” in a way through Klara. She first brings up the subject when the two of them take a day-trip to a natural area near Morgan’s Falls, a waterfall. Josie was supposed to visit the area with them, but a sudden downturn in her health prohibited her from coming along. Mrs. Arthur proposes that they go on the excursion anyway, without Josie. After hiking, they take a moment’s rest. It is then that Mrs. Arthur instructs Klara to imitate Josie: “Since Josie isn’t here, I want you to be Josie. Just for a little while” (Ishiguro 104). When Klara complies, Josie’s mother is clearly impressed by the performance and implores her to carry on pretending to be Josie: “I want you to move. Do something. Don’t stop being Josie” (Ishiguro 104). Klara continues in her impression for a while, referring to Mrs. Arthur as “Mother” throughout the exchange (Ishiguro 105).

Afterwards, Mrs. Arthur is jolted by what has transpired; however, it is clear, however, that she is also intrigued. Her
reaction is apparent when Klara recounts how Josie’s mother “didn’t speak for the entire way back down to the car” (Ishiguro 105). Once they arrive at the vehicle, Mrs. Arthur invites Klara to “travel in the front,” and tells her on the way home that she is “grateful” to her (Ishiguro 106). She also asks Klara to keep secret from Josie what happened, urging: “I think it’s best we say nothing to Josie about this. Nothing about what you were doing up there. Imitating her. Josie might take it the wrong way” (Ishiguro 107).

Not a thing is ever mentioned to Josie about the incident, but it becomes clear that Mrs. Arthur has been fixating for some time on the idea of Klara taking Josie’s place. When they visit an artist’s studio where Josie has been sitting to have her portrait done (Josie having been led to believe that the sittings are simply so that the artist, Mr. Capaldi, can paint her likeness), Klara realizes that Mr. Capaldi, however, is making not a painting of Josie but rather a realistic AF body. Klara notes that how, in an upstairs room of the studio, she spies “Josie there, suspended in the air,” and then, realizing that it is an AF model being built, describes how the “face was like that of the real Josie” (Ishiguro 201). Shortly thereafter, Capaldi and Mrs. Arthur question Klara about what she has seen: “‘Okay,’ the Mother said, and again I saw she was fearful rather than angry. ‘Now tell us what you thought. Or, rather, tell us what you think you saw up there?’” (Ishiguro 204). Klara relates: “I’d suspected for some time that Mr. Capaldi’s portrait wasn’t a picture or a sculpture, but an AF. I went in to confirm my speculation” (Ishiguro 204). That same day, Klara is given a test to gauge how well she knows Josie, and to see if she understands “how she makes her decisions and why she has her feelings” (Ishiguro 206). Klara believes the aim of all this is so she will be able to “train the Josie upstairs” to convincingly imitate the real Josie (Ishiguro 206). This passage
brings to light an interesting juxtaposition between Klara’s understanding of what is transpiring and readers’ impression of what is taking place. Klara, as narrator, does not display any sense of horror over this (she seems willing to comply), but reading might likely recoil at the suggestion that Josie can be so easily replaced (thus bringing to light fears about the self—namely that our concept of selfhood is problematic and unstable—as well as anxieties that AIs might replace humans).

Capaldi, however, quickly clarifies that the goal is not for her to train another AF to behave like Josie but rather that Klara herself will replace her: “Klara, we’re not asking you to train the new Josie. We’re asking you to become her. That Josie you saw up there, as you noticed, is empty. If the day comes—I hope it doesn’t, but if it does—we want you to inhabit that Josie up there with everything you’ve learned” (Ishiguro 206–207). While Klara is taken aback, Capaldi reasons that Klara could “continue her” for the sake of Josie’s mother (Ishiguro 207). This proposed scheme is not only significant in terms of the novel’s plot, but also gets to the heart of the questions posed by Klara and The Sun: To what degree are individuals replaceable? Is there really such a thing as an essential self at all? These inquiries necessitate a re-examination of concepts of such as individualism, identity, and selfhood, ultimately suggesting that the idea of there being a true self is just an illusion.

The plan hatched by Josie’s mother and Capaldi raises questions about identity and engages with debates about a concept referred to as “psychological continuity.” The concept relates to notions of selfhood by delineating certain psychological criteria of personal identity. Psychological continuity assumes that there exist overlapping chains of direct psycho-
logical connections, such as those between beliefs, desires, intentions, experiential memories, and personality traits, and that these connections constitute personal identity. Most pointedly, the scenario proposed in *Klara and the Sun* puts forth a dilemma related to an ongoing debate between Psychological-continuity theorists, in particular the question of psychological connectedness. The question posed is this: If the contents of an individual’s mind were to be transported or replicated (in some way)—assuming any of this is possible—and then later put into another being’s mind, would that constitute a continuation of the same individual? Psychological-continuity scholars disagree on this issue. For instance, while Sydney Shoemaker, in both *Personal Identity* (1984) and “Self and Substance” (1997), seems to believe that it would represent the same person, Peter Unger disagrees. In *Identity, Consciousness, and Value* (1990), Unger argues that identity must also be physically based. Moreover, he asserts that contemporary philosophers have underrated the importance of physical continuity to identity and survival.

Additionally, by dangling the possibility that Josie might be replaced by Klara, Ishiguro blurs the line between human and machine. By envisioning a world populated by humans (many of whom have been genetically modified) who live alongside several different generations and models of AFs, Ishiguro further calls attention to the often-unstable boundaries between humans and machines. In this respect, he probes what a posthuman future might signal. Considering that Josie has been “lifted” and has arguably moved beyond the human condition, as it has traditionally been understood, and given Klara’s obvious intelligence and awareness (not to mention her ability to reason and emphasize), which position her as a potential candidate for personhood, the novel’s two main characters represent competing visions of posthu-
man subjectivity. In this respect, Ishiguro’s characters probe traditional limits with respect to ontology, in a move that has come to characterize other of Ishiguro’s fiction, given that he makes such a case in Never Let Me Go, his novel about human cloning.

**THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN KLARA AND THE SUN**

Besides troubling boundaries with respect to ontology, the novel also reveals instability surrounding long-taken-for-granted concepts such as the Self and the Other, as well as the supposed difference between the two. According to phenomenology, the term the Other—and the concept of the “Constitutive Other”—are used to identify the other human being. Traditionally understood as dissimilar to, and even opposite of, the Self, this concept developed in the psychoanalysis of Lacan (this explanation appears primarily in Écrits). Through a Lacanian lens, the Other is associated with the image outside oneself perceived and identified within the Mirror-stage.

Taken as a cumulative, constituting factor in the self-image of a person, this concept of Self governs traditional understandings about identity. In Klara and the Sun, particularly in the way that he portrays Klara, Ishiguro complicates the relationship between Self and the Other. Thus, an already fraught concern is made even more complex in Ishiguro’s posthuman imaginary. Annalisa Quinn speaks to this dimension of the novel in “Klara and the Sun Asks What It Means to Be Human,” when she observes, “one of the distinct things about Klara’s speech is the way she addresses the people in her life indirectly (‘It is nice to meet Rick’), as if the space between ‘you’ and ‘I’ is unnavigable, shifting territory belonging only to people. The nature and size of that territory becomes the
novel's primary concern.” To an extent, this chasm can be attributed to the way technology has pushed a reassessment of concepts such as Self and Other.

Indeed, as Isabel Millar highlights in “Black Mirror: From Lacan’s Lathouse to Miller’s Speaking Body” (2018), technology is “beginning to dramatically change the social bond.” Millar thus references Lacan’s concept of the social bond which, as he claims in Encore, “installs itself only by anchoring itself in the manner in which language situates itself and impresses itself, situates itself upon that which swarms, that is, the speaking being” (51). The idea of being a speaking being, which for so long helped humanity define itself, no longer sets humans apart in the way it was previously argued to, in part because the realm of language is (also) occupied by others. Consequently, uncertainty now surrounds these once taken-for-granted notions that helped humans understand themselves in relation to (and as unique from) Others. These notions are particularly challenged when considering intelligent machines and what they can do for, as Millar notes, “Artificial Intelligence,” constitutes an “ambiguous object” that can disrupt the social bond. In this manner, Klara and the Sun, reflects as well as contributes to, ongoing debates about selfhood, particularly as these discussions either emphasize or complicate the (so-called) fundamental differences between Self and Other.

In effect, the dynamics present in the Klara and the Sun exemplify the argument that Lisa Zunshine makes about the degree to which literary studies and cognitive sciences can inform each other. In particular, Zunshine’s view that there is a strong connection between the two fields, one that relies upon the phenomenon of “mind-reading,” is suggested by the way Klara interacts with humans. To be sure, both Klara’s suc-
cesses and failures when she attempts to “mind-read” underscore the degree to which this phenomenon is a crucial component of human interaction, even though humans take it for granted and thus do not usually interrogate what the practice entails or what the implications of “mind-reading” truly are.

The novel also leans on Klara to bring other timely and relevant issues about identity to the forefront. Her role in the novel—that is, how she functions and how others see her—raises questions about to what degree humans are replaceable, thus challenging humans’ supposedly unique position in this regard, as well. As Quinn explains it,

The Mother begins testing Klara to see if she can imitate Josie’s movements and speech patterns. As Josie sickens, she goes to have her ‘portrait’ done, but Klara discovers that the portrait is really a kind of wearable 3-D sculpture of Josie. Here, the reader wonders if Klara, offered the option of replacing the human she is supposed to protect, will take it. All that love and affection, a family life, a romantic life with Rick, Josie’s boyfriend. Robots can replace us in our working lives—can they replace us in our emotional lives, too?

Thus, as Quinn’s reading emphasizes, by dangling the possibility that Klara could serve a replacement for Josie, Ishiguro’s narrative provokes anxieties about AIs supplanting humanity while also casting humans’ uniqueness into doubt. At the same time, this proposition serves to test Klara, to see if such an arrangement would be something she could do, would want to do, or would see herself as benefitting from. Might Klara be tempted to slip into the role of Josie? Would
such an existence be seen as appealing to her? And, if so, do these desires reflect her wish to obey her human “family” or do they reflect her own desires?

Besides highlighting anxieties and calling attention to uncertainties surrounding whether machines might eventually displace humanity from its privileged position (a shift already taking place in the novel since humans, \textit{en masse}, have lost their jobs to AIs and automation), the narrative also asks what these kinds of radical changes might mean for how humans see themselves. This line of questioning is central to the novel and shapes not only how humans treat AIs, but also how humans treat each other. Ishiguro approaches this concern, in part, by displaying another kind of friction between different groups: the tension that exists in the novel between the two castes of humans, those who have been “lifted” and those who have not. Thus, Ishiguro pushes the concept of the “haves” and the “have nots” to the extreme. By creating a dystopia where it is possible to augment humans via genetic engineering, Ishiguro probes who is most worthy of rights and opportunities.

Human rights, that is, the idea that humans are entitled to rights simply because we exist as human beings, are not universally granted. While many believe that universal rights are inherent to us all, an obvious challenge to the universality factor derives from the “cultural relativism” argument, which points out how cultural imperialism has long-influenced moral judgment. Those skeptical of the notion that human rights are universal also frequently emphasize that these rights are expressive of Western values, mores, and norms. Given that rights and values are defined and limited by cultural perceptions and since there is no universal culture, there are no universal human rights.
What It Means to Be a Talking Object

When Ishiguro brings this point to bear in *Klara and the Sun*, he does so alongside a broader examination of posthuman concerns and an in-depth consideration of nonhuman agency. In this sense, this novel offers an indirect critique of the political, cultural, and social factors that make some individuals more deserving of consideration than others. Ishiguro also probes the nature of humanity and the many social and technological forces that shape how we see ourselves.

**INFLUENCE AND INTERTEXTUALITY**

In these respects, Ishiguro’s narrative demonstrates overlapping tendencies with other popular stories about non-humans. The novel connects broadly to these kinds of stories since they all feature objects that have achieved varying degrees of subjectivity and agency. Thus, predicaments like Klara’s get dramatically depicted in these narratives. It is easy, for instance, to draw comparisons between *Klara and the Sun* and classic children’s books such as Margery Williams Bianco’s *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922) and Don Freeman’s *Corduroy* (1968). Likewise, there are striking similarities between Ishiguro’s novel and popular movies such as Disney-Pixar’s *Toy Story* film series (1995-2019) and Steven Spielberg’s *AI* (2001), a film based on the short story, “Supertoys Last All Summer Long” (1969) by Brian Aldiss.

These shared tendencies have been noted by the novel’s reviewers. Writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Anita Felicelli connects the desire Ishiguro’s Artificial Friends have to be chosen by children to the yearning of toys, as they have sometimes been depicted in fictional narratives. Referring to the words of caution spoken by the manager of the store where Klara is on display, she asserts that the “warning about children is reminiscent of the poignancy we’re accustomed
to in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the *Toy Story* series, and other similar work about the toys of childhood” (Felicelli). However, Felicelli clarifies that, while “the Velveteen Rabbit longs to be ‘real’ and that longing drives the story, gives it emotional heft, Klara only seeks to do right by the family that buys her. There are no explicit longings beyond the sense of duty to be a good friend and to understand the mechanics of her relationships” (Felicelli).

Instead of the *Velveteen Rabbit*, Jones likens Klara to the stuffed bear in Don Freeman’s classic children’s book, *Corduroy* (1968), observing about Klara that she “has come to act as companion for 14-year-old Josie. Like that childhood stalwart Corduroy, she’d been sitting in a store, hoping to be chosen by the right child.” While *Corduroy* has been touted as being like *The Velveteen Rabbit*, since both are children’s books which concern stuffed animals wanting affection, these stories also have a key difference: the rabbit in *The Velveteen Rabbit* also desires to be real, while Corduroy wishes only to be played with and loved.

Aspects of storylines within installments of Pixar’s animated *Toy Story* film series connect broadly to Klara’s situation, as well. They also display overlapping thematic concerns that bear discussion. Notably, Klara, like the toys in *Toy Story*, represents a form of being as well as purchased property. Klara, just like the toys in the Pixar franchise, was designed for a child; however, in her case, she was created to serve as a companion (not just as a toy) to a human child. Klara’s adventures relate directly to Josie (her human) much like the toys’ escapades in the *Toy Story* franchise relate to Andy and Bonnie (and the other human children depicted) in those movies. Moreover, like the toys in the *Toy Story* series (who care for and want the love of their children), Klara’s foremost
What It Means to Be a Talking Object

goal seems to be to care for Josie—she even goes on a mission to find the Sun to try to convince it (she sees the Sun as a deity of sorts) to cure Josie of her health ailments. Wanting to help the girl is a fundamental part of her being—indeed, as Senecahl puts it, Klara’s “‘duty to assist Josie’ is an innate part of her digital makeup.” In this respect, Klara represents a form of benevolent posthumanism insofar as her motives are to both care for and make life more comfortable for Josie.

Even so, Klara seems to have exceeded her original programming in the lengths she will go for Josie. This can be seen especially in how she hatches the plan to seek the help of the sun. Her recognition of the sun as important makes considerable sense given that she is a solar-powered AF; nonetheless, by displaying a religious instinct, Klara demonstrates that she has evolved from her original programming. From an anthropological perspective, spiritual beliefs often get characterized as the inevitable consequence of (human) evolution. By a similar token, it could be argued that Klara has likewise progressed. Moreover, her quasi-religious behavior pushes her closer to being human (and likewise makes her a clear candidate for personhood) since religious beliefs help to differentiate humans from other kinds of beings. As Pascal Boyer notes in his book, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (2001), the impetus “for religious beliefs and behaviors is to be found in the way all human minds work.” What matters, according to Boyer to, is that these “properties of minds” “can found in all members of our species with normal brains.” Thus, these religious impulses are part of what makes us human—and they make Klara seem human-like.

Klara’s quest to save Josie seems to derive, in part, from her apparent religious beliefs. Nonetheless, by undertaking this
mission, she also demonstrates her subjectivity and agency since she takes it upon herself to go to extremes to help Josie. Of course, her desire to help Josie also traces back to her programming, since she was designed to care for and protect her human. In this manner, she recalls the toys from the *Toy Story* franchise, especially Woody, who claims (in *Toy Story 4*) that “being there for a child is the most noble thing a toy can do.” In her review of the 2019 film, Judy Gruen notes Woody’s loyalty and calls attention to what she sees as a “poignant theme in the film—the sense of purpose and joy that all the toys either feel—or desperately wish they could feel—by being loved and needed by a child.” Thus, in the regard, Josie reinforces cultural images of talking objects who demonstrate affinity for their human companions.

Klara’s fate—deteriorating in a landfill—hearkens back to a subplot of the *Toy Story* franchise and thus establishes another parallel between the two imaginary worlds. In contrast to many of the other toys that take center-stage in the Pixar series, Stinky Pete (also known as the Prospector) displays real mistrust of humans, and especially children, fearing that he will be used and then discarded as if he were junk. As one of the antagonists of the *Toy Story 2* (1999), he cautions the other toys about putting too much faith in children. While his latent to desire to be loved by a child remains evident, the knowledge of what (human) children can do instills real fear in him. Lewis Roberts locates Stinky Pete’s dilemma in his article, “‘It’s a Dangerous World out There for a Toy’: Identity Crisis and Commodity Culture in the *Toy Story Movies*,” where he explains that “Pete’s suppressed longing to have been sold to a child and taken out of the box to be played with has turned to bitterness” (419). Feeling betrayed, Pete now equates security with being away from humans. According to Roberts, for “him, safety now lies in his isolation from
the violence that he associates with the life of a plaything. ‘Children destroy toys!’ he warns Woody. ‘You’ll all be ru-
ined, forgotten! Spending eternity rotting in some landfill!’” (419).

The similarities to the _Toy Story_ movies continue. Both the _Toy Story_ franchise and _Klara and the Sun_ have characters named Rex. A plastic Tyrannosaurus Rex toy, Rex is a sup-
porting character in the _Toy Story_ franchise. Boy AF Rex is a minor character in _Klara and the Sun_. He teases Klara early in the narrative (during the time when both resided in the urban store that sold AFs), but his joking nature hides the in-
securities he feels inside. In this respect, the Rex character in _Klara and the Sun_ demonstrates some resemblance to a bear named Lotso, the main antagonist of _Toy Story 3_. Most no-
tably, they share the desire to find a home with a child. Lotso—as revealed as part of his backstory in _Toy Story 3_—was abandoned by his owner, leaving him angry and resentful, though, of course, still hoping to find love and fulfillment by being claimed by a child. In _Klara and the Sun_, Boy AF Rex pines for a home, too, displaying something akin to desper-
ation as he and the fellow AFs in the storefront compete to catch the eyes of passing children. Rosa, another AF, notices this quality about Rex and confides to Klara that she thinks he will soon be chosen. As Klara relates, “Rosa leaned over to me once to say, ‘Oh, he does look wonderful! He’s bound to find a home soon’” (Ishiguro 5). Of course, another key sim-
ilarity is that the movies in the _Toy Story_ franchise illustrate the theme of objects coming to life, which is a loose way to describe Klara’s situation in Ishiguro’s novel.

Narratives that feature objects that come to life (in one sense or another) is the subject of _When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development_ (1994)
by Lois R. Kuznets. As part of her larger investigation into what the transformation of a toy into a living being represents, she argues, “when inanimate objects become ‘live beings,’” they “embody human anxiety about what it means to be ‘real’—an independent subject or self rather than an object” (Kuznets 2). As Kuznets highlights, stories which dramatize such transformations call into question notions of selfhood even while troubling the (already unstable) line between object and subject. Her analysis additionally explores what dangers might lie in the transformation of a toy into a living being, hearkening to “the idea that the ‘Other’ is dangerous” (Kuznets 106). This danger, of course, taps into anxieties about selfhood since questioning the constitutive qualities of (potentially sentient) objects also raises difficult questions about (human) subjectivity.

While Kuznets focuses on the dangers that toys-come-to-life might pose (either by being dangerous themselves or by taking their children on adventures that could prove risky), Roberts examines the risks and anxieties once-inanimate objects themselves face by/through their transformations. As part of his discussion about the Toy Story franchise, he posits that “toys such as Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear experience a series of identity crises” (Roberts 418). These predicaments result from the uncertainties “toys such as Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear experience as they struggle with the contradictions inherent in their lives as things” (Roberts 418).

Dilemmas such as these can be observed throughout the series. Indeed, all the “toys in the Toy Story movies are simultaneously inanimate objects and animate subjects, mass-produced things that also possess individual consciousness. Their existential crises are located within this slippage between the toy object and the character” (Roberts 419). Such
uncertainty derives, in part, from “the fluctuating identities of toys as both beings and property,” a feature which can be seen throughout the series (Roberts 418). While his observations center specifically on the Toy Story franchise, Roberts nonetheless acknowledges that “Pixar’s Toy Story movies join a long tradition of children’s fiction in exploring the nature of identity through the animation of the inanimate” (418). Tellingly, the same concerns which propel these plots and mark their cultural significance also emerge in Ishiguro’s Klara and the Sun.

Klara and the Sun also shares features in common with Steven Spielberg’s 2001 film, AI: Artificial Intelligence. Besides the fact that both have storylines featuring intelligent machines whose existence poses provocative questions about ethics and agency, Klara bears some resemblance to David (played by a young Haley Joel Osment), the AI in the film. Speaking of the two, Hooper admits that “Klara’s outlook reminds me of Haley Joel Osment’s character,” explaining that Osment “plays a robot boy programmed to be capable of love. Klara is programmed to be a friend, and when she is selected by Josie, her function simply becomes that of ‘friend to Josie.’ Klara’s own desires are only hinted at. She is a conscious being, but her artificiality means she is treated differently, and discriminated against, by humans.” Thus, as Hooper’s remarks underscore, both texts engage with difficult ontological questions by/through the portrayal of these characters while raising ethical stakes with the treatment of posthuman beings (such as David and Klara).

As these comparisons underscore, Klara and the Sun clearly shares tendencies with other works. Nonetheless, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish definitively between echoes and allusions. Still, as is the case with many novels, there is no
doubt that *Klara and the Sun* coexists as part of a network of associations with other creative works and thus displays intertextual relationships. The novel also dramatizes the cultural anxieties that influence so much of contemporary fiction. This can be seen principally in the way that Ishiguro foregrounds concerns about identity and the effects new technologies have on society.

Texts, of course, frequently mirror and borrow from each other since authors often deliberately (and directly) refer to other works in attempts to use allusion to generate related understanding in their own works. However, what comes across as allusion is sometimes authors just gravitating toward exploring the same concerns as their counterparts, an understandable practice given that authors are subject to many of the same cultural influences their contemporaries are—and therefore would likewise react to, and reflect upon, the same milieu.

*KLARA AND THE SUN: THE QUESTION OF “ALMOST MINDS”*

Besides the more general ways that Ishiguro uses his narrative to respond to social concerns, the novel also represents an important cultural artefact in the way that its narrator and protagonist displays a specific dilemma referred to the concept of “almost minds.” As Haraway reasons in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989), “children, artificial intelligence (AI) computer programs, and nonhuman primates all here embody ‘almost minds’” (376). These categories of beings share the fact that they all display aspirationally human cognition yet are seen as only provisionally deserving of ethical treatment. In this manner, they probe puzzling questions related to “who or
what has fully human status,” ultimately highlighting how the “boundaries among and within machines, animals, and humans are exceedingly permeable” (Haraway 376). Tied to these concerns are questions about what Haraway terms the “techno-bio-politics of difference” (376).

Thus, the notion of “almost minds” helps to explain Klara’s particular dilemma. While she is human-like in so many ways, she is not afforded the same rights as humans in her society. Her situation is emblematic of a larger practice and calls attention to real-world scenarios wherein certain categories of beings are recognized as different. In other words, by giving sustained attention to the impasse Klara faces, the novel also alludes to, even while re-framing, real-world scenarios that prove likewise problematic.

In “Robot Visions” (2014) Claudia Castañeda and Lucy Suchman address Haraway’s notion of “almost minds,” arguing that the “resonating figures of primate, child, and robot in contemporary technoscientific” bear examination due to the “claims about nature—and in particular human nature” that can be made by fictional representations of robots (315). With respect to the many fictional portrayals that follow this trend, they ask: “What kinds of bodies are being imagined, and what limits and possibilities does the robot embody in turn?” (Castañeda and Suchman 315). Perhaps, as Maya Indira Ganesh, who also weighs in on Haraway’s discussion of “almost minds,” suggests, by using the “phrase ‘almost-minds,’ Haraway is reminding us of the history of some people—‘natives,’ ‘slaves,’ women, among others—not having complete human status because they were not believed to have ‘full’ minds” (“The Difference that Difference Makes”).

*Klara and the Sun* calls attention to those who have been labeled different (and thus not seen as fully human) in our own
world, past and present. Besides hearkening to past and current articulations of difference and how they get used to enable and justify discrimination, the novel is forward-looking and functions also a fable about human rights in a posthuman world. These questions remain pertinent since, as William Lombardo notes in “Losing Ourselves,” we “moderns seem precariously unsure of what it means to be human.” As he argues:

We have shaken off the old hierarchy of living creatures—with humans at the top of the natural world and the bottom of the supernatural—and have replaced it with the notion that what truly sets us apart from the rest of nature is our superior intelligence, or having a mind at all. What is left of our dignity consists in this: we are thinking beings. But the prospect of truly humanlike artificial intelligence, even if it is for now only a pipe dream, rattles that foundation. If our intelligence is all that defines us, who are we when AI matches it? (Lombardo)

The cumulative effect of this reordering is that humanity must re-think not only our place in the world, but what it means to be human, as well.

In *Klara and the Sun*, humans are an endangered species. Between environmental catastrophes, terrorism, and the highly competitive labor market, the extinction of homo sapiens sapiens—as the category has traditionally been understood—seems imminent in Ishiguro’s imaginary. The direction that Ishiguro’s fictional society is headed portends fundamental changes on the horizon for any who remain, due in large part to the technological developments in Artificial Intelligence,
automation, and human gene editing. These changes, which have already necessitated a reconsideration of what it means to be human, promise to radically alter humankind.

**NARRATIVE LIMITS: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A “TALKING OBJECT”**

Ishiguro’s tale about what it means to be human, a narrative written amidst a radically re-imagining of the concept, is not narrated from a human viewpoint. Rather, Ishiguro selects an Artificial Friend, a sentient AI, as his narrator, thus relying on the “classical science fiction trope of the innocent android,” with her “narrative gaze restricted to partial glimpses” (Power). Consequently, the “sense that Klara makes of her experiences is not, of course, the sense that we are able to make from them, as we read; instead, we’re compelled to piece together from Klara’s observations a heartbreaking mosaic of human experiences: hope, need, love, loss, growth.” Klara’s partial view of the novel’s events underscores her nature and worldview even as her perspective pushes readers to assemble a coherent story from her observations. Besides demonstrating Ishiguro’s reliance on techniques such as estrangement and de-familiarization, the limits of Klara’s narrative serve another function: they remind us of our own. Like Klara, there is only so much we can see and make sense of. Nonetheless, we continue to contemplate our place in the world in a manner quite like Klara.

Ishiguro chooses to conclude this narrative by showing Klara’s existence waning in the “Yard,” a junkyard where she has been sent to wait until her cell fully powers down (294). Unable to move any longer, Klara exists at this point as a “talking object,” able to speak to passersby even as she continues to recount her the narrative for the novel’s read-
ers. In this manner, she spends her remaining time looking back on the years she spent with Josie and contemplating her existence. While this setting (a junkyard) and her contemplation prove significant since they underscore previously established themes in the novel, this final glimpse at Klara resonates due to what is reveals about her, even in her twilight.

As Richard J. Wallace surmises in the book, *Artificial Intelligence/ Human Intelligence: An Indissoluble Nexus*, “one thing people can do that seems outside the realm of computability is that they can contemplate existence” (298). For Wallace, this small act separates human from machine, since he says he has “no idea how this could be achieved by a computer program” (though he does clarify that his “present work is concerned with what AI systems can do,” rather than speculation) (Wallace 298). Arbitrary though this watermark may be, Klara has surpassed it in the way she ponders her place in the world in the twilight moments of her life, even while her care and concern for Josie persists.

By telling this story—an account of what it means to be human—through the lens of an intelligent machine who also must contemplate her own place in the world, Ishiguro pushes the limits in terms of narrative. He also prompts debates about Klara’s place in the world. In this manner, Ishiguro’s novel fits into the posthuman paradigm, for, as William Lewis notes, the “posthuman paradigm calls into question the ontological basis of subjectivity and position and, by questioning what it means to be a subject in our technologically mediated world, we must also question what it means to engage with(in) that world” (Lewis 8).

While these concerns relate directly to Klara’s predicament, they also highlight the broader and ongoing reassessment of concepts such as agency, subjectivity, and personhood.
While such kinds of reconsideration have been prompted by, and reflected in, science fiction literature, there are real world concerns that these lines of enquiry (foregrounded in the science fiction imaginary) address. Thus, literary works like Klara and the Sun operate as part of an ongoing dialogue about what it means to be human, what it means to be Other, and how these already unstable categories have become even more uncertain in the 21st century.

Images such as those present in Ishiguro’s science fiction novel suggest what the future could hold and, in this respect, they tap into cultural anxieties. Not only do they reveal fears surrounding societal change and concerns about humanity being replaced or rendered obsolete, but they show how the kinds of reassessments these ideas engender can be uncomfortable. However, science fiction is often prescient, and that may well also be the case for science fictional representations of Artificial Intelligence.

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What It Means to Be a Talking Object


What It Means to Be a Talking Object


A Lack of Joi: Hegemonic Femininity and the Male Gaze in Blade Runner: 2049

By Ashley McCann and Erika Engstrom

ABSTRACT
This article examines how the 2017 film Blade Runner: 2049 reinforces a patriarchal viewpoint utilizing hegemonic femininity and the male gaze as theoretical approaches. The holographic character Joi’s appearance and interactions with the male protagonist K reflects hegemonic femininity, which adds to how the film’s women characters reaffirm the centrality of K and gender stereotypes that prevent this sequel from reflecting any expected progress since the release of the original Blade Runner in 1982.

Keywords: Blade Runner, hegemonic femininity, male gaze, gender stereotypes, film
cualquier progreso esperado desde el lanzamiento del Blade Runner original en mil novecientos ochenta y dos.

*Palabras clave:* Blade Runner, feminidad hegemónica, mirada masculina, estereotipos de género, cine

乔伊的缺乏：《银翼杀手2049》中的女性气质与男性凝视

摘要

本文分析了2017年电影《银翼杀手2049》如何利用霸权女性气质（hegemonic femininity）和男性凝视作为理论方法来强化父权制观点。全息角色乔伊（Joi）的出现以及与男主角K的互动反映了霸权女性气质，这有助于解释电影的女性角色如何重申K的中心地位和性别刻板印象，这种性别刻板印象让这部续集无法反映任何自1982年原版《银翼杀手》上映后所期望的进展。

关键词： 银翼杀手，霸权女性气质，男性凝视，性别刻板印象，电影

The 2017 film *Blade Runner: 2049*, the sequel to Ridley Scott’s 1982 now-classic film *Blade Runner*, tells the story of K (played by Ryan Gosling), a replicant “blade runner” for the Los Angeles Police Department tasked with hunting down and destroying rogue replicants. While on a case, K discovers the remains of a replicant who died during childbirth, proving that female replicants are capable of biological reproduction. This narrative and the prominent fe-
male characters that revolve around the main character K underscore women’s status within the fictional future depicted, and the actual society in which it is produced.

Though the film presents itself as an exploration of what defines a human, the artificial humans are constructed products that perform stereotypical ideas of gender, with the depiction of its female characters falling passively within tired gendered roles that follow heteronormative patriarchal expectations. Although the negative portrayal of its female characters gained the attention of critics (Gush, Richards, Smith), alternate readings of this aspect of the film called such criticisms “facile,” arguing that the film actually served as an “overt criticism of such a society” (Shanahan 173), with further castigation of the film’s negative reviews as “completely missing that the emphasis on the male perspective is meant to highlight its destructiveness and signal its imminent destruction” (Parker-Flynn 73). These alternate takes on the film appear to read more into the text’s exploration of gender than the narrative itself is concerned with; gender roles that appear in the film are what are already expected rather than interrogated. The lack of truly resistant and intentionally alternative portrayals of gender negates these claims. For example, K plays the assumed masculine hero to the typical Hollywood standards. Further, there is no evidence in the film itself that societal gender structure will be dismantled. Any intentionality of a feminist agenda remains absent in the narrative itself. The poor treatment of women, especially, is never called out by any character in the film or even challenged nonverbally. Thus, the film provides no palpable commentary itself supporting claims that defend the film as actually being pro-woman, only an absence of support for a feminist agenda and lack of female characters who act apart from the male protagonist’s narrative.
An interrogation of *Blade Runner: 2049*’s depiction of its female characters using a feminist perspective serves as an appropriate way to explore how the film’s failure to engage substantially with those characters actually reinforces gender stereotypes. When viewed and approached through the lenses of hegemonic femininity and the male gaze, the film ultimately reinforces regressive beliefs about women. By doing so, it upholds patriarchy, a form of social system that “imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women” (Rawat 43).

The current inquiry employs these theories to unpack how the film, set in a near future, fails to present strong women characters who determine their own fate, which in turn supports a Hollywood-based status quo in which women serve as ancillary stereotypes rather than true agency needed for a radical shift in gender status. Rather than a forward-looking sequel, the current study demonstrates the *Blade Runner 2049*’s portrayal of women appears even more regressive than that of its 35-year-old predecessor. It contributes to *Blade Runner 2049* studies (Kim, King, Omry, Parker-Flynn, Shanahan and Smart, Taşkale, Žižek) in addition to the wider body of literature on gender portrayals in popular culture, particularly depictions of women that uphold a gendered power imbalance.

**SYNOPSIS OF BLADE RUNNER: 2049**

*Blade Runner* is a beloved cinematic classic science fiction film that has had a lasting impact on the genre; research on the film addresses its blending of the science fiction and noir genres (Doll and Faller) and how it blurred the boundaries between human and artificial human (Staudt). Its sequel,
Blade Runner:2049, follows K, a “blade runner” tasked with executing rogue replicants for the police force. K is a unique type of blade runner because he himself is a replicant. When he discovers the remains of a replicant whose death in childbirth proves that artificial humans can biologically reproduce, his superior, Joshi (played by Robin Wright), fears this discovery could spark a war between the humans and replicants and sends K on a mission to find and execute the replicant-human “miracle” child. K investigates the manufacturer of replicants, the Wallace Corporation, and discovers that the child is the offspring of Racheal, a character from the previous film with known romantic ties to Deckard, the original film’s protagonist. K’s investigations further lead him to reflect on his own memories and question whether he actually could be the child. His female “companion,” a holographic woman named Joi (played by Ana de Armas), encourages his introspection.

Fearing for his life, K lies to Joshi and claims to have eliminated the replicant child. As he emotionally spirals, failing to maintain the accepted emotional baseline expected for replicants of his model, Joi hires Mariette, a prostitute, to act as a surrogate for her and K to have sex. However, the prostitute is a member of a replicant resistance movement and implants K with a tracker. K continues to investigate, tracking down Deckard and confirming that he is the father of the child. Luv, a henchwoman for the Wallace Corporation, confronts K, then kills Joi and kidnaps Deckard, leaving K to die. But K is rescued by the resistance, from whom he learns that the replicant child was a girl and realizes his memories must be false. K leaves the resistance headquarters to rescue Deckard. On his way, he contemplates his identity, and is unnerved by an interactive ad for Joi’s line of holographic women that attempts to flirt with him. K fights Luv and ultimately frees
Deckard but is mortally wounded. K reveals the location of Deckard’s daughter, and Deckard reunites with her.

**HEGEMONIC FEMININITY IN HOLLYWOOD**

In *Fantasies of Femininity*, feminist scholar Jane Ussher identified how popular culture in a patriarchal society creates a dominant concept of idealized womanhood consisting of three elements—beauty, sexual purity, and interest in heterosexual romance—which girls are taught to adhere to from early childhood. A woman doesn’t have to do anything in a patriarchy, “she just has to be—to adopt the feminine masquerade” (Ussher 8). In contrast, women who are active are portrayed as villainous and straying from the path of correct femininity. Thus, femininity manifests as “the dilemma between pure passivity and active independent sexuality, a double bind in which no woman wins” (8). Gender portrayals in popular culture contribute to this script by vilifying women for exhibiting their own independence, expecting them instead to live under a passive subordination that continues to limit them to patriarchal expectations.

Through the script of womanhood described by Ussher, a hegemonic femininity permeates society; it becomes fundamentally woven into a society’s narratives, affecting both how women are perceived and perceive themselves. Thus, hegemonic femininity describes the idealized, dominant standards of womanhood prescribed by a society that might be unattainable for women in that culture while maintaining patriarchal power; it consists of “the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that by doing so guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Schippers 94). These charac-
teristics include traits that contrast with those of hegemonic masculinity, such as “physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance” (91). Hegemonic femininity appears across a range of filmic genres and cultures, with research focused on how such media texts either reinforce or challenge stereotypes of femininity (Dralega, Furiah and Bielby, Karupiah, Meyer).

**FEMININITY CREATED THROUGH THE MALE GAZE**

Traditionally, the male gaze works on multiple levels: when a female character is subjected to the male gaze, both the male characters perceiving her within the story and the audience are forced to stop and admire her. As explained by Laura Mulvey, “the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: the erotic object for the characters within the screen story and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (838). Within these moments, as time stops and the story halts to linger on the spectacle of the female form, the ingrained societal belief that men control power while women remain passive and unable to act on their own is reaffirmed: women are meant to be looked at, not to be the ones looking.

There is also the assumed surrogate relationship held by the viewer, who takes the perspective of the male spectator: “as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look” (Mulvey 838). This concept of the assumed male spectator and female erotic object ties into societal assumptions about gender that perpetuate the idea that “regardless of one’s sex category, the possession of erotic desire for the feminine object is constructed as masculine and being the object of masculine de-
sire is feminine” (Schippers 90). These societal assumptions regarding the spectator do not exist in a vacuum. By emphasizing the male perspective, the female spectator is forced to inculcate herself to patriarchal expectations. Consequently, both men and women view the world from the position of the male gaze, with women internalizing their own standards of beauty in the context of what would please men, in (an assumed heteronormative) patriarchy (Devereaux).

In this manner, the male gaze in film perpetuates gender stereotypes, which in turn become commonplace in popular culture. Onscreen gender imbalance becomes evident primarily in the ways in which male characters in these texts—as well as in their role as audience members—gaze at women as if they were objects presented for their viewing pleasure (Manon, Revesz). Despite fantastical environments that should provide a place for female empowerment, such as in the blockbuster 2019 Marvel Cinematic Universe film Captain Marvel (Meluso), women are still shackled by unconscious patriarchal assumptions in science fiction. Similarly, the male gaze functions in Blade Runner: 2049 as a means to present women in a fictionalized not-too-distant future that utilizes a point of view founded in the gendered power structure of the Hollywood film industry.

**THE WOMEN OF BLADE RUNNER: 2049**

Despite its general acclaim, Blade Runner: 2049 has been criticized in popular media for its portrayal of women. Charlotte Gush of Vice called it a “misogynistic mess” and noted that the film’s women were “either prostitutes, holographic housewives, or [died] brutal deaths.” Anna Smith noted the objectification of women’s bodies in the film, describing the setting as containing “sexualized images of women [that dom-
A Lack of Joi

In an article in *Vanity Fair*, the film’s director, Dennis Villeneuve, deflected such criticism by stating that the film was a “mirror on society” and that “the world was not kind to women” (Hoffman). In the original *Blade Runner*, the denouement of the character of Rachael was criticized for portraying her as a “submissive sex object, subject to her man’s desires and wishes” (Fitting). Villeneuve was aware of these negative evaluations and claimed to have tried to respond to them, stating, “[the] first *Blade Runner* was quite rough on the women; something about the film noir aesthetic. But I tried to bring depth to all the characters. For Joi, the holographic character, you see how she evolves” (Hoffman). But Villeneuve’s protestations fall flat. For example, as the current analysis will demonstrate, when one considers the film’s presentation of women as sexualized advertisements, it is clear that these images are presented uncritically. Rather than comment on the treatment of women, the nude holographic women shown are meant only to entice the assumed male viewer.

Despite Villeneuve’s assertions, *Blade Runner: 2049* includes only a few female characters, and they exclusively serve to further the story of the male protagonists of K and Deckard. There is Joshi, K’s superior officer who flirts with him; Luv, a cold replicant henchwoman for the Wallace corporation who is killed by K; Deckard’s daughter, an isolated shut-in who helps K with his investigation; and Mariette, the prostitute hired by Joi who secretly works for the resistance. And then
there is Joi, the holographic woman that K owns, literally. Joi is the character who serves as the focus of this textual analysis of *Blade Runner: 2049’s* depiction of women. Three themes detected in the film illustrate how even a fictional future reinforces the regressive beliefs current popular culture perpetuates about female characters on film and women in general: women presented as objects of desire, the gender imbalance in the relationship between Joi and K, and the use of women in advertising.

### PHYSICAL APPEARANCE: WOMEN AS OBJECTS OF DESIRE

In Joi’s introductory scene, she changes her appearance based on what she believes her owner, K, desires. She cycles through several outfits over the course of her conversations with K. While pretending to prepare him dinner, she dons the appearance of a 1950s housewife. When she believes K is unhappy, she tries to lift his mood by shifting into a dress reminiscent of a 1920s flapper and encouraging him to dance. When K gifts her the upgrade that grants her more physical freedom, she changes her appearance again to display her gratitude as she twirls in a short light blue dress and her hair has been taken down, so it moves with her. When she goes outside, it is raining. Her appearance changes to reflect the downpour; her hair and clothes become wet and the dress clings to Joi tightly, revealing that she is not wearing a bra.

Joi’s most common outfit is all-black athleticwear consisting of a long-sleeved crop top with a slit in the shoulders and loose pants. Her makeup is light, and her hair is pulled back but messy. For most of the scenes in which Joi is assisting K with his investigation, her outfit changes again. She wears a sleeveless minidress with a turtleneck and high boots. She
A Lack of Joi

also wears a transparent raincoat over her dress. Her hair is still pulled back, but it is in a neater ponytail.

Compared to the ads for Joi’s product line, the most common outfits K’s Joi wears are more dressed down; they are less flashily gorgeous or sexually provocative. But it is clear these outfits are still modeled to be desirable for K. Joi might wear a casual athleticwear outfit in their drab, modernistic apartment, but it is still form-fitting, shows her skin, and she still is always wearing make-up.

Taken together, the physical presentations of Joi in her array of decidedly feminine forms serve to be pleasing to the eye, not only for K within the film itself, but also the viewer. The way that Joi is presented visually—both as the version K decides as well as the more generic Joi available for mass purchase in the Blade Runner world set in 2049—illustrates the power of the male gaze as the default setting for how women have been presented on screen. Form-fitting outfits, a casualness that still requires cosmetics to literally “make up” for a lack of natural beauty, and the changing of apparel all become incurred by the motive to please the male gazer, and, thus, the viewer who takes the vantage point of a male gazing at a female. However informal Joi may appear, she cannot be shown in baggy clothing, having unkempt hair, or displaying a tired-looking face. Natural beauty, according to Hollywood and reaffirmed in this film, is disallowed. In the future world of Blade Runner, women still must present as physically attractive. In this sense, arguments that 2049 actually endorses a feminist perspective (Parker-Flynn, Shanahan) become dismantled when one considers the visuality of this prominent female character, who is framed as the love interest of the male protagonist. Joi is an artificial woman who has been designed to conform to expected Hollywood beauty stan-
standards: nothing about her is unexpected. If the film intentionally is forwarding a pro-woman stance, then Joi would have a moment when she or the narrative acknowledges the artificiality of her beauty. Rather, her appearance always adheres to K’s vision of a perfect woman—he never sees her outside of the ideal he purchased. There is no “true Joi” beyond the programming that one already expects of what a desirable woman would look like. When she “dies,” the audience is expected to empathize with K’s grief, but it’s unknown who or what he is grieving when his version of Joi never existed outside of the perfect product he paid for. Her death is bloodless, and she remains beautiful even in her final moments.

In the sex scene, Joi wears a qipao dress, also called a cheongsam, a style of Chinese dress that was first popularized in the 1920s. The setting of Blade Runner has been criticized in the past for its shallow use of Asian cultures and presenting an example of Orientalism, fetishizing the aesthetics of Asian cultures without meaningfully engaging with them or including Asian characters (Emerson). This scene in Blade Runner: 2049 supports these criticisms, as it is the only time a character wears an Asian-inspired outfit, worn very clearly by the subject of the male gaze as Joi sensually undresses for K. In fact, Asian stereotypes appear in the screenplay for the film as well: Joi is described in her first appearance as “goddess, girlfriend, geisha, and goddamn bombshell” (Fancher and Green). The inclusion of “geisha” invokes a fetishistic aspect to Joi’s onscreen depiction. Geishas are a type of Japanese highly trained, well-respected performing artists that have been fetishized by Western audiences due to inaccurate Orientalist treatments such as the 2005 film Memoirs of a Geisha that linked them to prostitution (Akita).
A Lack of Joi

JOI AND K: GENDER IMBALANCE BETWEEN ARTIFICIAL PEOPLE IN ARTIFICIAL INTERACTIONS

Through all of K’s interactions with Joi, it is clear that he is the master, and her role is to cater to his desires; her value is as a “consumer product” (Mulhall). Their first interaction begins with K literally powering Joi on, showing that she does not exist outside of her relationship to him. Joi immediately begins to try and take care of his needs. She performs domestic tasks for K, attempting to “cook” for him, though in reality she can only provide a simulation of food. Joi displays a strange lack of confidence in her duties. She says she needs “more practice” cooking and K tells her not to fuss. The film implies that Joi was programmed to lack self-confidence so that K could have the opportunity to reassure her.

Besides cooking, Joi performs other domestic tasks, such as when she offers to fix a tear in K’s shirt and lights his cigarette for him. Additionally, Joi also tends to K’s emotional needs by noticing he is unhappy and then performing a series of actions to try and emotionally appease him. She attempts to get him to dance. She asks him to read to her. When K claims that Joi hates the book he is reading, she immediately changes her mind to agree with him, saying that she “didn’t want to read anyway.” This scene cements Joi’s lack of agency and identity outside of her master. Her identity is in flux, ready to shift at a moment’s notice in order to pacify the man that owns her.

In one telling scene, K tells Joi he has a gift for her and casually says to pretend it is an anniversary gift. Joi earnestly asks, “Is it?” with her expectant tone hinting that while she currently did not think it was their anniversary, if K said it was, then she would adapt and start believing it to be true. K’s gift is a portable device that allows her to move beyond the con-
fines of the apartment. It is clearly shown in this scene that K controls all aspects of Joi: her memories, her movement, her personality, her appearance. These all conform to fit K’s— that is, the man’s—desires. In addition to the layered artificiality of both these characters, a profound inequality based on gender infuses their supposed relationship. K grants Joi the ability to move more freely; he is the master, and his gift is literally the freedom to have more movement. The subtext of this seemingly magnanimous gesture on the part of K reinforces patriarchal control, especially since Joi is “female” and he is “male.” There are no same sex relationships in the world of Blade Runner, which tacitly reaffirms heteronormativity, a hallmark of patriarchy.

They go outside so Joi can experience her newfound “freedom.” Joi tells K, “I’m so happy when I’m with you” in a tone so scripted that K deflects and responds that she “doesn’t have to” say that. Afterwards, the two perform a façade of intimacy, miming kissing and embracing, even though Joi is holographic, so any type of touch simply goes through her. A phone call interrupts them; Joi freezes in place as she leans in for a kiss. Joi remains frozen for the duration of the call, still stuck in the same position. When the call is over, K does not resume his romantic scene with Joi. Instead, he powers her off, once again emphasizing that she is simply an object at his disposal.

Later in the film, Joi assists K with his investigation to find Deckard’s daughter, while also encouraging K’s desire to believe that he is the replicant-human child. At one point, she mimes wrapping her arms over his shoulders and whispers, “I always knew you were special.” This is a constant refrain of Joi’s. When a discovery in their investigation reinforces K’s suspicions about his identity, Joi once again tells him he is
special. She then bestows the name “Joe” onto K, stating he is “too important” to simply be referred to by the first letter of his replicant model line. She stresses that if he had a mother, she would have given him a name. This scene alludes to a motherly component to their relationship which had always been present, in the constant encouragement and emotional checking in, but is solidified in this scene. To the isolated K, Joi can be and is “everything he wants”: his beautiful lover, his doting wife, and his encouraging mother. She also is a mouthpiece for his innermost desires; K wants to be special, to have a purpose. So, Joi gives voice to K’s thoughts, encouraging him that it’s all right to desire such a thing: “It’s okay to dream a little, isn’t it?” she soothingly assures him.

In the scene in which Joi hires the replicant prostitute Mariette, K is initially hesitant. Joi tells K that she “wants to be real” for him. He tries to tell her that she is real enough for him, but she continues persuading him, telling K that she observed him interacting with the prostitute earlier and could tell that he “liked her.” From there K takes the initiative, pulling in Joi/Mariette by the waist for an embrace. Joi undresses for K, who remains clothed, watching her. In all of Joi’s scenes, it is unclear to what extent she has free will. K never expresses any wish to have more physical intimacy with Joi, yet she hires the prostitute without his knowledge. So, in that sense, Joi is acting on her own. But can it be said that she is acting for herself/her own desire?

Physical intimacy is the one thing Joi has failed to provide for K. Her inability to physically touch him is present in every one of their scenes in the film.

After the sex scene, the film immediately cuts to an ad for Joi’s line of holographic female companions that includes the slogan “Joi is anything you want her to be. Joi goes anywhere
you want her to go.” Even when this Joi is not explicitly being commanded by K, she is still programmed to fulfill his desires. Physical intimacy was the one place Joi couldn’t “go” and the one thing she was incapable of being. In reality, this scene of the ad shows that even in her most active moments, she is still pursuing K’s desires.

The next morning, when K discusses his plans to leave because he is on the run, Joi asks to come with him. She also requests that K delete her data from their inhouse system and instead store her only on the portable device so no one can investigate K’s home and use her for information. K is fearful of this because moving Joi so that she is stored solely on the portable device would mean she would have no backup and if the device malfunctioned, she truly would be gone. But Joi begs him to do it, stating that she wants to be a “real girl.” Joi is unable to perform this action herself, so she is forced to verbalize her request by telling him, “I want this. But I can’t do this myself.” Whereas previous scenes seemed to suggest Joi truly lacked free will, this scene comes to the opposite conclusion. This is the only moment in the narrative when Joi acknowledges her own lack of agency and displays self-awareness.

K’s fears are proven correct. In their confrontation with Luv, Joi is casually killed by Luv. Her last words to him are “I love you.”

However, Joi is not the only woman who dies for K in the film. When K’s superior, Joshi, refuses to give up information about K to Luv, Luv kills her. Thus, two women who “love” K—or, in Joshi’s case, at least desire him—die because of him. This leads to the question: Does Joi become a “real girl” by dying for a man like Joshi does? Joi’s death follows a common pattern in science fiction of female characters be-
ing brutally murdered in order to progress the character development of male heroes. In 1999, comic book writer and feminist critic Gail Simone coined the term “women in refrigerators” to describe this reoccurring trope (Women in Refrigerators). In this instance, Joi’s “fridging” acts as a catalyst to spur K into despair, leading him to realize that he is not the miracle child. Joi’s humanity is directly linked to her ability to express heterosexual romantic love with K, thus reinforcing the male-centric nature of the film.

Taken together, these female characters serve as accessories for K: their purpose is to further his narrative and when they no longer do so, they have no purpose. Rather than teaming up to help K, these two women characters, as well as Luv, are killed off, negating any formation of allied power. Further, the lack of verbal interaction between the women characters outside of the context of their relationship to K calls to mind the Bechdel Test, the now-widely known measure of the degree to which a film can be considered non-patriarchal. If a film has a scene in which (1) two named women (2) talk to each other (3) about something other than a man, it “passes” the test (Bechdel Test Movie List).

According to the Bechdel Test Movie List web site, Blade Runner 2049 passes the test—but with the caveat that this verdict is “dubious.” Although women characters do at times talk to each other in Blade Runner 2049—such as in scenes between Luv and Joshi and between Joi and Mariette—those interactions are the result of their relationship to K. As one poster identified as “Steve” on the web site pointed out in a comment dated Oct. 23, 2017: “The Joi Mariette [sic] conversation is about Joi being done with using Mariette [sic] to have sex with K (a man). Fail. The Luv Madam conversation is about finding K (a man). Fail.” (Bechdel Test Movie List).
The primary women characters in the film do not team up, do not work together cooperatively, nor have a conversation unrelated to K. When one applies the purpose of the Bechdel Test to this film, although dialogue between women may not include specific verbal reference to K such as using his name or the pronoun “him,” the reasons for why the women talk to each other in the first place must be considered. Thus, the film fails to address gender inequality through dialogue, in addition to its visual representations of women as objects of the male gaze.

ADVERTISING WOMEN AS PRODUCTS

Before Joi makes her appearance, an ad for her line of holographic women appears in the background of the film. It shows an image of the Joi model of holographs, shown from the shoulders up. She appears to be nude and has one hand up to her mouth, and the other pulling back her hair. In bright neon pink text appear the words “Everything you want to hear.” Audio accompanies the text, with a seductive female voice that states, “Joi goes anywhere you want her to go.”

The second time an ad for Joi appears is immediately after the sex scene with K, Joi, and Mariette. This ad is of a full body shot of a Joi model, who wears a dress, more makeup, and straightened and styled hair, which is in contrast to K’s Joi’s more casual appearance. The ad’s Joi looks over her shoulder with a blank expression. The ad’s female voiceover states, “Joi is anything you want her to be. Joi goes anywhere you want her to go.” The text for the ad cycles through these statements: “Joi is everything you want. Joi is everything you want to see. Joi is everything you want to hear.” The camera pushes in so that the viewer experiences a feeling of coming closer and closer to Joi, who maintains direct eye contact with the camera (the viewer) and slowly begins to smile.
The Joi ad that K encounters at the end of the film is portrayed far differently from the first two ads. While the other ads appear on skyscrapers, the ad K sees toward the film’s conclusion is the only one that is at ground level and has Joi appear to move out of her ad to interact with a potential customer. The Joi of this ad appears almost as a giant; the holograph is as tall as a building and makes K look miniscule in comparison. This Joi is also nude, her skin is unnaturally pink, she wears a blue wig, and her eyes are completely black. The camera focuses on her naked form, lingering first on her buttocks as she begins the scene in a standing position. Then it focuses on her breasts as she bends down to say to K in a seductive tone: “What a day, hmm? You look lonely. I can fix that. You look like a good Joe.” After saying this to K, she gets up again and returns to her ad. The text displays the same message as the previous ad: “Joi is everything you want. Joi is everything you want to see. Joi is everything you want to hear.” Her expression is blank.

These ads can be read as questioning the relationship K has with Joi, reinforcing the idea that “his” Joi is a product, a digital, literal mirage that betrays any semblance of a “real” relationship between the two. Even prior to the introduction of K’s Joi, the first ad primes the viewer to understand that anything romantic she says to K is because of her programming and because he wants her to behave in a certain way. The second ad’s placement after the sex scene makes the audience want to question if Joi’s striving for intimacy is coming from her own desires or from her programming’s desire to keep her owner happy by being “anything” he wants, including someone he can be with physically.

The final ad does the most to make the viewer doubt the relationship between K and his Joi. In this scene, K is under-
going an identity crisis. He believed himself to be “special,” the potential replicant that was born, not manufactured. This specialness was something Joi frequently encouraged. This scene provides a twisted, mocking mirror of K’s Joi. Like K’s Joi, the ad initiates sympathetic questions, mirroring how Joi would try to fulfill K’s emotional needs. And most damning is the way in which the ad refers to him by the same name Joi bestowed on him in their quest to discover his origin. By having the Joi in the ad call K by the same name and then reemphasizing the ad’s message of Joi being “everything you want to hear,” the scene emphasizes the truly hollow nature of their relationship. Just as she is generic to him, he is generic to her—a common “Joe.” It is also notable that she is “Joi,” and he is “Joe,” which serves to make them parallel: both are artificial entities.

It is important to note the corporate sexualization of women that goes beyond Joi and her ads. The film also gives the viewer a glimpse of where the replicant Mariette works. It is a building made of blurred glass, where naked female bodies press up against the walls, accompanied by the sound of moaning. In the society depicted in the Blade Runner world, sex work is completely legal; the business is located on a crowded street and police officers pass by without comment. The prostitutes outside the building dress provocatively in thigh-high boots and tiny shorts, with many wearing only a bra. The inclusion of this depiction along with the other sexualized ads denotes a future where the bodies of women have been so thoroughly commodified that it has become commonplace, expected, and unremarkable. When the character of Luv first appears in the film in a scene at the Wallace Corporation, she is asking a businessman if he would like to add any “pleasure models” to his order of replicants. Wallace himself examines a naked replicant woman and kisses her be-
fore casually killing her. The bodies of women in *Blade Runner: 2049* thus are frequently shown as disposable, sexualized products in an extremely corporatized world. One can read this aspect of the film as a logical conclusion to how advertising—across the range of products, both physical and service-oriented—portrays women as sex objects (Kilbourne).

The image of an advertisement featuring a sexualized woman within a city landscape is one common to the cyberpunk genre, and the use of women as sexualized products is a symptom of the male gaze’s pervasiveness within it. Early Western cyberpunk media were quickly adopted in Japan, inspiring many Japanese comic book series, known as manga, which lifted imagery directly from influential works like *Blade Runner*. Cyberpunk manga were serialized in magazines targeted towards teenage boys. In cyberpunk manga that explore the same themes of transhumanism as seen in *Blade Runner*, there is often a focus on the naked female body augmented by masculine, militaristic machinery (McCarthy). The female body is subjected to objectification meant to entice young male readers, thereby clearly serving as the object of the male gaze.

Cyberpunk manga proved influential to Western filmmakers, who went on to draw content and imagery directly from popular manga series. In the most well-known example of this phenomenon, the original *Blade Runner* influenced the manga series *Ghost in the Shell*, which influenced *The Matrix*, which in turn became an iconic example of the genre (McGee). One of the most emblematic images from the original *Blade Runner* is a giant ad of a geisha smiling while swallowing birth control pills, an image visually referenced in other cyberpunk texts such as the 2013-2014 Fox television series *Almost Human* (“Blade Runner References”).
But those texts as well as *Blade Runner: 2049* assume that by simply including these images within their hyper-capitalist settings, they create a critique of gender imbalance. However, they fail to effectively use their female characters in commentative ways. This has led to a future depicted in cyberpunk occurring within a recursive regressive loop: cyberpunk creators envision a future inspired by 1990s manga that were inspired by 1980s films drawing on 1940’s character archetypes. In *Blade Runner: 2049*, the end result is a not-too-distant future filled with the objectification of women and gender imbalance that existed a hundred years before the narrative’s setting.

**DISCUSSION**

If *Blade Runner: 2049*’s portrayal of artificial women was meant to critique the status of women, the film ultimately falls short due to the shallowness of its female characters and its failure to substantially engage with them outside of their relationship with the male protagonist. The film’s constant emphasis on the holographic character Joi’s appearance clearly highlights hegemonic femininity and society’s emphasis on women maintaining beauty standards. The versions of Joi presented in ads throughout the film may be more explicitly stylized, but even the version of Joi that appears in mundane, domestic settings within K’s home is always beautiful: she is literally unable to ever not adhere to beauty standards, to never dress any way except as a spectacle created for the male gaze.

The portrayal of Joi as existing only in relation to the purported romantic relationship she has with K similarly reaffirms the sexuality and romance aspects of hegemonic femininity: Joi is depicted as a sexual being, devoted to her man. Regard-
ing the hollowness and artificiality of K and Joi’s relationship, the film navigates a strange gray area where it tries to both depict the relationship as a genuine love story and as a symbol of K’s hollow search for identity. The two characters are on unequal footing through the duration of the film, with Joi another step further removed from humanity than K. He is her master and her owner; she devotes her life to him. Only at the end of the film, when the two gain equal ground, is it revealed that all of Joi’s love for K was simply part of her programming. She is a generic product, and he is a generic customer. For K and Joi, true egalitarianism is only established when the hollowness of both their attempts at emulating humanity is acknowledged.

This notion is reinforced by how other characters other than K view Joi. Over the course of the movie, it is clearly established that other characters look down on K for owning a Joi product. When K is investigating the Wallace corporation, one of the employees asks K, “Are you satisfied with our product?” to which K in embarrassment answers, “She’s really realistic.” When Mariette first meets K as she is flirting with him, she hears the jingle of a Joi device and mockingly comments, “Oh, you don’t like real girls.” Even artificial women like the replicant Mariette are considered “realer” than holographic women like Joi. Later, Joi and Mariette “synch” with each other, their consciousness temporarily becoming one, in order for Mariette to function as a proxy for Joi and K to have sex. Afterwards Mariette tells Joi, “I’ve been inside you. Not so much there as you think.” When Luv eliminates Joi, she comments to K, “I do hope you enjoyed our product.” This once again re-emphasizes the fact that even the film’s female characters see Joi as nothing but an object.

In _Blade Runner: 2049_, competitiveness among and between women, even artificial ones, reaffirms gendered tropes re-
garding female jealousy. Although K’s character arc might have him coming to the terms with the fact that he is not special, he is still the center of the lives/existences of the women in the film: Joi is dedicated to him and grows jealous when other women express interest in him; Joshi, K’s superior, not only expresses interest and claims he’s “different” from other replicants, but she also dies for K; and Mariette might have an interesting double life as a sex worker/resistance agent, but the only mission she actually is seen participating in is seducing/tracking K. Even the cold Wallace henchwoman Luv’s efforts in searching for the replicant-human child always lead her back to him. This further underlines the patriarchal nature of the film: all of these female characters’ actions revolve around a completely average man. In short, they serve merely as accessories to the male protagonist. Additionally, when Joi dies at the hands of Luv, it is emblematic of a competitiveness of women in this film. This concept is reflective of other popular media like the reality competition show The Bachelor, which pits women against each other and implies that women are by default hostile to one another.

The sexualization of women in the dystopia presented in the world of Blade Runner serves an extension of women’s status in an extremely corporatized world. Women’s bodies have become another commodified product of that society, present amongst brand names in giant billboards. The role of women in Blade Runner: 2049 thus simply becomes another aspect of its dystopia, a world that is grim and wracked by climate change, where the class divide is larger than ever, and the phrase sex sells has been extrapolated to mean a “pleasure model” can be easily purchased. The future this film depicts is firmly stuck in gender stereotypes—the women are beautiful objects of desire. The clearest example of a woman who doesn’t adhere to typical gender roles is Luv, the cold Wal-
lace replicant, but not only is she still subservient to the male Wallace CEO—she is also portrayed as a cold villain who dies a brutal death.

The artificial women in this film are also firmly rooted in previous depictions of fembots. Fembots are inherently a reflection of gender stereotypes, thus their gender representation reveals what society believes about women (Watercutter, Zumberge). *Blade Runner: 2049*’s artificial women encompass the extremities present in the range of fembots: Joi is an example of the “perfect woman” type of fembot; she is beautiful, submissive, a committed housewife, and has no desires outside of her man. Mariette is a sex worker, aligning with the portrayal of fembots as seductresses that dates back to Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. And Luv is an example of the cold, villainous fembot; she exhibits an uncaring, stoic, almost “Terminator”-like perpetuity for violence.

Despite the film’s disinterest in exploring gender, the way in which the film’s artificial people adhere to patriarchal assumptions is insightful in and of itself. K, the artificial protagonist, fits the masculine ideal of rugged stoicism and only shows emotional vulnerability to his heterosexual love interest. The artificial women in the film are all products designed for male enjoyment or are valued for their reproductive capabilities; they exist within both the world and in the narrative only to fulfill the submissive female roles created for them. For several main characters, the depiction of gender is even more purposefully constructed—but only to reaffirm gender expectations in patriarchy. As products designed and manufactured without initial agency, their subjection in a patriarchal society becomes even more apparent. The audience learns that a man creates these gendered products, which hints at but requires another layer of reading beyond what is
presented. The Wallace CEO (played Jared Leto) appears as a stereotype of a sadistic, greedy sociopath male, but nothing else is done with the character to comment on patriarchal power: K does not fight him, Luv obeys him blindly, and the character remains undeveloped and fades into the film as it enters its third act. Even though one can read the film as saying something about patriarchy, in the end the film is disinterested in breaking gender boundaries with its characters or the idea of manufacturing a new version of humanity. Even though anything, really, can be done to program an artificial human, nothing is done that pushes back against gender stereotypes and dichotomies.

Although the portrayal of women in this film ultimately reads as largely regressive, there are shallow attempts by the film to appear progressive with its depiction of women. Power appears to be bestowed on the women characters of Joshi, K’s superior on the police force; the main antagonist Luv, who is extremely strong physically; and Deckard’s daughter, the missing “miracle child” who is considered sacred and turns out to be a highly skilled computer programmer who creates replicants’ memories. However, all these attempts fail to obscure the typical gender expectations to which these characters ultimately conform. K’s superior is a woman whose sense of duty is compromised by her romantic interest in him and who is abruptly and easily killed. Luv is physically strong, but she is still subservient to the male Wallace CEO and falls in line with portrayals of women in business positions as unemotional, “cold” villains.

Even though Dr. Ana Stelline, the “miracle child” and reason for K’s search and his ultimate death, is a woman, she is isolated and consigned to her circumstances, a damsel locked away in a castle who is only saved by her father at the end.
Deckard serves in this capacity to reinforce the authority and power of the male in the world of *Blade Runner*, and in this sense, there are two male protagonists in 2049. Rachael, the replicant mother of the miracle child, died in childbirth prior to the start of the sequel’s narrative, her only implicit value was her ability to give birth. Her offspring, the brilliant Ana, a female human-replicant, lacks any agency nor given any chance to determine her own fate. In this sense, the protection that surrounds her sends the message that she is too precious to fend for herself. The trope of a female hidden away in a fortress-like setting, concealed from the world and unable to enact her own story without the help of a man, further underscores how the film enforces, let alone reinforces, the gendered rescue fantasy that has permeated Western storytelling for centuries. One can consider K and Deckard as a combined male character within an analog described by Galician as “the Knight and Babe” motif that permeates stories of romance and keeps in place the gender status quo that ensures power remains the purview of men (288).

Overall, all the women in *Blade Runner 2049* only serve to further the story of the male characters. They reinforce an idea that the agency in filmic narratives will always belong to men, ensuring the continuation of a patriarchal society. This unmoving emplacement of male power remains even in fantastical, futuristic stories that are concerned with exploring how oppressed groups—which don’t but should include women—fight for their ability to decide their own fate.
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A Lack of Joi


A Lack of Joi


Where Epistemology and Metaphysics Touch in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* and Gary Ross’s *Pleasantville*

By Seth Vannatta

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Lowry’s novel, *The Giver*, falls short of a consistent philosophical premise regarding the establishment of Sameness in the novel because it vacillates between a metaphysical and an epistemological understanding of Sameness. On the other hand, Ross’s film, *Pleasantville*, navigates the same high concept with more philosophical consistency. Further, the film illustrates the white establishment’s fears of female sexuality and the racialized Other with more concreteness than the abstract liberation experienced by community members in *The Giver.*

Keywords: *The Giver, Pleasantville,* metaphysics, epistemology, sexism, racism, sameness, difference

Donde la epistemología y la metafísica se tocan en *The Giver* de Lois Lowry y *Pleasantville* de Gary Ross

RESUMEN

Este artículo argumenta que la novela de Lowry, *The Giver,* no alcanza una premisa filosófica consistente con respecto al establecimiento de la Igualdad en la novela porque oscila entre una comprensión metafísica y epistemológica de la Igualdad. Por otro lado, la película de Ross, *Pleasantville,* navega por el mismo concepto elevado con más consistencia filosó-
fica. Además, la película ilustra los miedos del establishment blanco a la sexualidad femenina y al Otro racializado con más concreción que la liberación abstracta que experimentan los miembros de la comunidad en *The Giver*.

**Palabras clave:** *The Giver, Pleasantville, metafísica, epistemología, sexismo, racismo, igualdad, diferencia*

**Título:** L. M. Loiri’s *The Giver* and G. C. N. Shade’s *Pleasantville* on Metaphysics and Epistemology

**Resumen**

El artículo argumenta que Loiri’s novel *The Giver* falla en establecer un supuesto filosófico consistente sobre la identidad (sameness) debido a su comprensión de la identidad que oscila entre la metafísica y la epistemología. Por otro lado, Shade’s película *Pleasantville* interpreta el concepto con una coherencia filosófica mayor. Además, mientras que *The Giver* representa la liberación abstracta que experimentan los miembros de la comunidad en la película, *Pleasantville* ofrece una interpretación más concreta del miedo de la élite blanca al sexo femenino y del Otro racializado.

**Palabras claves:** *The Giver*, *Pleasantville*, metafísica, epistemología, sexismo, racismo, igualdad, diferencia

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The veil of perception—the idea that there is a gap between appearance and reality—is a persistent theme in epistemology. Randall Auxier analogized the veil of perception as a river of doubt, with one bank representing the world of appearances and human epistemic fallibility and the other bank signifying the in-itself—the really real (Aux-
ier and Davies 115). We can build a bridge of experience across it with the tools of perception, or we can dig a tunnel of existence under it by means of ontological reasoning. The former tactic is empirical; the latter is rationalist or transcendental. The empiricists claim that our access to that reality is had through our experiences, including sense experience, so they claim that we can build a bridge of experience across the river of doubt, although empiricists vary regarding how reliable the bridge is, given the degree of each empiricist’s fallibilism. Because our perceptions are fallible, some rationalist philosophers attempt to dig a tunnel of existence under the river. For instance, Plato depreciated the value of perception in reaching reality, relegating it to the realm of mere opinion on his Divided Line in The Republic. Only objects of the intellect, such as mathematical objects, known but not seen, constituted knowledge for Plato. Similarly, René Descartes began his Meditations with the premise that sense perception was the easiest faculty to doubt, and thus could not be relied upon to establish a firm foundation for scientific knowledge. Instead, he needed a necessary truth, cogito ergo sum, upon which to build his edifice of knowledge.

The appearance/reality gap is largely a product of early modern European philosophy in the Cartesian tradition. American pragmatist and Continental phenomenological philosophical traditions understand the problem as the product of a misguided mind/body dualism. However, when popular cultural artifacts, such as a novel or a film, deploy the veil of ignorance as a premise in their plot structure, an analysis of the ways they navigate the problem is in order. Their options include those traditions that emerged in response to Cartesian philosophy. Rationalists look for a priori knowledge, necessarily true propositions, and transcendentalists search for the a priori necessary conditions that make possible the
experiences we do in fact have. The rationalists and transcendentalists, then, dig a tunnel of existence under the river of doubt, a strategy involving metaphysics and ontological reasoning. Such are the options for crossing the river of doubt and overcoming the veil of perception. If either is successful, epistemology and metaphysics touch.

In Lois Lowry’s dystopian young adult novel, The Giver, the veil of perception is woven into the community intentionally as a policy measure in the establishment of Sameness—the effort to insure a world without conflict, inequality, difference, pain, or freedom of choice. Similarly, in Gary Ross’s film, Pleasantville, the veil of perception drives the high concept of the film. Members of a fictional television show community, “Pleasantville,” do not know they are in a fictional program and are limited in their access to reality.\footnote{For purposes of clarity, Pleasantville refers to the film, “Pleasantville” refers to the television show in the film, and Pleasantville refers to the town depicted in the television show.} Specifically, they lack pathos in terms of neutered emotionality, eros in terms of sanitized or nonexistent libido, and aesthesis in terms of an inability to perceive color and an inability to experience affectively love, pain, loss, grief, and sensuous, artistic beauty.

Returning to The Giver, a question lingers in the premise of the novel’s community. Has the bridge of experience been sabotaged to render perception spurious, or has the tunnel of existence been blocked to alter reality itself? Put otherwise, has the Committee of Elders in charge of maintaining Sameness in The Giver, changed the ability of its community members to perceive an unchanged reality, or has the Committee altered reality itself? The evidence in the novel offers inconsistent answers to this question, structuring much of its high concept around the epistemology/perception thesis but un-
necessarily giving credence to the metaphysics/reality thesis. Their points of overlap do not hang well together. While memory is where epistemology and metaphysics try to touch in the premise of *The Giver*, Lowry falls short of a consistent philosophical premise upon which to base the story.

On the other hand, Ross’s film, *Pleasantville*, navigates the river of doubt with more philosophical consistency than Lowry’s novel. Changes from sameness to difference in television’s “Pleasantville” emerge as latent potentialities whose epistemic access involves the new forms of perception, *pathos, eros,* and *aesthesis*. These epistemic paths, bridges of experience, transform the constructed appearances of the community into a metaphysical reality with all its flux, uncertainty, and possibility. Further, the film illustrates the white establishment’s fears of female sexuality and the racialized Other with more concreteness than the abstract liberation experienced by community members in *The Giver*. Thus, I argue both that *Pleasantville* offers a more philosophically consistent premise than *The Giver* and that the liberation depicted in *Pleasantville* is more concrete, explicitly denotative, and socially relevant than the freedom that memories proffer to community members in the *The Giver*.

**THE GIVER**

As a proxy to understanding *The Giver*, think Plato’s *Republic* or Orwell’s *1984*. The community in *The Giver* has in common with Plato’s work a highly planned society where members’ aptitudes are studied by Elders who dictate their vocations, the communal raising of infants, and the high value placed on Platonic, rather than erotic, relationships. It shares with Orwell’s work the presence of a Speaker giving the community orders and the presence of a slow-moving bureaucra-
cy of committees who study the possibility of changing the rules, but rarely do so. It shares with Ross’s film, *Pleasantville*, discussed herein, the lack of both color and eroticism. At puberty, members of the community take pills to suppress “The Stirrings.” Members of the community cannot see color. The community no longer experiences snow, hills, or seasonal changes because of the institution of Climate Control. Love is entirely absent in the community. As Susan Louise Stewart writes, “Jonas lives in a community set in the future, where science has finally reached its logical—and on one level, peaceful and perfect—conclusion … [But] people have no choice as to whom they will marry, their vocations, and as readers discover, how many children will constitute their families. Members of the community know in advance when they will receive certain clothing and when they begin to ride a bicycle. They do not even have a choice as to what they remember” (Stewart 23). Here, Stewart ends with memory, the attempted touching point between epistemology and metaphysics in the novel. Epistemology and metaphysics touch when the means of acquiring knowledge about the “really real” are successful. Thus, in the world of *The Giver*, Lowry posits memory as the epistemic access to unaltered reality.

**THE BRIDGE OF EXPERIENCE: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL/PERCEPTION THESIS**

Ample evidence in *The Giver* points to the thesis that Sameness has been achieved by changing people’s ability to perceive. Several characters, including the protagonist, Jonas, the Giver himself, and Gabriel, the one-year-old Jonas ends up saving from a eugenic death, have pale eyes. The pale eyes represent a special ability to see what others cannot, specifically color. Jonas notices the ephemeral color red in an apple and in his love interest, Fiona’s, hair. The red apple
corresponds both with the redness in Fiona’s hair and with the emergent redness in Pleasantville, as the fruit points to a Biblical understanding of a special kind of knowledge—likely forbidden, sexual knowledge. All of these instances of the novelty of red announce the emergence of eroticism in the otherwise unadorned and “pure” communities. Because of his pale eyes, Jonas has the ability “to see beyond” (Lowry 116). This raises the question: have others’ subjective perceptions been altered, or has objective reality itself been changed? The pale eyes and ability to see beyond demonstrate that perception in others has been manipulated, as does the suppression of sexual desire; that is, the bridge of experience has been intentionally damaged so that the river of doubt cannot be crossed, and epistemology and metaphysics fail to touch.

The five senses are not the only modes of perception. Emotion and habits of feeling are experiential modalities, sensuous perceptions. When Jonas is given memories by the Giver, he feels love, pain, and joy, and he learns something about the possibility of reality through these feelings. His erotic love for Fiona gives him insight into the possibility of real objects otherwise absent in the community. Post-pubescent members of the community must take pills to suppress their libido. This means that aesthetic experience, as such, is suppressed in the community. Erotic and familial love as well as physical and emotional pain constitute aesthetic experience as much as seeing the color red. But the absence of these affective experiences in the community is not the product of ontological engineering but of perceptual manipulation. This explicit management of feeling supports the perception thesis.
THE TUNNEL OF EXISTENCE: THE METAPHYSICAL/REALITY THESIS

Other evidence in the novel suggests a different understanding of the establishment of Sameness in the community. Climate Control was the means by which the community eliminated difficulties including hills, snow, and unpredictable weather (Lowry 106). The Giver also tells Jonas, “Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. Probably when you saw the faces take on color it wasn’t as deep or vibrant as the apple, or your friend’s hair” (Lowry 119). That flesh is all the same color suggests the intentional manipulation of reality as such, an ontological change. But the Giver continues, “We’ve never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona’s must drive them crazy” (Lowry 120). “We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences,” the Giver continues. “We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others,” including the beauty of rainbows (Lowry 120–1).

Here we see that the ontology of the community has been altered genetically and atmospherically, and the tunnel of existence, rather than experience, has been blocked to impede its ability to traverse the river of doubt. But if Fiona’s hair is a tricky problem for the scientists such that her hair persists in being red, (as does the apple), why can other members of the community, those without the pale eyes, not see it? Here is the inconsistency in the premise concerning the establishment of Sameness.

WHERE EPISTEMOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS TOUCH IN THE GIVER

The capacity for memory is where epistemology and metaphysics touch in the premise of The Giver. It is the primary
means to cross the river of doubt and see beyond the veil of perception. Jonas is charged at age 12 to be The Receiver of memories. This honor means that he receives memories from the Giver, who consults the Elders based on the wisdom of memories. The plan for Jonas is that he become the new Giver. The memories Jonas is given include pleasant ones of rainbows, of familial love, of the exhilaration of sledding down a snowy hill, and eventually of music. He also receives painful memories, of a broken leg after crashing his sled and of a soldier injured on the battlefield. Carter Hanson argues that memory, especially cultural memory, serves as the primary lever for liberation from the dystopia of the community in the novel. He writes of the role of memory in the novel: “The Giver is a striking object lesson in the human and political costs of relinquishing historical memory. Without directly satirizing contemporary American culture, Lowry critiques the anesthetizing effects of cultural amnesia—t “the ability to forget” (Hanson 58).

Interestingly, Hanson points out that Lowry’s treatment of memory is decidedly unscientific. Its ability to serve as a philosophically consistent touchpoint between metaphysics and epistemology is lacking. Jonas comments on the ontology of the color red: “It had that same thing: the color red. But it didn’t change. It just was” (Lowry 120). The Giver explains that it’s because it’s a memory of a time when red existed. Memory gives Jonas the access to a past where existence was different; but Jonas has the ability to perceive difference amid the altered reality of Sameness. These two features of the premise of the story do not hang well together. It would be more consistent if the pale eyes were what drove the scientists crazy, rather than the reality of Fiona’s red hair. That is, the scientists would be concerned with the challenges involved in altering perception, rather than those in manipulating reality.
Randall Auxier penned the analogy of the bridge of experience and the tunnel of existence, which is applied here. He applies the analogy to Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Charles Hartshorne, arguing that Brightman digs “a metaphysical tunnel of his own under the river of doubt; but he digs only at night, while wearing a blindfold, and does not remember doing so in the light of day” (Auxier and Davies 117). Mapped onto the world of The Giver, the difficulties experienced by the genetic scientists represent a tunnel of existence between appearance and reality, the pale eyes build the perceptual bridge, and memories provide more immediate epistemic access to the reality by draining the river of doubt. The analogy speaks to our real-world fallibility and our indirect access to reality in-itself. Then, in The Giver, the community’s establishment of Sameness amounts to the attempt to hinder the construction of the bridge and the digging of the tunnel, such that the river of doubt cannot be traversed, and epistemology and metaphysics fail to touch. While the genetic scientists work on blocking the tunnel, the Elders work on hindering the bridge’s construction, but they have failed to work together in making the river entirely impossible to navigate. Lowry has failed to establish a consistent philosophical premise, such that the metaphysics and epistemology of The Giver end in a vicious circle, even while the immediacy of memory, as an epistemic tool, attempts to do the work intended by roles of the Giver and Receiver of Memories in the community.

**PLEASANTVILLE**

After a brief summary of the film’s plot, I will present a concise review of some of the representative literature on Pleasantville in order to create new space to discuss the film philosophically. With the exception of Erin Kealey’s philosophical
analysis that supports my thesis, the historicist, social psychological, and political interpretations of the film summarized herein do not address the philosophical premise undergirding its high concept. Therefore, I will present an alternative reading of the emergence of color in the community. Last, by contrasting the film with Lowry’s *The Giver*, I will illustrate its superior philosophical consistency and more substantive and relevant social commentary.

The film opens in the 1990s depicting fighting siblings, David and Jennifer, in a somewhat broken home (with divorced parents). David longs for the comfort of the images of stability presented in the program “Pleasantville.” He has even memorized its plot lines as a hobby, and his expertise is what prompts the TV repairman (Don Knotts) to deliver the magic remote control to David. David’s sister, Jen, thinks this obsession silly and is solely focused on the potential lust of her ensuing date. Their fight over control of the television ends in a destroyed remote control and allows for the plot to unfold with the arrival of the magic remote control. Then, thirteen minutes into the film, David and Jen are transported into the television show’s community by way of the magic remote control. They are immediately outfitted in conservative, suburban 1950s clothing and living in the home of the teenage main characters on the show, Bud and Mary Sue Parker, into whom they have themselves been transformed.

The town is entirely antiseptic. Nothing will burn, and nothing is written in any of the books in the library. The homes are all single-family houses surrounded by white picket fences. As Greg Dickinson writes:

> [Pleasantville] mark[s] the contours of the good life within suburbia, pointing to the (im)possibilities that “border” ideal subur-
ban living as the film struggle[s] with seeming contradictions within (white) suburbia. In the film, suburbia is imagined as a bland landscape, devoid of deeply felt emotions or passionately committed relationships. Yet suburbia, in part because of this blandness, is also imagined as a place of safety, a home that offers security and acceptance. The struggle becomes one of offering passionate commitments and emotionally engaging relationships while maintaining the safety of familiarity and the security of a risk-free environment. (Dickinson 217)

The town is also sexless. In the show, Muffy takes her father to the ball, dressed as Prince Charming, when her date comes down with the measles. After Bud convinces Mary Sue to go out with Skip (Paul Walker), she is afraid she could “kill a guy with these” (her breasts). However, Bud assures her that he won’t notice anyway, because “they just don’t notice that kind of thing around here.” On their first date, Mary Sue tells Skip that talking is overrated. He does not understand the sexual undertones of her comment. The restaurant also has no toilets. Handholding is the raciest thing that occurs between high school sweethearts.

The siblings are trapped in the town, but they eventually unsettle its reality. In class, during a lesson on the different geographies of Elm Street and Main Street, Mary Sue asks, “What’s outside of Pleasantville?” The teacher does not understand the question. David, as Bud, learns that he cannot miss a basket at his first basketball practice, nor can any of his teammates; that is, until Bud lets his teammate Skip know of his skepticism about Skip asking out his sister. Skip’s frustra-
tion, an infusion of *pathos* into the community, results in a rare missed shot, shocking the coach and the rest of the team.

Mary Sue disrupts the town’s stability when she plays on the (equivocal to her, univocal to Skip) meanings of “pin.” She proposes: “Skip, you can pin me anytime you want to. Or maybe I should just pin you!” The town’s sexless reality illustrates a rare moment of inconsistency when Bud’s dad assures him that Mary Sue is a fine young woman who would never do anything for Bud or her father to be concerned about. That is, if the town is devoid of lust, what could her dad be concerned about? At Lovers’ Lane, Mary Sue initiates sexual activity with Skip, who is mystified and transformed by the encounter. His sexual awakening manifests in his ability to see a red rose, the first appearance of color in the town. Skip’s epistemic access to the redness of the rose is opened via his erotic discovery. When Skip regales his basketball team of his discovery, they all miss their next shots. Later in the film, Margaret (Mary Shelton), a teenage inhabitant of Pleasantville, gives Bud an apple, an allusion to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, insight into one’s sexuality, and potential awareness of one’s nakedness and concomitant shame.

Jen sees herself as unleashing the potential in the community, but David thinks she is disrupting their universe for the worse. But the initial changes quickly multiply, and soon color starts emerging throughout the town: pink chewing gum and tongues, red taillights and lollipops, teal cars, and colored lights on a jukebox. In a way similar to *The Giver*, Bill Johnson (Jeff Daniels), Bud’s co-worker at the soda shop, is excited about the novel differences and succumbs to despair about the sameness he has been living in. Betty (Joan Allen), the mother of Mary Sue, sees her playing cards turn red at the mention of Bill, who is not her husband and with whom
she is secretly in love. Her erotic curiosity is unearthed when Mary Sue gives her a daughter-mother, rather than mother-daughter, birds and the bees talk, including an apparent masturbation tutorial. Betty’s first orgasm produces her vision of pink flowers as well as the town’s first fire. The tree outside her house explodes into flames.

Sex and color emerge, for the most part, coincidentally and coextensively. The town authorities are threatened by both. And each speaks to the racism of white America. The myth of white purity, the myth of the “black man as rapist,” “the image of the black woman as chronically promiscuous,” and the racist and sexist fear of both female sexuality and the presence of “Coloreds” in town go hand in hand (Davis 2008, 133). Suppression of the Civil Rights (of Coloreds) and of women’s rights to control their own erotic desires work in lockstep in both the history of our country and in the transformation of the town. Further, it is telling that the words of Huckleberry Finn, no racially neutral book, materialize on its formerly blank pages alongside the emergence of erotic freedom in the town. Etta James plays on the car radio as pink flowers blossom when Bud drives to Lovers’ Lane. The Coloreds in town (played by all white actors depicting people with “white” flesh), represent the eroticism and sexuality of Black Americans, viewed as dangerous and threatening to the purity of whiteness when viewed through the racist lens of the white establishment in Pleasantville and in the United States.

Aesthesis, or sensuous perception, soon emerges alongside pathos and eros. Bill Johnson’s artistic instincts are unleashed by his perusal of new books of art. His artwork, full of color, passion, and nudity disarms the community authorities. Eventually a gang of conservative men, dressed in white, vandalize his mural. The community outlaws rock and roll. Rock
and roll, (once Black slang for sex), was the soundtrack of the sexual revolution, and a significant impetus for fears concerning integration and miscegenation in the late 1950s. In fact, at early rock concerts, the feverish dancing responses to the music actually caused the rope dividing white and black audience members to fall down. Rock literally integrated the crowds. As I put it in The Rolling Stones and Philosophy:

Rock music helped initiate and propel a revolutionary social transformation. Often live music concerts in the South would separate the audience into white and black sides of the room using only a rope. But when the music and dancing began, the ranks would begin mixing. Rock music helped integrate the south, and this was dangerous. Rock […] was breaking Jim Crow. Footage from the BBC/PBS documentary “Rock and Roll” shows a Citizens’ Council chairman [(reminiscent of Big Bob (J.T. Walsh) in Pleasantville)] […] who tells us: “We set up a twenty-man committee to do away with the vulgar, animalistic nigger rock and roll bop.” And a member of the Alabama White Citizens Council said: “The obscenity and vulgarity of the rock and roll music is obviously a means by which the white man and his children can be driven to the level with the nigger. It is obviously nigger music.” (Vannatta, 2011, 190)

The community of Pleasantville’s suppression of aesthesis mirrors the actual history of such suppression in our nation’s history.
RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF PLEASANTVILLE

A concise exposition of the historicist, social psychological, and political readings of Pleasantville, indicate a space for a philosophical analysis of the text. M. Carmen Gómez Galisteo argues that Pleasantville exposes tensions “lying behind [the] seemingly peaceful, long-established surface, deconstructing the image of the fifties as a golden age” (Galisteo, 2009, 64.). The film is important in that it challenges and subverts this stereotypical golden age image. The stereotype offered by traditional domestic sitcoms depicts stable communities and families amid a prosperous and increasingly consumerist American society (Galisteo 2009, 64). Men were bread-winning careerists, women were dutiful housewives, and contemporary conflicts regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, and class were absent (Galisteo 2009, 65). David seeks refuge in this depiction as it contrasts with his all-too flawed actual home with his divorced parents, absentee father, and troubled mother. But despite the idyllic image of the show David loves, “the secrets that the fifties hid were plenty: […] housewives’ dissatisfaction with their lifestyle, repressed artistic aspirations, censorship and authoritative Big-Brother-like government disguised as a benevolent, paternalistic regime … and could destroy society as it was understood in the fifties” (Galisteo 2009, 66).

Galisteo states that Jennifer and David represent the spark that unveils these hidden tensions (Galisteo 2009, 69). Jennifer unleashes libido on the community. When her mother has her own sexual awakening, she is first ashamed and covers up its revelation (in color) with greyscale make-up but eventually frees herself of the shame that can only exist in a “monochrome world which symbolizes the repression of self-actualization” (Galisteo 2009, 69). The film inverts the norms of the fifties insofar as “going beyond moral propriety
(i.e., Betty Parker committing adultery) results in a positive outcome (sexual satisfaction)” (Galisteo 2009, 70). While for most characters, color and sexual awakening emerge co-extensively; Jennifer, as Mary Sue, only becomes colored as a result of finding her own individuality and identity. Her previous experiences with sex were a function of social expectations and role-playing. But when she reads *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, she becomes self-actualized, and her color represents this actualization.

Galisteo concludes that personal repression leads to social and political oppression, and that self-actualization, even in terms of the return of the repressed, leads to social liberation, even if liberty involves chaotic possibilities. He cites director, screenwriter, and producer Gary Ross: “This movie is about the fact that personal repression gives rise to larger political oppression. […] That when we’re afraid of certain things in ourselves or we’re afraid of change, we project those fears on to other things, and a lot of very ugly social situations can develop.” And Galisteo concludes by citing Taylor: “With this, Ross wants the smooth unruffled surface of ‘50s sitcoms to stand for America’s fantasy image of itself during that decade, a place that had banished even the admission that real life contained dirt and messy complications.” Galisteo concludes that “Pleasantville pre-dates and advances changes about to come in the American society in the sixties and seventies—the sexual revolution, women’s emancipation…” (Galisteo 2009, 75).

In a later article, Galisteo focuses his analysis on the promi-
nent place suburbia holds in both the American lifestyle by the 1950s and in the American cinematic imagination (Galisteo 2014, 71). Ross uses the imperfection of the present in David’s school and family life to highlight the romance and ideality of the past. While most critical commentary focuses on the role of sex in inducing visible changes in the Pleasantville, Galisteo argues that the role of education is equally important: “Jennifer […] discovers the power of the written word and her passion for literature up to the point that she decides to stay behind in Pleasantville to pursue a university degree” (Galisteo 2014, 75). Upon my reading, the emergence of color is a function of that which has been repressed or ignored. For most Pleasantville residents, this is **eros** and **libido**; for David, **pathos**; for Bill and I would argue for Jennifer, **aesthesis**. Her passion for literary art, once ignored, suppressed, or repressed, flowers, and she becomes colored as a result.

Galisteo writes: “Pleasantville ultimately becomes not just a critique of misconceptions about the Fifties, but also a warning against contemporary political ideologies which ‘satirises the fallacious nostalgia of the New Right, attached as it was (and remains) to a prelapsarian order of patriarchal norms and family idealism’” (Galisteo 2014, 77).4 Galisteo sees Pleasantville as offering a political warning against right wing attacks on the sex and violence of Hollywood (and by extension the cultural left).5 His conclusion with regard to the relationship between the repression of aesthesis, eros, and pathos and the resulting political oppression is both accurate and

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4 Galisteo cites Grainge 2003: 212.

5 Laura Crossley argues against the notion of Pleasantville being a token of a “nostalgia films” invoking a past, and rather it does not “promulgate a yearning for the past, but evoke[s] the characters and tropes of a romanticized past in order to comment upon both that past and the present” (Crossley 2017). In my reading, this much is clear.
bolsters my conclusion regarding the more concrete freedoms experienced by Pleasantville community members.

Erin Kealey presents an existential approach to popular culture based on Martin Heidegger’s existential concept of de-severance in order to advance a more immediate contemporary involvement with past eras than those available through the mediated lenses of nostalgia Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of nostalgia and Susan Sontag’s writing on camp sensibility (Kealey 251). Kealey argues that “engagement with objects and beliefs of the cultural past can be nostalgic or campy; however, through de-severance we can overcome spatiotemporal distance with an existential intimacy that contributes to a more meaningful way to understand our culture, our shared history, and our future possibilities (Kealey 251). De-severance involves a personal, but not subjective, engagement with temporally distant objects (Kealey 252). Kealey sees David’s relationship with Pleasantville and “Pleasantville” as nostalgic, combining fascination and ironic distance with a past, mythic, and ideal object. She also interprets Jennifer’s interpretation of Pleasantville as exemplifying camp, which involves a comic and detached relationship with an object exemplifying exaggeration and excess (Kealey 258). However, Kealey applies Heidegger’s notion of one of the existential structures of Dasein, concern, as allowing the viewer to engage in an intimate way with Pleasantville. Our concern for it as an object makes it temporally near for us.

Kealey’s use of Heidegger’s concept of de-severance is relevant to the perception thesis in Pleasantville. At the town meeting at the end of the film, one woman shouts, “Roy

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Campbell’s got a blue front door!” Roy yells back, “It’s always been blue!” Kealey interprets this to mean that it is not as if colors did not exist before David and Jennifer were transported to the diegetic world; [...] The colorization of Pleasantville introduces “real” colors because a more personal orientation toward involvement opens new ways to experience objects and people. When colors begin to emerge within Pleasantville’s familiar black-and-white appearance, people notice the objects that have been overlooked and see them as more than everyday fixed representations. “Real” color emerges when objects and characters are discovered to have possibilities that are hidden from inauthentic conventional perception by the forgetfulness of the past and the preconceived expectations of the future. (Kealey 263–4)

This accords with my reading of Pleasantville. Modes of perception have changed. Aesthesis, eros, and pathos allow the perception of color and the knowledge it represents.

Ted Gournelos argues that Pleasantville presents a representation of the trauma of loss, alienation, and shock. He thinks the answers to the traumas experienced are inconsistent and wanting. Gournelos summarizes the changes in the Pleasantville as the product of exposure to new things, “primarily sex, literature, and art” (Gournelos 2009, 534). Eros, aesthesis, and pathos are a part of each of these novelties. The colors that emerge as a result of these modes of perception bring the backlashes of racism and fascism, but in the end, no one is immune to the new perceptual modalities, especially the
pathos involved in fearing change and the risks involved in sexual awakenings. Gournelos argues that the film transparently communicates that in the end “the real world with its perception of freedom of emotion and sexuality becomes preferable to the fantasy world” (Gournelos 2009, 515). But consider Gournelos’s summary and interpretation of the causes of changes to color in the film:

Jennifer changes color after she reads what we are to believe is her first novel, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*; her mother Betty changes color after having extra-marital sex; and the protagonist, David/Bud, changes color only after he saves Betty from being attacked and possibly raped by a group of boys from his school. The mayor changes color at the end of the film out of anger and the whole town changes with him. So what is the impetus behind this change? Progressive politics? Emotion? Sexuality? Art appreciation or creativity? That the film is completely inconsistent is important mostly because it points towards a dissonance within the film’s conceptual framework: the film does not understand its own worlds or their politics and therefore it visually reflects an uncertainty about social change. (Gournelos 2009, 515–6)

Rather, I argue that a particular mode of perception has been repressed in each of these changes to color. In Betty, *eros* emerges; in David/Bud and Big Bob, *pathos* returns from its repression; and in Jennifer and Bill, *aesthesis*, in its visual and literary forms emerges.
THE BRIDGE OF EXPERIENCE IN PLEASANTVILLE

Pleasantville is much more consistent than The Giver in its building of a bridge of experience between appearance and reality. Passion, sex, and art are latent potentialities in the community, whose reality changes based on these new modes of perception. The tunnel of existence plays no real role in the metaphysical fabric of the town. The town, after all, is a fictional construction, depicting “Happy Days” before the sexual revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, and an emerging artistic freedom. Diversity is unleashed on the community of Pleasantville much as it emerged as a new reality alongside these revolutions in our country. The authorities in the town attempt to suppress difference because it is unknown, potentially dangerous, and chaotic. Betty is liberated, but George, Betty’s husband (William H. Macy), doesn’t get his dinner because of it. The town authorities are outraged at Bud’s hypothesis that soon women could leave home and work while men stay home and cook.

However, possibilities are multiplied in the new reality, and the message of Ross’s film is that these possibilities and potentialities are more beneficial than the chaos and danger they may bring. As Linda Mercandante writes, “they find the risks preferable to a world where we have only stasis and the illusion of freedom” (Mercadante 17). And Bud shows that passion, if not libido, inheres in all of the community members, even those who long for the sameness of the good ol’ days. George’s and Big Bob’s (J.T. Walsh) faces turn red in sadness and anger respectively at the town hall meeting organized to discuss and combat the new chaos in Pleasantville. And Bud’s color emerges in his passionate defense of his mother, who is harassed by a gang of uncolored youths. Her blue dress was a mark of her potential promiscuity, and the gang was sexually aggressive toward her because of it.
CONCLUSION: THE GIVER AND PLEASANTVILLE

The novel and the film share several themes. Sexual discovery and liberation, both concomitant with redness and pinkness, and difference disrupting sameness occur both. Each is a high concept work of art. However, Lowry fails to be as consistent in the way the veil of perception is navigated. The Elders attempt to hinder the construction of an empirical bridge of experience by medicating the inhabitants to suppress their libidos, but they also attempt to hinder the tunnel of ontological existence by atmospheric and genetic alteration of reality. Unfortunately, Lowry fails to clarify which could succeed in reaching the other side of the river of doubt.

Ross’s film is clearer. Pathos, eros, and aesthesis, new forms of perception build an experiential bridge over the river of doubt. The metaphysics of “Pleasantville,” the show, were constructed, and they represent the supposed pleasantness of post-war America. But these new forms of perception unleash the latent potentialities of our nature. The flux of difference triumphs over constructed sameness in both films. As Bud states, “there are so many things that are better [than pleasant], like silly, or sexy, or dangerous, or brief.” Nevertheless, Pleasantville navigates the river of doubt with its bridge of experience with more philosophical consistency.

Further, while both films represent dystopian visions where sameness is valued at the expense of difference, Pleasantville fearlessly draws analogies between the supposed pleasantness of Pleasantville and of pre-Civil rights era White suburban America, while The Giver analogizes a more abstract danger of sameness and equality at the expense of diversity and liberty. Further, Pleasantville successfully illustrates the symbiotic fears of sexuality and the racialized Other. The film brings into clearer view the myths of white purity, especially
white female sexual purity, and of the black man as rapist. It highlights the role of visual and sonic art in liberating the perceptual modes of pathos, eros, and aesthesis, depicts the white establishment’s fear of these, and conveys the benefits of such liberation with more concreteness than the liberation experienced by the community in Lowry’s The Giver.

WORKS CITED


By Felicia Cosey

ABSTRACT
This paper argues that from 2013 to 2021 Hollywood filmmakers have favored casting Black British actors to play Black American characters in dramas dealing with racism and oppression in the US in order to remove the racial excess associated with Black American subjects. Once excess is removed, filmmakers feel free to craft narratives that appeal to US moviegoers and that elide the national shame of the enslavement and persecution of descendants of American slaves.

Keywords: Racism, Excess, Black British, Black American, Hollywood, Cinema, Lacan

Black Parallax: el enfoque reciente de Hollywood para mitigar el exceso racial

RESUMEN
Este artículo argumenta que, de 2013 a 2021, los cineastas de Hollywood favorecieron elegir a actores negros británicos para que interpretaran a personajes afroamericanos en dramas que tratan sobre el racismo y la opresión en los EE. UU. con el fin de eliminar el exceso racial asociado con los sujetos afroamericanos. Una vez que se elimina el exceso, los cineastas se sienten libres de elaborar narrativas que atraigan a los cinéfilos estadounidenses y que eludan la vergüenza nacional de la esclavitud y la persecución de los descendientes de esclavos estadounidenses.
volved into essentialist language related to authenticity or which group of Black people were more oppressed, British or American.

While contentious, these online discussions failed to adequately interrogate why Hollywood filmmakers made these casting choices. Two-hundred-and-eighty-character tweets cannot possibly explore the reasons filmmakers made these casting decisions, and a more rigorous approach is needed. Yet as of this writing, there have been no scholarly articles about this topic. There are three reasons for this. The most obvious reason is that this touches upon a sensitive subject, and the complexities of Black diaspora require a nuanced approach to discussing the racist oppression of Blacks on both sides of the Atlantic. Second, as will be illustrated, filmmakers do not want to admit their biases. They will instead provide often problematic reasons for their casting choices, such as actor training or celebrity culture. Finally, analyzing these filmmakers’ motivations requires employing theoretical notions that are less popular in academia than they were in the 1990s.

By applying Jacques Lacan’s theory of jouissance to ideas of excess, one sees a possible reason for these casting decisions. Because of racist stereotyping, Black Americans are mischaracterized as possessing a certain excess. This stereotyping stems from decades of film characterizations, popular culture, and societal injustice. Filmmakers, whether White or people of color, retain biases that similarly recognize Black Americans as possessing racial excess. These biases manifest themselves in their casting decisions and subsequent preference for Black British actors when crafting narratives about racism in the U.S. By viewing their casting decisions through a black parallax, filmmakers are capable of making these casting decisions and defending them against criticism.
WE NEED TO TALK

While promoting his film *Kong: Skull Island*, Samuel L. Jackson caused a stir by suggesting Black British actors were taking movie roles from Black American actors. When discussing the film *Get Out*, starring Daniel Kaluuya, Jackson stated the following:

I know the young brother [Kaluuya] who’s in the movie, and he’s British . . . There are a lot of black British actors that work in this country. All the time. I tend to wonder what would that movie have been with an American brother who really understands that in a way. Because Daniel grew up in a country where they’ve been interracial dating for a hundred years. Britain, there’s only about eight real white people left in Britain . . . So what would a brother from America made of that role? I’m sure the director helped. Some things are universal, but everything ain’t. (Calvario)

Jackson reasoned Britons cost less to hire and movie executives believed “they’re better trained . . . because they’re classically trained” (Calvario).

In a clumsy attempt to extend this discussion, in Spike Lee’s Netflix series *She’s Gotta Have It*, episode writer Barry Michael Cooper has the protagonist Nola Darling accuse Black British actors of taking work from Black American actors (“#SuperFunky”). The dialogue between Nola and her Black British boyfriend Olu is as follows:

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1 Jackson does not elaborate on what constitutes “an American brother,” whether it is someone born in the U.S. or a naturalized citizen.
OLU. Black British actors are better suited than Black American actors because they don’t carry the burden of... fucked up Black American history. Lynching, slavery, Jim Crow, all of that.

NOLA. You’re not unburdened, Olu! British ships were the dominant force in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Almost two million kidnapped Africans died in the Middle Passage. You and your Black British blokes didn’t come out unscathed. You just developed Stockholm Syndrome and fell in love with your captors.

Nola’s response to Olu elides the many Black British authors (see Headley, Smith, and Femi) and activist groups (see Mohdin) who write about and fight for equality daily in the UK. It also elides the historical contingency of the UK’s treatment of Black British subjects such as the Windrush generation (see “Windrush Generation”).

Both Jackson and Lee faced harsh criticism, particularly from their British counterparts, for diminishing Black British actors’ experiences with racism. John Boyega, star of the film Detroit, responded to Jackson’s comments by tweeting, “Black brits vs African American. A stupid ass conflict we don’t have time for” (@JohnBoyega, “Black brits”). Boyega, whose last name Nola intentionally mispronounces, voiced his disdain for the She’s Gotta Have It episode by calling the scene “trash” (@JohnBoyega, “Trash”).

As Boyega and other Black British actors noted, they too face racism. This is evidenced by their limited acting opportunities in the UK. For example, in the past decade, period mov-
ies and television programming have grown in popularity in Great Britain, but the roles available for Black British actors are limited to those of servants. Actor David Gyasi of Chris Nolan’s *Interstellar* lamented, “all scripts have lead roles[,] but I wasn’t reading for them when I was here [in the UK]. You get tired of hearing people say: ‘Turn to page 33’” (Black “The Rise”). The indication is that the role is so minor, the character does not appear until one third of the way through the script. David Harewood of Showtime’s *Homeland* attributes the lack of roles in the UK to an underrepresented Black middle class. Harewood asserts the following:

I think perhaps it’s to do with economics in the UK. There is a black middle class in America—you have a black president, black CEOs, you’ve got black political analysts and you turn on CNN and you have black anchors . . . In the UK, we don’t have a growing, viable, strong, aspirational black culture. Commissioning editors and advertisers don’t see us as a target market and because of that we’re not really part of the fabric of society. (Thomas)

While actors such as John Boyega and Cynthia Erivo are securing dramatic British roles, primarily through their own production companies (see Petski and Ritman), more needs to be done in the UK film industry to create opportunities for actors of color. Speaking to the UK’s Parliament, Idris Elba explained that it is in the UK’s best interest to represent diversity (Jaafar). He continued by saying that when British television and film industries do not cast people of color, that “talent gets exported all over the world.”

Black diaspora is a sensitive and complex topic that requires
delicacy, understanding, and compassion. It is not something that can be addressed in flippant television dialogue or awkward radio soundbites. As columnist Renée Kapuku contends:

[W]e need to use episodes like these [the Jackson and She’s Gotta Have It events] to move beyond demanding accountability but push for conversation and nuance . . . We need to engage the wider international black community; and we need to hold each other accountable for reproducing some of the inequalities we seek to dismantle in our own communities. We need to achieve this not through ignorance, through platform-ing unfounded assumptions nor through unproductive infighting . . . Most importantly, we need to talk.

Scrutinizing the casting choices of Hollywood filmmakers and identifying both conscious and unconscious biases directed toward Black American actors are steps towards engaging the wider international black community. By identifying biases and hypothesizing the origins of these biases, a dialogue can begin on ways to improve representation for all Black actors, no matter their nationality.

Yet there is a paucity of scholarship dealing with this trend of casting Black British actors to play Black American characterizations in dramatic films. Scholars have written about casting decisions related to Black actors playing non-native roles. For example, Ricardo Guthrie’s research addresses Black American actors playing roles of African characters. He focused specifically on Forest Whitaker’s depiction of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Guthrie likens his performance
to racial ventriloquism that harkens back to blackface minstrelsy. Simone Knox discusses the trend of casting British and Irish actors in quality television series in her essay titled “Exploring the Casting of British and Irish Actors in Contemporary U.S. Television and Film.” Quality television series, as described by Robert Thompson, are series that have a “quality pedigree,” attract audiences with “blue chip demographics,” tend to be literary based, and aspire “towards realism” (13-5). Knox points to the success of HBO’s Band of Brothers in 2001 as the beginning of the most recent trend of casting British actors in American television roles. The show featured British and Irish actors such as Damian Lewis, Jamie Bamber, Michael Fassbender, Dexter Fletcher, Tom Hardy, Matthew Leitch, and James McAvoy (Ch. 10).

Christine Becker’s essay “Accent on Talent” also deals with the trend of casting British Actors in television series. Becker notes that almost all American quality drama series feature a British actor because British actors are believed to be more skilled than their American counterparts. She acknowledges that the trend excludes British actresses, as there are twice as many actors working in the U.S. as actresses, because actresses are “associated in the press with the banality of celebrity and physical beauty than with the craftsmanship of acting…” (Ch. 9). Christopher Holliday’s “The Accented American” contends British actors’ mimicry of an American accent others them while also reinforcing “the screen presence of the British actor-as-American, soliciting spectators’ attention to their extra-textual identities as non-natives, whilst paradoxically consecrating ‘Britishness’ through the individual actor’s quality command of American language” (64). In other words, the British actor’s accent, a Brit mimicking an American, reinforces his “outsidedness” for the spectator. This sonic affect proves effective for characters seen as outsiders in
the narratives. Holliday uses Damian Lewis’ Nicholas Brody in Showtime’s *Homeland* as an illustration. Finally, Kimberly Fain’s *Black Hollywood* discusses the empowerment of Black filmmaking in the age of Obama. With this empowerment, filmmakers have reimagined southern slavery with films like *Django* and *12 Years a Slave*. Fain focuses on *12 Years* to discuss the Black diaspora of British actors playing roles that showcase racism and oppression. She sees Black British actor Chiwetel Ejiofor’s performance in *12 Years* as reimagining “blackness and freedom” in a global context (185).

While researchers such as Guthrie, Knox, Becker, Holliday, and Fain deal with the complexities of the English accent and actors playing non-native roles, none of them address the recent trend of Black British actors playing Black American characters in Hollywood films. Knox briefly touches upon the lack of opportunities for Black British actors in the UK as cause for the recent immigration of these actors to the U.S. Therefore, her essay focuses on the circumstances that compel British actors to travel to the U.S. for acting jobs rather than the circumstances that cause filmmakers to cast them in American roles. Fain also discusses the lack of opportunities for Black British actors, but she fails to challenge the motivation for casting these actors in American roles.

This article takes a different approach and seeks to interrogate why filmmakers during an eight-year period, 2013 to 2021, cast primarily Black British actors in lead dramatic roles dealing with racism and oppression in the U.S. By investigating notions of authenticity in representation and biases in casting, this paper identifies perceptions of racial excess in the Black American actor as the impetus for casting Black British actors in Black American dramatic roles dealing with racism and oppression.
Present discussions of representation also include notions of authenticity. For instance, telling stories of transgender characters now requires more than a storyline dealing with transgender issues. Those in the transgender community also demand authentic representation by casting transgender actors. Steve Friess describes Jared Leto’s role as a transgender woman in *Dallas Buyers Club* as a modern-day “Mammy” characterization. Carol Grant says Eddie Redmayne’s performance in *The Danish Girl* bears all the hallmarks of a “cisnormative gaze of the transgender community.” Similarly, representation of Asian Americans demands more than plots involving Asian American characters. Notably, the casting of Emma Stone as a Chinese-Hawaiian native in *Aloha* generated criticism from those in the Asian and Pacific Islander community (Yamato). The Black American community as well expects authenticity in representation. Michael Boyce Gillespie’s *Film Blackness* contends that Black American films are expected to feature a specific reality. Gillespie also asserts the value of a Black American film is contingent upon a “consensual truth of the film’s capacity to wholly account for lived experience or social life of race” (Introduction).

Yet what *is* an authentic representation of the Black American lived experience? Online critics would say an authentic representation involves films written, produced, directed, and acted by descendants of African American slaves. Some filmmakers would argue an authentic representation consists of convincing writing, direction, and acting. The two sides—critics and filmmakers—place emphasis on differing aspects. For the critic, authenticity hinges upon cultural influences, but for the filmmaker, authenticity hinges upon suspension of belief, that the audience believes the representation is authentic. Both critics and filmmakers’ ideas expose a parallax view of race. In other words, when approaching the Black
subject, the angle at which the subject is viewed gives a different image.

When making casting decisions, filmmakers hope spectators see the image of Black characters, not Black British or Black American actors. By casting Black British actors in dramatic films dealing with racism, filmmakers appear to elide the effects of systemic racism and the quasi-legal oppression of slave descendants in the United States. The function of this elision is to mitigate the racial excess associated with the Black American subject. Racial excess refers to a perceived over-enjoyment the Black American subject experiences in transgressive acts. Put another way, that which is perceived as excess is always that which is latched on to by the racist as excess. In fact, race itself is perceived to be an excess.

**EXCESS IN BLACKNESS**

The term excess harkens to Jacques Lacan’s theory of *jouissance*, which is not merely sexual enjoyment, but an unsymbolizable enjoyment. Lacan states, “*jouissance* being properly speaking (sic) an opening out whose limit cannot be seen, and whose definition cannot be seen either” (*Le Séminaire XIII* 212). Put another way, unlike its French counterpart, *jouissance*, which means enjoyment, *jouissance* cannot be articulated. It is both frightening and fascinating. For Lacan, *jouissance* is transgressive (*The Ethics* 191). In other words, the prohibition of *jouissance* elicits a desire to transgress that which is forbidden. Dylan Evans explains the transgressive nature of *jouissance* further by noting the following:

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2 Lacanians italicize *jouissance* to distinguish between Jacques Lacan’s theory of *jouissance* and the French word *jouissance*, which means enjoyment.
the pleasure principle functions as a limit to enjoyment: it is a law which commands the subject to ‘enjoy as little as possible’. At the same time, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibition imposed on his enjoyment, to go ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not mere pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear. (91–92)

That the pleasure brings about pain does not discourage the subject from transgression. In fact, the prohibition of jouissance elicits a desire to transgress that which is forbidden. The enjoyment of the object is excess. Ruth Stein describes the “phenomenon of excess” as “the overstepping of boundaries, the sense of overbrimming with inordinate arousal that makes one feel it cannot be encompassed” (44). The notion that someone is overstepping boundaries, or transgressing, enjoying an object that the subject cannot, frustrates the subject. For the subject encountering the Black American other, that frustration is manifested in an imagining of racial excess.

Racial excess describes the dimension of racial expression (whether by conduct or speech) that appears to evade the realm of meaning, yet it has a material component. Concepts of race are based on physical features that exist in reality. It is because of the materiality of race that racial excess is seen as a “stain” on the subject of racial difference. In other words, the racist believes Black Americans are “stained” by their race and cannot speak or act independent of it. When the Black person speaks, his words (no matter the merit of what he says) are perceived to be imbued with a racial compo-
Black Parallax

nent that evades the ordinary construction of meaning. He is saying just a little something more than the same words would convey if spoken by a non-racialized subject. His actions, his conduct, no matter the merit, are perceived to be imbued with a racial component that exceeds that of the non-racialized person. His conduct always conveys just a little something more than the same conduct would convey by a non-racialized person. Put another way, the racist sees this “little something more” in examples of perceived excess enjoyment in the Black American subject. The Black American subject never just dances, but rather experiences a heightened enjoyment of dancing that exceeds the ability of the non-racialized subject to enjoy. The Black American subject never just has sex, but rather is able to enjoy sex in a manner that exceeds the ability of the non-racialized subject to enjoy.

Examples of racial excess would be the typical racist clichés such as: Black Americans dance too well; they laugh a little too loud; they enjoy food too much; their penises are a little too big; their butts are a little too curvy; they have too many babies out-of-wedlock, etcetera. Black Americans, in other words, experience a superabundant jouissance that is only accessible to them. Put in even simpler terms—Black folk just seem to enjoy a little more than the rest of us. This, of course, is just a fantasy concocted by the White racist in an attempt to make meaning of the racist’s own shortcomings.

A recent example of a racist’s fantasy of Black excess can be found in the Buffalo shooter’s screed, posted online. Eighteen-year-old Payton Gendron shot and killed 10 shoppers, mostly Black, at Tops Friendly Markets in Buffalo, New York. He specifically targeted this store because of its location in a predominantly Black part of Buffalo. Gendron carried out the attack to warn Whites of the “replacers.” He ascribed to
Replacement Theory which suggests that White people are being replaced by non-White people. His document states, “the average black takes $700,000 from tax-payers in their lifetime.” Some of his other observations include the following:

- Blacks have less moral understanding than Whites.
- Blacks are more reckless than Whites.
- Blacks are 50% more likely to cheat on their spouses than Whites.
- Black men are over a hundred times more likely to rape a White woman than vice versa.
- Blacks are 600% more likely than non-Blacks to commit murder.

All these racist stereotypes point to racial excess. Lack of moral understanding means the Black person engages in immoral activities, i.e., sexual lasciviousness, drug abuse, and theft. Recklessness, infidelity, rape, and murder also evidence excess. The memes posted in his screed that deal with Black people are almost all sexual in nature. Gendron projects his own sexual frustrations on to Black people. Stated differently, Gendron sees black people as enjoying something, sex, that he has no access to. This sexual freedom, a freedom he believes the government endorses with handouts amounting to $700,000, will lead to more Black people, either through birth or immigration. Those Black people will eventually replace White people.

Payton Gendron’s conduct and writings are extreme examples of racists’ mindsets about Black racial excess. Yet his

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3 Gendron posted his screed in Google Docs. Google has since deleted the document, but it can be found on right-wing blogs and discussion sites. Out of respect for the victims of the shooting, reference information, including the web address, will not be provided in this article.
beliefs offer a window into the perception that many people have about Black Americans. These biases are not merely present in White people. They also influence the way people of color, including Black people themselves, view the Black subject.

A less overt and more insidious illustration of racist notions of Black American excess can be seen in Hollywood casting decisions. Filmmakers—from executive producers to casting agents—attribute a certain sophistication to Black British actors that they do not attribute to Black American actors (Bastién). Associated with this sophistication is an implicit belief that the Black British actor lacks the same racial excess that encumbers his American counterpart. This belief that Black British actors are more sophisticated than their American counterparts and are devoid of racial excess enables filmmakers to negotiate the anxieties they feel about picking at the scab of racism in America. Expressed differently, casting Black British actors in Black American roles mitigates racial excess and presents a blank canvas for which filmmakers may create dramatic narratives about the U.S.’s oppressive past and present.

**BLACK PARALLAX**

This racist past is recounted throughout the history of Hollywood cinema, beginning with D.W. Griffith’s full-length feature *The Birth of a Nation*, which created the template for racist stereotypes of Blacks that continues to this day. Donald Bogle explains Griffith’s racist stereotypes in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, where he argues Hollywood filmmakers have followed Griffith’s archetypes of Blacks by creating five modes of characterizations. For Black males there are Toms who are affable and subservient
to Whites (Bogle 2–3), Coons who are clownish buffoons for the entertainment of Whites (Bogle 4–6), and Bucks who are brutish reminders of what could happen to Whites (Bogle 7–14). For Black females there are Mammies who are clownish and rambunctious servants of Whites and Mulattoes who are tortured products of miscegenation (Bogle 6–7). These modes limit the depth and dimension of Black characters and pigeonhole Black actors into limited roles. Pigeonholing Black actors into these narrow characterizations results in Black actors competing for limited roles and reluctantly accepting parts that often paint Black Americans in a negative light.

Recent scholarship has delved into Hollywood production culture to explore rationales for casting choices. Monica White Ndounou’s *Shaping the Future of African American Film* contends “race-based economic principles guide investment decisions and distribution deals in the movie industry” (Ch. 5). She emphasizes that films with predominantly Black casts are “labeled ‘urban’” and do not receive wide (i.e., nationwide and international) marketing and distribution because executives believe these films garner limited appeal outside Black American communities. Ndounou points to the industry’s use of the Ulmer Scale to illustrate the color-coded economics of Hollywood cinema. The Ulmer Scale was developed by James Ulmer, a contributing writer for *The New York Times*. The scale tracks, measures, and ranks “star power of more than 1,400 actors worldwide” (Ndounou Ch. 5). Ulmer’s methodology consists of “polling leading deal-makers from Hollywood and key international territories” to create a “100-point ranking system to measure bankability, the key component of star power” (Ndounou Ch. 5). Ulmer describes “bankability” as “the degree to which an actor’s name alone can raise 100% or majority financing up-
front for a film” (Ndounou Ch. 5). In other words, a film with Tom Cruise as the lead can easily receive total funding before principal photography begins. A film like Dee Rees’ *Pariah*, about a Black American teenage lesbian, however, encounters funding roadblocks because the lead Adepero Oduye is unknown. The Ulmer Scale is not as widely used today as it was ten years ago, but the same principles of bankability still determine casting decisions. The Ulmer Scale provides individuals with racial biases a scientific rationale for their casting decisions.

Hollywood filmmakers’ views on bankability and what constitutes an “urban” film illustrate their approach to casting Black British actors for Black American characterizations. They see Black British actors as fulfilling the casting requirements merely because they are black. Yet from a different angle, these actors are not completely black because they do not possess the perceived excesses of Black Americans.

This view is what Slavoj Žižek calls a parallax view. He describes the parallax view as a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus, there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip” (“Introduction”). Kojin Karantani influences Žižek’s notion of the parallax view in his writings on optical delusion. Karantani asserts that what the subject sees in the mirror image and in the photographic image are a “pronounced parallax” (2). In other words, the pronounced parallax creates an optical delusion. The example Karantani gives for the pronounced parallax can be seen with the advent of photography. When people first viewed photographic images of themselves, they were horrified by what they
saw, similar to hearing a recording of one’s voice. Yet people eventually “came to see the image in the photograph as themselves” (2). The pronounced parallax was people’s experience when they first saw their photographic images (2).

Karantani’s photography and voice recording analogies suggest that when placing oneself in the metaphorical shoes of another, a pronounced parallax develops. In other words, if one’s viewpoint is an optical delusion, then the other person’s viewpoint cannot be an optical delusion as well. Žižek progressed this argument further by suggesting these two viewpoints constantly shift, and therefore can never share the same space. Žižek’s parallax view proposes that when one looks at an object from a different angle, it looks completely different. This is significant for understanding the preference for casting Black British actors for Black American characterizations. Black British and Black Americans are closely connected, by the materiality of race, even identical in a way, but they are not the same. The concept proposed in this article to explain this preference is the black parallax.

The black parallax presents a Black subject that on the surface seems like any other Black subject, but when viewed through the filter of national origin, one is presented with a parallax view. When the filmmaker looks at the Black American actor, the actor seems to be teeming with racial excess. However, the filmmaker sees the Black British actor as lacking that racial excess and lacking any historical contingency. These filmmakers look at Black Americans through the lens of national origin, and therefore, the Black American actor is bursting with racial excess.

When asked about casting two British actors for the lead roles in the film Queen & Slim, screenplay writer Lena Waithe responded as follows:
It’s [asking why Black British actors were cast] divisive. I think it doesn’t move the culture forward. For anyone that has that argument . . . anyone who says, ‘let’s get some American whatever,’ I say at the end of the day, if you’re black and you get pulled over by a police officer, he’s not going to not kill you because you have a British accent. We all in this together. Black is black. Is black. (“Lena Waithe”)

Queen & Slim deals with an Ohio couple (played by Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner-Smith) who kill a White police officer in self-defense after that officer shoots Queen. Indeed, a Black British person could have the same encounter with an American police officer. However, this road movie deals specifically with the brutality Black Americans have faced when interacting with law enforcement dating back as far as the 1700s, when modern-day policing was formed through slave patrols (Hassett-Walker). What should not be missed in Waithe’s deflection is her assertion that Black is black. This is the very thing filmmakers hope viewers see, that Kaluuya and Turner-Smith are Black. Yet because of the black parallax, the filmmakers see these actors’ national origin—and because of their origin they appear to lack the racial excess of Black American actors.

This is not to suggest Black British actors are incapable of playing Black American characterizations. There are highly talented Black actors around the world who can play these roles. Additionally, the point is not that filmmakers in Great Britain do not also see Black British actors as possessing similar racial excess. The point is that Hollywood filmmakers whitewash the historical contingency associated with racism.
in the U.S. by creating characters that lack a perceived black racial excess.

**HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY**

For some filmmakers, casting Black British actors to play Black American roles whitewashes the oppression that Black Americans have experienced for hundreds of years. It elides: the kidnapping, enslavement, and rape of Africans; the Jim Crow laws passed that segregated, disenfranchised, and terrorized descendants of slaves; and the school-to-prison pipeline of mass incarceration that created a New Jim Crow and makes it legal to discriminate against former convicts, which disproportionately affects Black males.

Where the Black American actor, as a descendent of slaves, may offer living proof of that oppression, the Black British actor ostensibly presents, for the predominately White filmmaking industry, a blank slate with regards to America’s national shame of slavery and subsequent Jim Crow laws. Carmen Ejogo, who plays Coretta Scott King in *Selma*, suggested this perceived blank slate was an asset when approaching iconic moments in King’s life. She stated, “I’ve been trying to convince myself that being British has had no bearing on any of this, but actually (sic) I think that’s where it served me well . . . I’m not as entrenched in the history so immediately. I didn’t go to school and learn about Coretta. I didn’t know who Coretta was until I played her the first time. It wasn’t as daunting as it might have been for an American actress. An African-American actress . . . that might have been a bit more of a challenge” (Haile). Ejogo’s British identity provides a blank slate that serves two functions. First, it absolves the Hollywood-based film industry of any guilt associated with white privilege because the actor does not represent the great
national shame of slavery and oppression of Black Americans. Second, the British actor’s distance enables the narrative’s rendering of Black American oppression to be softened for White American consumption because ultimately, *Selma* was made for White American consumption. As Joe Pichirallo, producer of *The Secret Life of Bees*, speculated, “the bottom line is that the major studios want assurances that film projects have the potential to attract a significant white audience” (Barnes).

Moviegoers also like to see themselves as progressive in matters of race and appreciate films that address the U.S.’s historical past, even when that past involved racial injustices. However, when faced with evidence of the nation’s past atrocities, (White) American moviegoers are confronted with uncomfortable truths about their national narrative, that the U.S. is not a just and moral nation that recognizes the rights of all human beings. Spectators resist films that cause them to question their national identity. To mitigate these circumstances, screenwriters employ narrative devices that seek to make moviegoers feel better about their country once the story ends.

Past filmic incarnations of racial oppression saw the “white savior” as a means for softening the uncomfortable content of America’s racist past. The white savior is a White protagonist, usually male, who risks his inscription in the social order to right a moral wrong against a non-White person or group of people (Murphy and Harris). For example, *Amistad* and *Mississippi Burning* both have White male protagonists who risk everything to right the wrong of white supremacy. *Amistad* depicts John Quincy Adams fighting for the freedom of a group of kidnapped Africans set to be sold into American slavery. *Mississippi Burning* is a fictionalized account of two
white FBI agents who solve the mystery surrounding the murder of three Freedom Riders near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Director Alan Parker took great liberties with the authenticity of the story, for example portraying the FBI as guardians of Civil Rights advocates when in fact, under J. Edgar Hoover, they worked surreptitiously to paint advocates as communists and enemies of the U.S. Parker explained his reasoning for making the FBI agents the protagonists rather than the Freedom Riders: “because it’s a movie, I felt it had to be fictionalized. The two heroes in the story had to be white. That is a reflection of our society as much as of the film industry. At this point in time, it could not have been made in any other way” (Sirota). Parker’s decision to make the two protagonists white was rewarded with strong box office sales and Golden Globe and Academy Award nominations.

Haile Gerima, director of the film Sankofa, describes the white savior as a “white point of entry.” Gerima states, “I think that even the idea of a Black story cannot be told without a white point of entry—from Mississippi Burning to Stephen Biko. White distributors and producers continue to say it’s not commercial to do a film about Black people without having a ‘point of entry,’ which means white people” (Gerima and Woolford). This white point of entry or white savior diminishes the Black subject’s agency. Black subjects and their narratives have no validity until they are legitimated by White subjects. For Black Americans, this necessity for white legitimacy harkens back to the Black American’s need for freedom papers or slave passes when traveling to avoid capture from slave patrollers. Black American subjects’ existence, like that of slaves, is contingent upon White recognition. They are not recognized, they are not legitimated, and they are, therefore, barred from entry into the social order. This is commonly recognized today when a White person calls the police on a
Black person because it seems as if that black body “doesn’t belong” in the White person’s space.

**BLANK SLATE**

While the white savior motif is still deployed, for example, in Brad Pitt’s character Bass in *12 Years a Slave*, a shift in casting decisions has ushered in a subtler approach to dealing with racial excess and the national shame of racism. For eight years, between 2013 and 2021, several critically acclaimed films chronicling Black Americans’ experience with racism featured Black British actors in the central roles. *Twelve Years a Slave* is the first film of this new trend. British Nigerian Chiwetel Ejiofor plays Solomon Northrup, a Black American freeman kidnapped and sold into slavery. Ejiofor’s presence, with extreme close-ups that focus on the pain in his face, makes palpable the brutality of slavery for the White American audience. Northrup’s desperation in trying to return home to his family and his heroism at defending Patsey from their brutal slaveowner Epps is emblazoned across Ejiofor’s face and sorrowful eyes.

Many general audience members likely assume Ejiofor is American due to his lack of a noticeable British accent. Nevertheless, this casting decision facilitates the exploration of different narratives that filmmakers would be uncomfortable pursuing with a Black American lead actor. In addition, as Carmen Ejogo noted in her own experience, Ejiofor and director Steve McQueen’s British origins inoculated them from the cultural and social indoctrinations of a Black American with slave ancestry. It must be noted that Black American John Ridley adapted the screenplay for *12 Years a Slave*.

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4 Ejiofor and McQueen were not three or four generations removed from their own family
members’ experience of slavery and servitude in the U.S. As Black Britons Ejiofor and McQueen are certainly stained by racial difference, which often bars them from access to the British film industry, but Americans, as noted by Samuel L. Jackson’s comments, are ignorant of this discrimination. Because Americans do not see it, they do not think it is there. In fact, in his response to Jackson’s comments about Hollywood filmmakers casting Black British actors for Black American roles, British actor David Harewood writes, “Perhaps it’s precisely because we are not real American brothers that we black British performers have the ability to unshackle ourselves from the burden of racial realities—and simply play what’s on the page, not what’s in the history books.” This is exactly the black parallax. Hollywood filmmakers hope that when the American spectator sees the Black British actor from a distance, he appears as an American character. Yet when the filmmaker sees the Black British actor up close, he sees the actor’s Britishness. That Britishness conceals any racial stain, or racial excess the actor possesses.

The same racial stain is, however, believed to be existent in Black American actors. Speaking about his series *Fargo, Season 4*, Chris Rock revealed he would give showrunner Noah Hawley feedback about the script. Rock stated, “Occasionally. Whenever I would interject, it wasn’t as a writer. In the 1950s [when the series takes place], my dad was 17 and my granddad was 30. So I know these guys a little bit. Occasionally I would pull Noah to the side and go, ‘what about this?’ As the senior black person on the set . . . there is a responsibility you have if you disagree with something” (Hibberd). Casting Black British actors gives filmmakers a blank slate for which to develop narratives that may not be historically accurate or that may elide historical contingency. They do not have to worry about Black American actors challenging the
film’s authenticity, and the filmmakers may not be encumbered by the necessity for accuracy.

In fact, while promoting *12 Years a Slave* at the Toronto International Film Festival Steve McQueen distanced himself from conversations about race. Johanna Schneller of *The Globe and Mail* asked McQueen, “Can we talk about race in North America? Are we all too careful, are we all too fearful?” (Qureshi). McQueen responded:

I made this movie because I want to tell a story about slavery and a story that hasn’t been given a platform in cinema. It’s one thing to read about slavery, but when you see it within a narrative, it’s different. Now if that starts a conversation, wonderful, excellent . . . But for me, this film is about how to survive an unfortunate situation. I don’t know what kind of conversation you are talking about. It’s a very broad question, and I don’t know what you mean . . . I hope it goes beyond race. You’re trying to narrow it down to race. Yes, race is involved, but it’s not entirely about that. (McClintock “Toronto”).

Steve McQueen’s response to Schneller’s questions evidences his discomfort with assuming the responsibility for discourses about race in the U.S. More importantly, his response erases the historical contingency associated with American slavery, in which ideas about race made slavery possible in the first place. Race for the Black American is tied inextricably to slavery because the descendent of slaves are still affected by racism. In fact, epigenetics researchers have argued that trauma, such as slavery, can be transmitted over generations
Therefore, for the Black American, a conversation about slavery must include a conversation about racism today.

In addition to relieving filmmakers like McQueen of the responsibility of discussing real-world racism, casting a Black British actor to play a Black American offers the filmmaker the parallax view of a white body under black skin. For the Hollywood filmmaker the Black British actor’s culture, i.e., accent and educational training, makes him black on the outside, but removed from the excess of the Black American. This enables the filmmaker to imagine a time when Black Americans did not have racial excess. In other words, filmmakers want to tell the story of racism, but they do not want to depict the racial excess. That excess, for example, would be portrayals of Blacks rebelling against slavery or calling for open violence against racism. This historical revisionism too is a form of whitewashing.

David Oyelowo, who played Martin Luther King in Selma, reinforced this notion when he suggested that casting two British actors for the roles of MLK and Coretta Scott King was a good decision because he and Ejogo lacked the encumbrances of culture and history when depicting such iconic figures. Oyelowo stated, “there’s something to be said for the fact that we are able to come at these films clean” (Bastién). What he means by “clean” is that he is not blemished by the racial excess that marks the Black American subject. What he means by “clean” are actors who can portray the Black American subject without risking indulging in or lapsing into the sort of conduct, i.e., racial excess, traditionally associated with negative stereotypes of Black Americans. The presumption is that Black Americans are stained by racial excess in a way that casting directors are afraid the Black American actors themselves cannot control. They fear the experience of
being a descendant of slaves is too overwhelming for Black American actors, that it will get in the way of playing the role.

This whitewashing of racial oppression provides a depiction of racial subjects cleansed of excesses such as fondness of music, innate ability to dance, superiority in sports, proclivity for sexual wantonness. In one sense, this clean depiction presents a narrative that focuses purely on racial injustice. In another sense, this depiction omits not just what is unique about the Black American experience with its specific historical contingency but also omits the very contingency explaining the genesis for contemporary Black subjectivity.

**DEFENDING THE SYSTEM**

Hollywood filmmakers, some of them Black Americans, go to great lengths to defend casting Black British actors in Black American characterizations. The typical defense asserts that British actors, both black and nonblack, are better trained. *Selma* director Ava DuVernay indicated she liked working with British actors because they possess theater training. She goes on to say the American system of creating actors “is a lot more commercial . . . there’s a depth in character building [in theater training] that’s really wonderful” (Bastién). DuVernay assumes the U.S. does not boast equally trained actors graduating from NYU Tisch, Juilliard, Pace University, Yale, UCLA, or many other American schools with prominent theater/drama programs.

By “commercial,” DuVernay could be alluding to another form of excess: celebrity. Returning to Samuel L. Jackson, his celebrity is associated with his colorful language and unflappable swagger. Although early in his career Jackson portrayed different permutations of the Black criminal, most notably in *Coming to America, Jungle Fever,* and *Goodfellas,* Jackson also
played more temperate characters, such as Arnold, the computer programmer, in *Jurassic Park*. In the late nineteen nineties to the early aughts, Jackson transitioned from character actor to celebrity. No matter the role, whether it was Stephen in *Django Unchained* or Nick Fury in *The Avengers* films, Jackson’s celebrity became his performance. His performance, the enjoyment he seemed to experience when using the word “mothafucka” as both a noun and descriptor, was inextricably tied to his celebrity. Jackson’s linguistic embellishment is one manifestation of that excess. The very thing that some White Americans fear about Black Americans is the very thing that keeps them enthralled with Black folk. In other words, there is a disdain for Black Americans because they talk too loudly, but White Americans love the loud talker when it is Samuel L. Jackson. With this in mind, is not DuVernay addressing excess when she states the American system of creating stars is more commercial? Is she not also acknowledging that she wants to make a “true artistic piece” that is about the piece and not about Black American excess?

Kasi Lemmons is another Black American director who found herself defending the casting of a Black British actor in a Black American role. Although producer Debra Chase Martin casted Cynthia Erivo to play the title role of Harriet Tubman in *Harriet* before Lemmons became attached to the film, when asked about the decision to cast Erivo, Lemmons stated, “she [Erivo] is uniquely perfect for the role and she’s

5 In an interview after a screening of *Harriet*, Martin touted Erivo’s graduation from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art as a qualification for her earning the title role of Harriet Tubman (Black Dollars University). Additionally, Erivo faced intense criticism for her 2013 tweets that some believed mocked Black Americans (Martinez). The backlash for Erivo proved so intense, with the hashtag “NotMyHarriet” trending on social media, that she found herself addressing those 2013 tweets throughout the press junket for *Harriet*. 

138
perfect in the movie. I watch this film all day long, every day . . . And I play a game where I look for Cynthia and I can't find her . . . Take off the wig, you know she’s under there . . . Erivo disappears into the role” (Obie). Associated with this disappearance is the disappearance of Black American excess. Stated differently, Erivo’s Britishness does not carry the presumed excesses of the Black American actor, whose descendants were most likely slaves. Erivo hides from Lemmons because she does not have any of the baggage of being a Black American.

By removing that excess, Lemmons is capable of turning Tubman’s character into a superhero, who has what Lemmons calls a “Spidey sense” to evade capture and free at least 70 slaves. Lemmons’ characterization of Tubman as a superhero with direct contact to God is a form of whitewashing. Like the past incarnations of the magical negro, Tubman’s humanity is whitewashed for the furtherance of plot. Brooke C. Obie notes about the film that “by hyperfocusing on the superhuman elements of Tubman, as Harriet does . . . the impact is to further separate this icon from her humanity” (Obie). The logical reasoning for this whitewashing is that critics and the movie-award-nominating class expect a whitewashing. In other words, Harriet as a product was crafted for this type of critical reception. The expectation is that films about racial oppression should feature a “realistic” superhero. Therefore, if Lemmons focused on Tubman’s humanity, she would have to address Tubman’s sanity (i.e., sane people may not put themselves in harm’s way or claim that God talks to them).

**BLACK AMERICAN COONERY**

In the film Get Out, directed by Jordan Peele, Daniel Kaluuya, whose own problematic approach to diversity reveals the
complexity of African diaspora, is cast as Chris Washington, a Black American dating a White woman, Rose Armitage. Although a critically acclaimed thriller that offers a Black American perspective of present-day racism and microaggressions, *Get Out* too fits within this trend of casting Black British actors as Black American characters. Most notably, director Jordan Peele cast Kaluuya as Chris after seeing him in the British television series *Black Mirror*. Kaluuya’s Britishness brought a gravity and weight to the *Get Out* role without the racial excess of Black American subjectivity.

Yet if Kaluuya’s Britishness brought seriousness to his characterization of Chris, Black American Lil Rel Howery’s comedic background brought a buffoonish comic relief to the film. Howery’s comic characterization is distinctly American, harkening back to coonish characters like Mantan Moreland. The Black buffoon is something the filmmakers felt only a Black American was capable of playing because as noted earlier, it is a characterization dating back to 1915’s *The Birth of a Nation*. The classical training and perceived poshness of a British actor suggest he is better suited for the serious pro-

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6 In discussing diversity in film, Kaluuya took umbrage with the use of the term minority. He said, “even people who say that black people are minorities, there are a billion black people in the world. A billion white people ... What part of that is a minority?” (Haile). While postcolonial critics note that the term “minority” is outdated, and many prefer the term “people of color” instead, Kaluuya’s statement demonstrates a detachment from the historical contingency of the oppression of Blacks globally. Eritrean-American writer Rahawa Haile says Kaluuya’s assertion “minimizes the specifics of systematic racism,” that it’s a form of “benign erasure” because “it asks that we focus on what unifies us in spite of other struggles.”

7 As a black man, Daniel Kaluuya is not immune from experiences of racism and stereotyping. In 2013 he sued London Metropolitan Police for removing him from a bus, pinning him to the ground, and strip-searching him (Lydall).
agonist. Meanwhile, a working class, urban Black American, such as Howery, because of his excess, must be typecast as the coon. In Howery’s case, he provides comic relief in a film tackling a subject matter that makes most White spectators uncomfortable.

Robin DiAngelo calls this discomfort “white fragility.” DiAngelo claims:

> given how seldom we [White Americans] experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven’t had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. (“Introduction”)

To mitigate white fragility in films dealing with racism, the coonish character offers a moment of relief from the mirror that has been reflected upon the White moviegoer. After Chris has uncomfortable interactions with the Armitages and their party guests, the phone conversation between Chris and Howery’s Rod Williams is necessary. When Rod implores Chris to leave because Rod believes Chris will become a sex slave, the tension built up previously is released. This short exchange between Chris and Rod ameliorates any anxiety associated with White fragility.
Another stereotype D.W. Griffith offered his viewers in narrative cinema’s nascence was the Black brute. Donald Bogle describes this subset of the Black buck as barbaric and someone “out to raise havoc” (10). The brute, like the coon, is not a lead character in dramatic films, but he plays a pivotal part in the narration. The brute, unlike the coon, serves as an antagonist to the protagonist. The brute’s excess stands in contrast with the protagonist’s virtue. Like the coon, the Black American, because of his perceived excess, is often cast in these roles. For example, in *Judas and the Black Messiah*, which also stars Daniel Kaluuya in the lead role, Black American LaKeith Stanfield plays Bill O’Neal, a real-life FBI informant who in the late 1960s infiltrated the Chicago Black Panther Party. O’Neal assists the FBI in gathering information on Fred Hampton, real-life community activist and Black Panther leader. Hampton, played by Kaluuya, is killed in a police raid. In the film, O’Neal provides layout information of Hampton’s apartment to the FBI, who passes it on to the Chicago police, and O’Neal drugs Hampton so that he will not wake during the raid, making it easier for the police to kill him.

O’Neal is dubbed the Judas because Hampton takes him in, even as others in the Panther party are suspicious of him, and O’Neal rises among the ranks in the party. Hampton embodies the messiah as a community activist who is so influential, he unites such disparate groups as the Panthers and the Young Patriots Organization (a White Southerner’s group that coopted the confederate flag as its party flag) to fight for worker’s rights and civil rights in Chicago. Stanfield’s Judas is just as guilt-ridden for his betrayal of Kaluuya’s messiah as the biblical Judas. He abuses alcohol. His relationships and jobs suffer. By the end of the film, the viewer learns that this
Black Judas similarly dies by suicide like the biblical Judas. O’Neal’s betrayal of Hampton, his close relationship with his White FBI handler, and his payments as an informant make him the Black brute described by Bogle. O’Neal’s actions disrupt the coalition between the various activist groups that could have possibly changed the political and social dynamics that would shape Chicago today. With this in mind, it is no surprise Stanfield, a Black American, was cast as the Judas and Kaluuya, a Black Briton, was cast as the messiah. It is also no surprise that while both actors were nominated for Academy Awards for best supporting actor for the same film, Kaluuya took home the prize. Finally, it is no surprise that Lil Rel Howery plays Wayne, the pimp who gives O’Neal the sedative that will incapacitate Hampton during the police raid.

**CONCLUSION**

Dramatic Hollywood films that deal with racism in the U.S. present the opportunity to not only open discussions about America’s past and present, but to make amends for past injustices. For instance, the film *Hidden Figures* introduced moviegoers to Black female mathematicians like Katherine Johnson who made the U.S.’s first manned spaceflight possible. After the film’s release NASA named two facilities in Johnson’s honor. She was awarded an honorary doctorate. Johnson even had a Barbie doll made in her likeness. Films that deal with racism in the U.S. are necessary to move the nation forward and facilitate healing.

Yet filmmakers, like all people, are mired in biases that affect the final product presented to spectators. This paper proposes that these filmmakers’ biases manifest themselves in their casting decisions and subsequent preference for Black British actors when crafting narratives about racism in the U.S.
By scrutinizing these final products and the decisions made in creating them, improvements can be made in representation, both in front and behind the camera.

Like the Hollywood industry, the British film industry must be challenged for its racism and exclusion and forced to make changes. Black British actors should not have to learn American accents at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art because they cannot find roles in the UK. In fact, that Black British actors are told they must learn (Black) American accents—like one would learn stage fighting—to secure steady work, illustrates the problems of racism in film casting. It is important that discussions about casting decisions do not vilify Black British actors, or pit Black British actors against Black American actors, but instead question the motivation for these casting decisions. Though inartfully stated, Samuel L. Jackson pointed to an ugly stain on our nation’s past—racist stereotypes and perceptions of Black Americans—and the present incarnation of racism toward Black Americans, both in and outside the film industry, must be interrogated.

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Protest, Humor, and the Nigerian Establishment in Selected COVID-19 Facebook Texts

By Nurudeen Adeshina Lawal and Rabiu Iyanda

ABSTRACT

In this study, political protest motifs in selected COVID-19 pandemic Facebook posts are explored. Using Claude Ake’s postcolonial insight as a theoretical paradigm, the study analyzes ten COVID-19 pandemic Facebook posts during the 2020 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria. The posts reveal a repugnant distrust in the Nigerian governments; an affirmation of the COVID-19 pandemic as a reprisal for the ruling class’ alleged impunity and Nigerian masses’ repudiation of COVID-19 policies.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Facebook Posts, Political Protest, Postcolonialism, Social Media

Resumen: En este estudio, se exploran motivos de protesta política en publicaciones seleccionadas de Facebook sobre la pandemia de COVID-19. Utilizando la perspectiva poscolonial de Claude Ake como paradigma teórico, el estudio analiza diez publicaciones de Facebook sobre la pandemia de COVID-19 durante el confinamiento y el posconfinamiento de 2020 en Nigeria. Las publicaciones revelan una desconfianza repugnante en los gobiernos de Nigeria; una afirmación de la pandemia de COVID-19 como represalia por la supuesta
impunidad de la clase dominante y el repudio de las masas nigerianas a las políticas de COVID-19.

**Palabras clave:** Pandemia de COVID-19, publicaciones en Facebook, protesta política, poscolonialismo, redes sociales

关于2019冠状病毒病的部分脸书文本中的政治抗议表征

摘要


关键词：2019冠状病毒病大流行，脸书帖子，政治抗议，后殖民主义，社交媒体

**INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria recorded its COVID-19 index case on the 27th of February 2020. The index case was an Italian national who came to Nigeria through Murtala Muhammad International Airport, Lagos. The second case was confirmed on the 9th of March 2020.1 The spread of the

infection evident in the increasing number of infected people necessitated the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and state governments to close borders, schools and offices, ban public/social gatherings and other non-essential services, and, subsequently, impose a nationwide lockdown in March 2020. The restriction of movements was initially imposed in Lagos and Ogun States, and the Federal Capital Territory for an initial period of 14 days with effect from 11 p.m. on the 30th of March 2020.2 It was later extended to nearly all the States of the Federation except Oyo, Kogi and Cross Rivers, whose state governments did not subscribe to the lockdown policies.

In collaboration with security agencies, these foregoing measures were coordinated by the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, which was constituted by President Muhammadu Buhari on the 9th of March 2020. Chaired by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha, the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19, with its membership drawn from various Ministries, Departments and Agencies, was meant to provide technical and material support to state governments to manage the outbreak and its spread. It equally functioned as an advisory body to President Buhari on specific decisions such as imposing and lifting lockdowns and providing information to the public on the efforts that were being made to contain the pandemic through daily media briefings with journalists.

The aforementioned measures—and others put in place by the governments—exacerbated social discontent among many ordinary people in the country. Not only did many ordinary Nigerians perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as a

80%9Ce-ku-corona-o%E2%80%9D-reuben-abati

2 Ibid.
fraud, but some people also regarded it as a disease that was exclusively meant for the members of the Nigerian ruling elite who often travel to Asian and Western countries, which are considered by many common people as the origination point of the pandemic. Thus, social tension and disobedience of the government’s directives and public health policies on the pandemic were recurring features of the periods of the national lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria in 2020. Various forms of protest, including the EndSARS demonstrations and looting of palliatives perceived to be hoarded by some state governments and their agencies, were staged by the ordinary people to challenge the legitimacy of both the federal and state governments to impose restriction of movement and lockdown on them. Writing on the socio-economic and cultural conditions that provoked social tension in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ruben Abati asserts that “in Nigeria, more than half of the population lives below the poverty line. Over 40 million persons are unemployed or underemployed. They have no access to food stamps or unemployment benefits. For these persons, life is a daily struggle. Even the employed are either under-paid or over-worked and their salaries and pensions are not paid as and when due.”

As evident from the foregoing, the tension that attended the periods of the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria was rooted in the sociopolitical and economic contradictions of the Nigerian state. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects were important factors, the violation of the lockdown policies, looting of palliatives and protests like the EndSARS demonstration were direct means of challenging the hegemony of the Nigerian state and its ruling class. These direct protests were reflections of the masses’ peren-

3 Ibid.
nial disillusionment about the failure of the Nigerian state and its agents to ameliorate the poor living condition of the masses.

Despite the chaos, fatality and anxiety that characterized the lockdown and post-lockdown periods in Nigeria in the year 2020, the social media platforms were inundated with different forms of humorous posts. The humorous posts were used by online meme artists, cartoonists, and anonymous authors to interrogate the COVID-19 pandemic, the members of the Nigerian ruling elite, including religious leaders, and the ordinary people. The humorous texts were not merely posted on social media for their own sake or just as a means of escape from the Nigerian postcolonial predicaments exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. Indeed, Obadare has noted that “in Nigeria, jokes serve a double function as a tool for subordinate classes to deride the state (including its agents) and themselves” (“The Use of Ridicule” 241). Similarly, “the performance of humor in contemporary Africa can best be described as mélange of shifts and continuities that uncover the intensification of the humorous as one of the most formidable cultural representations of the current precarious state of existence in many parts of postcolonial Africa” (Yeku, “Joke-Performance” 1). In addition, social media platforms such as “YouTube and Facebook facilitate the emergence of new structures and contexts for the subversive and anti-establishment behavior of the traditional trickster of oral narratives” (Yeku, “Akpos” 1). From these perspectives, it can be extrapolated that humorous texts on the COVID-19 pandemic enabled by social media can be important popular cultural texts for interrogating power and power contestation (and complicity) in postcolonial African society.

The current study analyzes how elements of humor in selected COVID-19 texts posted on Facebook during the COVID-19
lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria function as protest and self-criticism. In addition to selected COVID-19 Facebook texts, the study also draws instances from newspaper reports and the authors’ observations before, during, and after the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. While deploying the postcolonial insights of Ake and Mbembe as the theoretical framework, the study examines the manner in which humorous COVID-19 texts posted on Facebook during the lockdown and post-lockdown periods question the hegemonies of the Nigerian political and religious establishment. Postcolonialism encapsulates diverse theoretical perspectives that are used to interrogate various forms of neo/colonialism and their implications on the neo/colonizers and the neo/colonized people. Postcolonial theory is significant to this current project because it will help to uncover the oppressive neo/colonial relations that characterize the condition of life in Nigeria before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory is useful to dissect how the neo/colonized subjects in Nigeria deploy humorous Facebook posts on COVID-19 to interrogate and challenge the oppressive hegemonic principles of the Nigerian ruling class. It will also demonstrate how ordinary Nigerians, through comical Facebook posts on COVID-19, engage in self-criticism and self-mockery in manners that not only lament their vulnerability to the tyranny of the ruling class, but also reveal their complicity with it.

LAUGHING PROTEST, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE POSTCOLONY

The connection between humor and power in the postcolony reveals that humor enabled and circulated through social media platforms surpasses mere entertainment. Although the act/art of deploying humor to protest against abuse of power and corruption is not new to many indigenous people
in Africa, the advent of social media platforms has continued to intensify the potency and the ubiquitous nature of humor as a tool of engaging power in everyday life in Nigeria. Yeku underscores this point when he contends that “the agency and the capacity for self-representation which social media platforms enabled legitimizes the possibility of laughing out loud at the state, playing with technologies of power, and producing and reproducing new fields of cultural and political representations” (“Akpos” 3). Yeku explains further that “many Nigerian producers of online humor narratives communicate their inner anxieties and reconstruct the socio-political conditions of their nation-state through modern myths in internet enabled sites. These myths reflect their social anxieties and are also made to signify other cultural meanings on social media” (“Akpos” 3). Goldstein expresses a similar perspective on the function of humor when she remarks:

Humour is a vehicle for expressing sentiments that are difficult to communicate publicly or that point to areas of discontent in social life. The meanings behind laughter reveal both the cracks in the system and the masked or more subtle ways that power is challenged. Humour is one of the fugitive forms of insubordination. (5)

However, the confounding conditions of life in the post-colonial African state tend to suggest that laughing protest (humor) by the ordinary people can do little or nothing to subvert the hegemonies of the establishment. Mbembe underscores this point when he notes that humor “though may demystify the commandement or even erode its supposed legitimacy, it does not do violence to the commandement’s material base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on
which the *commandement* may snub its toe, though other-
wise it glides unperturbed over them” (“Provisional Notes” 10). Even though Mbembe’s perspective is valid, especially when one considers the “banality of power” in the postcolo-
ny, recent happenings in Nigeria tend to suggest that humor, circulated through social media, can, indeed, be an effective means of challenging the establishment. For example, the In-
spector General of the Nigerian Police, Usman Baba, recently issued a statement ordering the arrest of online comic skit makers and movie producers who often use police uniform to portray the Nigerian Police in “the demeaning manner.”

Usman Baba’s threat is provoked by the biting satire to which the members of Nigerian Police are often subjected by many Nigerian online comic skit makers. This has continued to im-
pinge on the image of the Nigerian Police in a manner that makes it appear as an agency that is synonymous with grand corruption, duplicity and violence. This explanation supports Obadare’s view on the place of humor when he explains:

Humor, whether of the type targeted at the postcolonial state/elite that is widely criti-
cized for producing ‘the condition’ in Afri-
cia, or the self-lacerating type that the suffer-
er directs at herself, is a veritable means of simultaneously recognizing, rejecting, and enduring social suffering. In public spaces in Nigerian bars, restaurants and on com-
mmercial buses, what people call their ‘suf-
ferness’ is not too infrequently the cue for angry attacks on the ruling classes, which

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are soon followed by jokes about both the bogus rituals of the state, and the lethargy of those ‘elected’ to run it. (“State of Travesty” 97)

Another issue that problematizes the agency of online humorous narratives in power relation in the postcolony is the “unholy” alliance between the members of the ruling class and the ordinary people, including online meme artists. In the perspective of Mbembe, “the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can be characterized as illicit cohabitation, a relationship made fraught by the very fact of the commandment and its ‘subjects’ having to share the same living space” (“Provisional Notes” 4). Mbembe rejects Bakhin’s view that the grotesque and the obscene are the province of ordinary people which they use as parodies to undermine officialdom (“Provisional Notes” 4). He further contends that the grotesque and the obscene are, indeed, essential elements of state power and are inherent in the manner it organizes and displays its magnificence. The grotesque and the obscene that characterize state power and the manner the ordinary people laugh at them reveal “the mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate” (“Provisional Notes” 4). Thus, rather than being a tool of resistance against the arbitrary actions of the ruling class, humor, as Mbembe’s analysis suggests, is a site of mutual conviviality between the dominant class and the dominated one. He explains further:

The question of knowing whether humour in the postcolony is an expression of ‘resistance’ or not, whether it is, a priori, opposition or simply a manifestation of hostility towards authority, is thus of secondary
importance. For the most part, people who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandment*. Hence the image of, say, the President’s anus is not of something out of this world-though to people’s great amusement the official line may treat it as such; instead, people consider it as it really is, capable of defecating like any commoner’s. (“Provis- sional Notes” 8)

Apart from suggesting the impossibility of binary opposition between the dominant class and the dominated class, Mbembe’s view also indicates the collective culpability of the two classes in promoting and sustaining the grotesqueness and the obscenity that state power exhibits. Therefore, a laughing protest—humor—produced through social media is not only mockery of the state and its agents, but it also constitutes an art/act of self-recrimination. Not only do social media humor narratives mockingly expose the duplicity and deliberate mis-governance of many Nigerian rulers, they also depict the people’s willful acceptance and perpetuation of their subjugation by the Nigerian ruling class.

Mbembe’s foregoing perspective is quite relevant because it underscores the complexity of sociopolitical crises in contemporary Africa. Just like Mbembe, Lawal has noted that the essentialist representation of ordinary people in Nigeria (Africa) as victims of the arbitrary rule of the neocolonial ruling elite “fails to account for the possible role of some ordinary people in the manifestations of neocolonialism” (77). Hence, he introduces the notion of “consensual neocolonialism” to explain how “the ordinary people in the contemporary African State, either explicitly or implicitly, collaborate with neo-
colonial policies of African rulers to advance their (the ordinary people’s) personal interests” (77). He explains:

Consensual neocolonialism implies that the people are not opposed to the neocolonial ideologies and policies of the ruling class, especially when such ideologies and policies satisfy either their personal, material or psychological needs at the expense of the community. Consensual neocolonialism signifies that the people are complicit in the acts of neocolonialism in contemporary Africa. (…) apart from leadership failure, there are also palpable crises of followership in the postcolony. (77)

While interrogating a number of social media (Facebook) posts, Lawal concludes that “social media texts (and their users) do not essentially constitute threats to the members of the ruling class because there are social media posts (and users) that are meant to perpetuate and validate hegemonic discourses” (77). Lawal’s assertion shows the ambivalent nature of social media posts, including humor. While it is true that there have been instances where social media posts have provoked popular protests in Nigeria (the most recent being the EndSARS movement), there are also cases where some ordinary Nigerians deploy social media posts to valorize and mythologize the ruling class. In fact, in Nigeria, every member of the political class has “committed” sycophants among the masses who often use social media posts to validate their hegemony. For example, one Facebook post describes the current Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, thus: “Buhari is God’s sent/ anyone against him has been cursed (sic)” (Cited in Lawal, 89). The post, apart from demonstrating the
complicity of some ordinary Nigerians with the members of the Nigerian ruling class, reveals that the common people do not constitute a coherent class. There are some ordinary Nigerians who are in alliances with the members of the Nigerian ruling class despite the abuse of power that they often perpetrate.

Mbembe and Lawal’s perspectives, despite their validity, cannot discountenance the relevance of social media humorous posts as functional symbolic texts that are used to speak against the abuse of power by the members of the Nigerian elite. As a neocolonial state, Nigeria is a highly pluralistic country. It is also characterized by various dimensions of state orchestrated violence and injustice, which necessitate different forms of protest, including “laughing protest” (humor). Whether in humor or everyday life, the Nigerian state with its agents is often perceived and treated by many Nigerian citizens as an illegitimate entity. The public perceptions that many members of the ruling class, either in government or outside it, are “thieves” and irresponsible are rife among many ordinary Nigerians. Hence, widespread socioeconomic and political discontent is a recurring feature in contemporary Nigeria. Ake alludes to this reality when he contends:

Political intensity received additional impetus from the alienation of leaders from followers in the postcolonial era. Basically, the political elite dealt with the tide of popular discontent arising from the deradicalization of the nationalist movement by enforcing political conformity through coercion. Coercion was used to constrain the political expression of the masses, now disillusioned with the performance of their leaders. Co-
ercion was also used to impose “political unity” in the midst of considerable social pluralism, which had become very divisive for being politicized and exploited by competing elites. (*Democracy and Development in Africa* 6)

However, in many contemporary African countries, including Nigeria, the political elite’s agenda to deradicalize the disillusioned masses and suppress them through the state apparatuses have not come to fruition. In the particular case of Nigeria, non-state actors, including militia, insurrectionist and terrorist groups, have continued to contest power and public space with the state, thereby destabilizing the state’s claim to monopoly of violence.

Beyond conventional/direct protests, social media humorous posts have also become the sites of engaging the state and its various collaborators, including the ordinary people. For example, President Muhammadu Buhari is often mockingly called *Bubu* and *Jubril of Sudan*. He is given these two names by social media users in Nigeria to underscore his “unpresidential,” dead-like detachment from various national crises confronting the country. In addition to the foregoing instance, comic inversion/subversion of official statements and history, humorous reportage of subaltern everyday realities, contemptible depictions of the members of the Nigerian elite (including religious leaders) and their agents, and the mockery of state institutions are some other instances through which Facebook humorous texts on COVID-19, which are the focus of this study, register their dissatisfaction with the Nigerian ruling elite and Nigerian society in general. The current study, therefore, agrees with Obadare who contends:
Humour is meaningful only in relation to specific social referents. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, humour is integral to a reality which compels the postcolonial subject to endless improvising. What humour and its many uses are a pointer to is [...] the diversity, even wildness, of social life outside institutions, though still within ‘civil society.’ These are the unmapped spaces where the governor and the governed (often in a general situation of ungovernment) blend in a spectrum of possibilities. Humour is integral to the constitution of this space because it serves as means through which the subordinate classes ‘get even’ with the sovereign, and, as Grovogui (1996) maintains in a related context, ‘dispose of themselves.’ (“State of Travesty” 109)

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, Facebook humorous texts constitute subtle, but effective critiques of the Nigerian establishment. Irresponsible leadership, culture of profligacy and violence are some of the dimensions of sociopolitical disorder depicted in the Facebook COVID-19 posts. The posts constitute functional symbolic forms of protest against the Nigerian establishment because they expose different forms of abuse of power being perpetrated by them. They will also show that there is a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and the “nervous” condition of life in Nigeria. The posts, through elements of humor, also serve as a self-criticism of the ordinary Nigerians and Nigerian society in general because they depict the complicity of some ordinary Nigerians with the Nigerian ruling class.
The COVID-19 texts that are analyzed in this section were shared on Facebook during the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria. The lockdown period (including the phases of the relaxed lockdown) lasted five months. It began on the 30\textsuperscript{th} of March 2020 and ended on the 3\textsuperscript{rd} of September 2020. The post-lockdown period in Nigeria commenced on the 4\textsuperscript{th} of September 2020. Those posts (mainly cartoons) culled from Bulama’s Facebook wall had been published in \textit{The Daily Trust}, one of the national dailies in Nigeria. Apart from publishing his cartoons in \textit{The Daily Trust}, Mustapha Bulama, a Nigerian cartoonist, often shares his cartoons on social media, especially Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Bulama’s cartoons, especially those that focus on COVID-19, are parts of the Facebook data selected for analysis because of their relevance not only to the period of the COVID-19 lockdown, but also to the recurring chaotic condition of life in postcolonial Nigeria. Another factor is accessibility. Bulama’s cartoons can be easily accessed on social media.

Apart from Bulama’s cartoons, other Facebook texts analyzed in this section were also widely shared on Facebook and WhatsApp during the COVID-19 lockdown and post-lockdown in Nigeria. These Facebook texts, unlike Bulama’s cartoons, could not be traced to particular authors because they were shared several times. Just like Bulama’s cartoons, the Facebook texts’ thematic concerns are relevant to the condition of life in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recurring pandemic of mis-governance that continually assails the country before, during and after the COVID-19 lockdown.
The common motif that unites all the texts is COVID-19. The COVID-19 motif, as evident in the Facebook texts, is used to expose and interrogate the failure of leadership and the followership complicity that characterize postcolonial Nigeria. The COVID-19 motif in the posts is, therefore, used as a broad canvas to address various existential crises that hobble Nigerian society. These crises include corruption, poverty, social inequality, civil disobedience, willful violence (including terrorism and banditry), decayed infrastructure, religious charlatanism, lawlessness and wanton death. Hence, the notion and the atmosphere of the pandemic that the outbreak and the spread of COVID-19 signify are, in the context of the posts, regarded as a “normalized situation” in contemporary Nigeria. Another important feature of the posts is that they use elements of humor to depict the postcolonial Nigerian predicaments. Elements of humor deployed in the COVID-19 Facebook posts are symbolic strategies of writing back to the ruling class. They also constitute self-recrimination of the ordinary people. Thus, as used in the posts, humor transcends art for art’s sake.
LEADERSHIP CORRUPTION AND COLLAPSED HEALTH SYSTEM


Source: From Facebook on April 18, 2020.
In the three COVID-19 Facebook posts above, the link between leadership corruption and the collapse of the health system in Nigeria is humorously captured. In the first post—a cartoon culled from Bulama’s Facebook wall—the character, illustrations, symbolism, and setting deployed are not only reflections of the COVID-19 pandemic; they are also a satiric critique of the long neglect of the Nigerian health system by the members of the political class. The spatial setting is an open space in front of a shanty building with a signpost: “Nigeria’s Healthcare System.” The temporal setting is during the COVID-19 lockdown in the year 2020 in Nigeria. This is evident in the fact that the open space is deserted by the people except a huddle of men labeled “Nigerian leaders.” The men raise their hands, fretfully pleading with a yellow, round-like object which, obviously, represents the deadly virus—COVID-19.

Misappropriation of public funds, inflation of contracts, kickbacks and other forms of corruption are the ways in which
many Nigerian politicians become wealthy. In fact, Ake has noted that Nigerian politics (indeed, Nigerian politicians) is responsible for the underdevelopment of the country (“The Political Question” 28). Political office holders deploy state power to accumulate wealth. Ake contends that “the wealthiest people in Nigeria are generally people who have acquired wealth through state power: by political corruption, by access to state contracts, agency rates or concessions such as import licenses—which do not usually involve them in a direct productive activity” (“The Political Question” 29). Ake’s perspective is quite evident in the cartoon’s portrayal of the role of Nigerian leaders in the appalling state of the Nigerian public healthcare system. Not only have Nigerian leaders neglected the country’s healthcare system—they have also continually embezzled the funds that are meant to build and equip hospitals for everyday use and the period of emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them, having arbitrarily enriched themselves from public coffers, often embark on medical trips to Western countries and some parts of Asia to medically take care of themselves and their immediate family members. One notable instance is that of the Nigerian Senator and Former Deputy Senate President, Ike Ekweremadu, who, alongside with his wife, Beatrice, their daughter, Sonia, and Dr. Obinna Obeta, is being charged with organ harvesting in the United Kingdom. Ekweremadu and Beatrice’s daughter, Sonia, has been suffering from kidney disease and she needs a transplant. A donor, a member of the subaltern, was gotten from Nigeria and sent to the United Kingdom for medical investigation with the aim of providing a kidney to Sonia. However, the donor’s kidney did not match that of Sonia. Hence, the donor was scheduled to return to Nigeria. However, the donor refused to return to Nigeria, but reported to the United Kingdom police in order
to seek asylum.\footnote{See “UPDATED: UK Police Arrest Ike Ekweremadu, Wife for Organ Harvesting” Channels Television, 23 June 2022. https://www.channels tv.com/} Hence, on Thursday 23\textsuperscript{rd} of June 2022, the London Metropolitan Police declared it arrested a Nigerian national, Ike Ekweremadu, and his wife, Beatrice Nwanneka Ekweremadu, for conspiring to bring a child to the United Kingdom for organ harvesting.\footnote{Ibid.} The arrest of the Senator and his family members during their medical trip to the United Kingdom shows that the failure of the members of the Nigerian ruling class to build the public healthcare system in the country also has negative consequences on them and their family members.

Unrestrained manifestations of power, absurdity, excesses, and orifice are the recurring features of many postcolonial (Nigerian) rulers and governments. According to Mbembe, “the emphasis on orifices and protuberances has to be understood in relation to two factors […] . The first derives from the fact that the commandement in the postcolony has a marked taste for lecherous living. Festivities and celebrations […] are the two key vehicles for indulging in the taste. But the idioms of its organization and its symbolism focus […] on the mouth, the belly and phallus” (“Provisional Notes” 6-7). Mbembe explains further that, “beyond this concern specifically with the mouth, belly and phallus, the body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power” (“Provisional Notes”7). As captured in the cartoon, the Nigerian leaders’ overweight bodies reveal their lecherous living which is made possible by their embezzlement of public funds, including funds meant for health facilities and other public utilities. The bales of currency that they stuff in their pockets underscore their extravagant lifestyle. Thus, confront-
ed with COVID-19, the Nigerian leaders in the cartoon fretfully surrender, admit their guilt, and declare thus:

WE ARE SORRY SIR;
WE PROMISE TO FIX IT!

Beyond their admittance of guilt implicit in the statement above, their promise to fix the country’s shambolic healthcare system is not borne out of genuine repentance of their corrupt acts. Rather, it is informed by thanatophobia—the fear of death—occasioned by the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and their sudden contraction of it. It is important to note that many members of the Nigerian elite contracted the deadly virus in the year 2020. In fact, Suleiman Achimugu, the former Managing Director of the Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC); Victor Ikwuemesi, the founder of the defunct Sosoliso Airlines Limited; Suleiman Adamu, a member of Nasarawa State House of Assembly; Senator Esho Jinadu (popularly called Buruji Kashamu), a former Senator who represented Ijebu-Igbo Constituency in Ogun State at the 8th National Assembly and founder of Western Lotto Limited; Adebayo Sikiru Osinowo, a Senator who, until his death in June 15, 2020, was representing Lagos East Senatorial District in the National Assembly; Abiola Ajimobi, the former Governor of Oyo State, Nigeria; Wahab Adegbenro, Ondo State Commissioner of Health, and Abba Kyari, the Chief of Staff to President Muhammadu Buhari, were said to have died of COVID-19 complications.7

As said earlier, the Nigerian leaders’ promise to fix the Nigerian health system is borne out of death anxiety. In the perspective of Ernest Becker, thanatophobia—death anxiety—comes to every human who considers the thought of death and dying unacceptable. Becker notes further that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man” (ix). From Becker’s view, the goals human beings set, their struggle for achievements and greatness are all coping strategies of repressing the thought of death and dying. Hence, as revealed in the cartoon, the Nigerian leaders’ acceptance of guilt, their apologies to COVID-19 and their promise to fix the Nigerian healthcare system are strategies of escape from the death that COVID-19 may want to inflict on them. They are mere smoke screens to cover up their mis-governance. As depicted in the cartoon, their acceptance of guilt, their apologies to COVID-19 and their promise to fix the Nigerian healthcare system are not engendered by any sense of patriotism. Indeed, the stolen public funds in their pockets reveal that they lack any sense of decency, patriotism, and integrity. The actions of the Nigerian leaders, as depicted in the cartoon, are essentially motivated by their personal and class interests.

By using a vocative case of politeness/honor, ‘SIR,’ to address COVID-19, the Nigerian leaders show that they, in spite of their powerful positions, are scared of the deadly virus. Here, their stolen wealth and positions of power have been rendered somewhat useless because they are incapable of rescuing them from the deadly virus. Therefore, ‘Sir,’ as used in the cartoon, is an ingenious linguistic device to denigrate the hitherto powerful status of the Nigerian leaders. COVID-19 is portrayed as a kind of master who has come to expose and
put to check the culture of corruption among the Nigerian leaders.

In subjecting the Nigerian leaders to the whims and caprices of COVID-19 in the cartoon, Bulama, the cartoonist, desires to deflate the lecherous lifestyle and messianic preoccupations of the members of the Nigerian ruling class, depict them, in spite of their personalization of the state resources, as powerless individuals. The cartoon, therefore, tacitly challenges the binary difference between the Nigerian ruling class and the masses. Just as the Nigerian masses are victims of some common diseases, the Nigerian leaders are also not immune to COVID-19. The deadly virus is no respecter of wealth, political power, and class. It is a form of leveler. Thus, the Nigerian ruling class’s refusal to build medical infrastructure in the country is injurious not only to the masses but also to their survival as leaders of the country.

In the cartoon, the deadly virus’ confrontation with the Nigerian leaders relates to Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection. The abject is what culture throws away, its garbage, or its waste products. Instances of abject substances include excrement, menstrual blood, and dead bodies. In the perspective of Julia Kristeva, “these substances evoke the lack of division between self and other that characterizes the pre-Oedipal phase” (cited in Mary Klages, 4). These substances conjure the maternal body, from which the infant has to separate in order to become a self (and to create an unconscious where pre-Oedipal memories and desires are repressed) (4). Therefore, things that are abject create a deep sense of horror, disgust, and discomfort in the civilized viewer for they remind him or her the time before differentiated selfhood; they threaten to dissolve the boundaries of the self and the other, and to return the civilized viewer to a non-differentiated state.
of egolessness that is frightening to the self (4). Hence, read as a thing of abject, the deadly virus, as captured in the cartoon, reminds the Nigerian ruling elite of their inherent morbidity and mortality. In spite of their accumulation of wealth and control of state apparatuses, they, like the masses and other animals, are vulnerable to diseases, illness and death. Their civilized selfhood, represented by their elitist status, is a mere illusion.

Entitled ‘CORONAVIRUS,’ the second cartoon shows two health workers carrying a COVID-infected man to a small hut labeled: GENERAL HOSPITAL. In anguish, the man yells to the two health workers not to carry him into the “general hospital” because he is a politician. In response to his demand, one of the health workers declares that the hut-like general hospital is the politician’s project. Therefore, he has to make use of the hospital just as the ordinary people do.

As seen from the character, setting, dialogue and symbolism in the cartoon, the members of the Nigerian ruling class, represented by the politician, do not truly want for themselves what they want for and give to the Nigerian masses. In Nigeria, it is common knowledge that successive governments often claim to provide social amenities such as hospitals, schools, and roads, but many of these facilities, in reality, are mere white elephant projects because they are always poorly executed, underfunded and poorly maintained. Hence, such projects end up as conduits for embezzling public funds by politicians, contractors, and their collaborators in the civil service. While the ordinary citizens contend with either dysfunctional basic social amenities or outright absence of them, the members of the ruling class often fly to developed countries to enjoy those basic facilities. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic came travel bans and
lockdown across many countries in the global North, especially in the year 2020. Thus, the members of the Nigerian ruling elite, represented by the politician in the cartoon, became the victims of the mis-governance and leadership ineptitude they foist on the ordinary Nigerians. Confronted with the dysfunctional public healthcare system, some members of the Nigerian elite who contracted COVID-19 had to seek respite in private hospitals in Nigeria.

The hut-like general hospital is a metaphor for the dysfunctional public healthcare system in Nigeria. It is an insignia of the predatory capitalist ruling elite. The interests of the predatory elite, represented by the politician in the cartoon, are to exploit and enslave the common people. That the politician refuses to be treated in the so-called General Hospital he builds for the people underscores the fact that the “facility” is more of a morgue than a hospital. Contrary to the interest of the people, the hut is constructed by the politician for the accumulation of wealth. It is a bogus project that is meant to irrigate and enlarge the private purse of the politician. The politician’s predatory attitude supports Ake’s idea that the Nigerian ruling elite’s interests do not correspond with the interest of the majority of Nigerians (“The Political Question” 23).

By carrying the politician to the hut, the two health workers want the politician to have a foretaste of his corruption and its negative consequences. The action of the two health workers underscores Mbembe’s view that “in the postcolony the search for majesty and prestige contains within it elements of crudeness and the bizarre that the official order tries hard to hide, but which ordinary people bring to its attention” (“Provisional Notes” 8–9). Despite the politician’s pretentious claim to provide functional healthcare facilities to the people in his constituency, the people, represented by the health
workers, expose his duplicity by forcing him to use the hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic. The health workers’ action is an effective symbolic protest against the politician’s treacherous character. That the two health workers are able to expose the politician’s fraudulent attitude suggests that not all Nigerian citizens are deceived by the phony promises and amenities that the members of the ruling elite often provide for the common people. Infected and demystified by COVID-19, the politician’s legitimacy is further subjected to questioning by the two health workers. Thus, he becomes a victim of his own predatory leadership as he is served the poisonous meal he prepares for the masses.

Beyond the themes of corruption and revenge, the cartoon challenges the superiority posture of the members of the ruling class. That the politician, owing to the COVID-19 global lockdown, ends up in the hands of local health workers in a dysfunctional hospital destabilizes the binary opposition between the rich and the poor, the rulers, and the ruled. It suggests that political power and money are insufficient to give an individual physical and emotional wherewithal. The rich and the poor, the rulers, and the ruled need each other for survival. Therefore, beyond parochial interests, every human, especially those entrusted with public offices, must strive for common good.

The third cartoon is a (post-lockdown) critique of the recurring medical trips by the incumbent Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, to the United Kingdom. The cartoon shows that President Muhammadu Buhari and other members of the political class have refused to abide by the lessons of the global lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. As revealed in the post, the debilitated healthcare system, represented by the shambolic structure and the hut-like
general hospital in the two previous posts, remains the same in Nigeria after the COVID-19 lockdown. Despite the threat occasioned by the pandemic which was compounded by the collapsed healthcare system in the country, the members of political class have refused to rebuild Nigeria’s health system. For example, no sooner had some developed countries lifted the ban on the lockdown and opened their spaces than some members of the Nigerian political elite, including the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, began traveling there to enjoy medical amenities. The verbal text, “Buhari heads to UK for medical checkup” in the cartoon underscores this reality. The message in the verbal text is further graphically foregrounded through the flying aircraft in the cartoon. The two yellow, round-like objects which, obviously, represent COVID-19, declare:

APPARENTLY
HE DIDN’T LEARN ANYTHING

In the excerpt, the pronoun, “HE,” is a referent to the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari. By immediately traveling to the UK for medical checkup after the lockdown without serious efforts to address crises in the Nigerian health system, COVID-19 perceives Buhari as a myopic who refuses to learn from the health crises occasioned by the immediate past pandemic in order to resolve the conundrums in the Nigerian health sector. COVID-19’s statement also connotes that Buhari, despite the supposed lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, has not desisted from using his position as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to advance his private welfare at the expense of the masses.

Besides, the presence of COVID-19 in front of the Nigerian crumbing healthcare system suggests that the virus is still around, and that the Nigerian healthcare system is incapa-
ble of confronting it. Its position in front of the dilapidated public health facility also makes the ordinary Nigerians who rely on the facility endangered individuals. The caustic manner in which the virus speaks to Buhari further suggests that the members of the ruling class’s recurring trips to developed countries for checkups cannot save them from the wrath of COVID-19 if they fail to rebuild the crumbling healthcare system in the country. COVID-19 and other deadly diseases will continue to have a field day in the county. Thus, both the rulers and the ruled are at risk of contracting the disease.

Buhari’s trip to the United Kingdom for a medical checkup can be viewed from the neocolonial relations that continue to exist between the former colonizers and the leaders of the former colonized countries. This reality is emphasized by Akude that “African governments maintain their relationship with the departing colonial masters based on the complementarity of interests by granting expensive contracts to foreign firms, increasing investment opportunities for those firms and enriching themselves through deals with the firms (1). Akude, therefore, surmises that “foreign aid, foreign trade and foreign investment contribute to the maintenance of African rulers in power” (1). Similarly, by neglecting the Nigerian healthcare system and expending taxpayers’ money on medical tourism in the United Kingdom, Buhari’s character, as depicted in the cartoon, validates Ake’s view that “the political interests of the few who control state power rarely coincide with the economic interests of the rest of the nation” (“The Political Question” 28). The members of the Nigerian ruler class are solely committed to advancing their private interest, and they often do this by engaging in various forms of “economic irrationalities,” including embarking on recurring medical tours to developed countries instead of rebuilding the country’s dilapidated healthcare system.
Entitled “Lockdown,” the above cartoon reveals how the lockdown policy imposed on the country in the year 2020 by the Federal Government of Nigeria worsened the socio-economic inequalities that have hitherto existed in the country. The cartoon captures the situations in the homes of two different classes of Nigerians—the ruling elite and the common people—during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the home of the ruling elite, two overweight, flamboyantly dressed men are captured. The two men who clad in traditional attire (agbada and caps) are busy wining and dining. Amidst this activity, one of the men justifies the lockdown policy imposed on the country by declaring thus: “CORONAVIRUS IS REAL!”

In the second home, which represents the life of many ordinary Nigerians at mealtime, are two other individuals—one is standing while the other is sitting. However, unlike the class of “the haves,” the two common people are not only shabbily dressed, they also look hungry, sick, and gaunt. With
the empty plates in their hands, they cast a furtive, resentful gaze at the two rich men who are busy winning and dining at the table. In a kind of acerbic tone, one of the two common people retorts thus: “…HUNGER is, to some Nigerians! His assertion is a protest against the corrupt Nigerian rulers who abandon the ordinary people to languish in poverty before and during the pandemic. His assertion can be considered a counter-narrative to the statement CORONAVIRUS IS REAL! made by one of the two members of the elite. This is because the poor man, just like many ordinary Nigerians, does not regard COVID-19 as a major threat to his life. Rather, he believes that the lack of food is his major problem.

Apart from indicating that the year 2020 lockdown in Nigeria is an anti-subaltern policy which aggravates the economic distress of the ordinary people, the cartoon also validates Ake’s notion that “the need for a more secure material base drove the indigenous elite to increase the statism of the economy” (Democracy and Development in Africa 6). Ordinarily, in a period of lockdown occasioned by a pandemic, governments at various levels are expected to offer palliative measures to alleviate the people’s socio-economic hardship. However, the cartoon reveals that the members of the ruling class only take care of themselves while the people languish in hunger. Hence, the immediate threat to the common people’s existence is the epidemic of hunger, but not the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the cartoon, the lockdown policy is depicted as an ideology of the ruling class. By foisting it on the members of the lower class without corresponding socioeconomic provisions for them, the members of the ruling elite not only impose their ideology on the common people—they also misrepresent reality in a manner that valorizes their will. Indeed,
the lockdown policy corresponds with Louis Althusser’s idea of ideology when he explains that “in ideology the real relation is invariably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality” (234). Thus, by essentializing the “reality” of the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of “the reality” of the hunger epidemic, and by endorsing the lockdown policy, instead of alleviating the socioeconomic deprivation of the ordinary people, the members of the ruling class deliberately misrepresent reality to express their desire, elevate and preserve it. Contrary to the view that COVID-19 is the major threat, Abati contends:

The bigger epidemic in Nigeria, in any case, is the epidemic of empty pockets. The ordinary Nigerian will do anything to fill the emptiness of his or her pockets. It is therefore not surprising that the prices of sanitizers, face masks and hand wash have gone up. I won’t be surprised if very soon, there is a Nollywood movie on Coronavirus! I have already seen photos of some beautiful women carefully posted on Social media with the message: “Not all Coronas are deadly!” Phone numbers are discreetly attached.⁸

Nonetheless, the ordinary people produce counter-hegemonic ideology to project the reality of their class. This is evident in the statement “…HUNGER is, to some Nigerians!”

By capitalizing hunger, the cartoonist foregrounds it. This implies that starvation, rather than COVID-19, is the fundamental reality of the ordinary people in contemporary Nigeria. The foregrounding of hunger is also a way of speaking back to the members of the ruling elite and inverting their unicentric knowledge of reality.

The cartoon also shows that the colonial structure is still in place in contemporary Nigeria. Frantz Fanon explains that “the colonial world is a world divided into compartments” (29). He asserts that “it is […] the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans” (29). This structural violence promoted by colonialism is also a recurring feature of many countries in post-independence Africa, including Nigeria. The cartoon emphasizes this reality through the symbolic elements of binary opposition. For instance, the two members of the ruling class are flamboyantly dressed in traditional attire; they also look overfed. In addition, their plates from which they are still busy eating chickens are full of sumptuous meals. However, the common people look shabbily dressed, frustrated and hungry. Their plates are also empty. The darkness in the background of their house connotes a gloomy life while the illumination in the elite’s palatial house symbolizes the material comfort that characterizes the life of the members of the ruling class. These instances reflect the Manichean structure of the neocolonial condition in contemporary Nigeria, even during the COVID-19 lockdown. They also support Ake’s view that the Nigerian bourgeoisie “did not fight the colonial system in order to change it but merely to inherit it” (“The Political Question” 23). Ake adds that the Nigerian bourgeoisie’s “intent, now clearly manifest, to inherit the exploitative colonial system underlies its own oppressive style in regard to the Nigerian masses” (“The Political Question”
The overfed, monstrous bodies of the two members of the ruling elite metaphorize the profligacy that characterizes the postcolonial Nigerian governments, both military and civilian. This point supports Mbembe’s view:

> The body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power. But if […] it is the festivities and celebrations that are the vehicles, par excellence, for giving expression to the commandement and for staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality, then the body in question is firstly a body that eats and drinks, and secondly a body that is open in both ways. Hence the significance given to orifices and the central part they play in people’s political humour. (“Provisional Notes” 7)

Despite the fact that ordinary people make mockery of the monstrous bodies of the members of the ruling elite, the monstrous bodies are, according to Mbembe, “part of a system of signs that the commandement leaves, like tracks, as it passes on its way, and so make it possible for someone to follow the trail of violence and domination that is intrinsic to the commandement” (Mbembe, “Provisional Notes”). Thus, the monstrous bodies of the members of the ruling class are ways by which they proclaim their domination, violence, and lustful lifestyle. Their monstrous bodies are symbolic strategies of instilling themselves and their regimes into the consciousness of the dominated class.

However, beyond a mere mockery, the monstrous bodies of the ruling elite provoke the anger of the ordinary people. This is evident in the rage displayed by the two common people
in the cartoon. They are angry because they believe the two members of the elite, like predators, are feeding fat on the collective resources of the land. This point recalls the jibe flung at Aishat Buhari, the wife of the President of Nigeria, by Aminu Muhammed, a final year student in the Department of Environmental Management and Toxicology, the Federal University Dutse, Jigawa State, Nigeria. On June 8, 2022, Aminu Muhammed “posted on Twitter that Mrs Aisha Buhari had suddenly added massive weight after taking part in plundering the nation’s meager resources,” while the masses languish in socioeconomic hardship under her husband’s regime. “According to Muhammed’s friends, Muhammed made the post because he was frustrated about the protracted strike by public Universities across the country. The strike started in February 2022 and ended in October after eight months.”

Muhammed was arrested by men of the Nigerian Police but was later released after heavy criticism by several social media users.

Muhammed’s arrest and his detention show how social media humor in contemporary Nigeria can unsettle the members of the ruling class. Here, contrary to Mbembe’s view, humor is an instrument of subversion. This view is supported by Obadare who notes that humors are “symbolic instruments of social transgression” and that in Africa (Nigeria), humor “must be seen as integral to a reality in which the postcolonial subject is condemned to endless improvising” (“State of Travesty” 92). Similarly, Yeku alludes to the potency of humor as instrument of resistance when he contends:

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10 Ibid.
Through social media for instance, postcolonial humour achieves a more caustic emphasis, as those who are subject to power can directly travesty the state and its apparatus of systemic oppression. The implication of organizing the rhetoric of political humour through the images and texts of social media is that humour as a site of resistance is individuated, with the ‘private spaces’ of citizens online becoming public sites of power contestations, hereby affirming the importance of treating (social media texts, as (...) as embedded in broader social discourses. (“Akpos”3)

Obadare and Yeku’s perspectives are also supported by Goldstein:

Everyday forms of “resistance” are admittedly largely fleeting, but, I believe, they are important nonetheless. As expressions of power, such dissent reveals the fault lines within society. As a deployment of power, however weak or limited, dissent challenges the status quo. If laughter often does not live up to its radical potential, it nonetheless echoes Rabelais and speaks bitter truths to power. (8)
THE EPIDEMIC OF LAWLESSNESS, CORRUPTION, AND INSECURITY

Government said 4 passengers in a Car, but you will see 10 Policemen in 1 Hilux. Abi Corona no dey catch Nigerian Police ??


The three Facebook posts above dwell on the recurring lawlessness, corruption, and terrorism that characterize Nigeria before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Structurally, the first post contains two sentences. The first one, which is a compound sentence, highlights the social distance policy formulated by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) in the year 2020. It further demonstrates how the members of the Nigerian Police disobey the policy. The second one, presented in Pidgin, is a rhetorical question which interrogates the illegal conduct of the police with regards to the social distance policy. Emblazoned on the post is a picture of Mr. Ibu (John Okafor), a popular Nollywood/Nigerian comic actor. The picture of Mr. Ibu on the post tends to suggest that the statement emanates from him. However, Mr. Ibu’s picture is emblazoned on the post to accentuate its satiric undercurrent.

As evident from the verbal text, the post captures the arbitrary character of the agents of the Nigerian state. The post
shows that the COVID-19 pandemic does not restrain the country’s law enforcers, especially the men and women of the Nigerian Police, from violating the laws which they are meant to obey and implement. Just like in the colonial era where the colonial masters “made rules and laws profusely and propagated values” (Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*) without engendering “any legitimacy,” successive Nigerian governments and their agents have often enacted laws and propagated values, but have always failed to abide by their own laws. It appears, then, that the laws and rules are made to be obeyed by only the masses.

The violation of the social distance policy by the members of the Nigerian Police also signifies that they are the spreaders of the virus. The lawless act by the members of Nigerian Police, especially during the lockdown, inverts their status as law enforcement agents. Hence, their repressive methods of enforcing the social distance policy and lockdown are oppressive. They are portrayed in the post as agents of illegality and chaos. By interrogating their action through the rhetorical question presented in Pidgin, the post subjects them to the court of the people. The rhetorical question shows further that they, just like the ruling elite they serve, are arbitrary powers, which not only spread COVID-19, but also constitute oppressive viruses to the common people.

Produced against the background of the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, the second post shows how some members of the Nigerian Police, in collaboration with some ordinary Nigerian citizens, engage in corrupt acts with a view to violating the lockdown policy for their parochial ends. In the pictorial post, a commercial motorcycle rider on his motorcycle, contrary to the lockdown policy, is seen on the road. He is also carrying a passenger on the motorcycle. The commer-
cial motorcycle rider’s encounter with a gun-bearing policeman further reinforces the lockdown policy. The policeman, maintaining a social distance and wearing a facemask, puts forward a net to receive a bribe of one thousand naira from the commercial motorcycle rider. Here, the policeman who is supposed to implement the law by getting the commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger arrested, compromises the law for his pecuniary gains.

As captured in the post, the ordinary citizens and the law enforcement agents are mutually involved in the violation of law and order, even during the COVID-19 lockdown. What this implies is that there is a kind of transactional and mutual relations between the ordinary people and the agents of the law with regards to the desecration of the state and its laws. These transactional relations between the two classes—the ordinary citizens and the agents of the state—are anchored on mutual gratifications. For example, the commercial motorcycle rider disobeys the COVID-19 lockdown policy to eke out a living. Also, the policeman, who is supposed to arrest and prosecute him, renders the lockdown policy impotent by receiving a bribe from him. Thus, both the motorcycle rider and the policeman are depicted as the agents of corruption. The transactional relations between the policeman and the commercial motorcycle rider validate Mbembe’s perspective that:

In order to account for both the mind-set and the effectiveness of postcolonial relations of power, we need to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination, such as resistance v. passivity, autonomy v. subjection, state v. civil society, hegemony v. counter-hege-
mony, totalisation v. detotalisation. These oppositions are not helpful; rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations. (“Provisional Notes” 3)

However, the representation of the policeman shows that he is more culpable than the commercial motorcycle rider because the onus of implementing the COVID-19 lockdown policy is on him. Implementations of government policies, including those of COVID-19, also involve the arrest and prosecution of violators of the policies. By taking a bribe in order to compromise the lockdown policy, the policeman not only enables the spread of COVID-19, he also contributes to the endemic rise of corruption in Nigeria. Hence, the policeman is represented as an agent of the COVID-19 pandemic and corruption. As noted by Ake, the (post)colonial society, despite the fact that it makes “rules and laws profusely and propagates values,” cannot “engender any legitimacy” because its operators are enablers of corruption and sociopolitical disorder (Democracy and Development in Africa 3).

In a number of ways, the characters of the commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger challenge the hegemony of the Nigerian state and COVID-19. First, the commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger violate the lockdown policy imposed by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Second, the motorcycle rider subverts the hegemony of the state and its law by offering a bribe to the law enforcement agent. Third, the motorcycle rider and his passenger refuse to use facemasks or nose-masks, thus announcing their disbelief in the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its fatal effects. They are only concerned about the epidemic of poverty, which they are out to combat. Their violation
of the lockdown policy is also informed by their conscious realization that the members of the Nigerian ruling elite do not provide meaningful palliatives for them prior and during the lockdown. Thus, they defy the government policies on COVID-19, manipulate its agent and undermine its hegemony for their material interests. The commercial motorcycle rider and his passenger’s aforementioned acts are effective symbolic protests against the state. Their rebellious attitude shows their disillusionment about the state and its operators. On the attitude of ordinary Nigerians to the Nigerian state and its operators, Ake explains:

In Nigeria, for instance, the state has little influence on the lives of the rural people. Much development that has taken place in rural communities has occurred not because of the state, but in spite of it. To many rural dwellers, the state exists primarily as a naissance to be avoided in their daily struggle to survival (cited in Uwasomba and Alumona 209).

Entitled “Bandit Attack Community again—news,’’ the third post is a cartoon produced by Mustapha Bulama during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria. The cartoon shows a group of arm-wielding bandits who, on motorcycles, are returning from a community in Katsina that they have just invaded and looted. This is evident from a huge smoke emanating from the community in the distance and the splash of blood on the road sign labeled KATSINA, and on the road. As captured in the cartoon, a group of Corona viruses, which is also heading for the invaded community, meets the bandits on the road. One of the bandits and one of the viruses wave to each other, and the bandit declares:
WE’VE
BEEN THERE
MANY TIMES;
JUST GO
AHEAD
NOTHING WILL HAPPEN.

As depicted in the cartoon, the spatial setting, the symbolism, diction and characters not only reflect the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria; they equally capture the epidemic of insecurity in northern Nigeria in particular, and the country in general. Ake’s idea that “the political interests of the few who control state power rarely coincide with the […] interests of the rest of the nation” (“The Political Question” 28) is clearly evident in the cartoon. The members of the ruling elite who control the security apparatuses only deploy them to protect themselves and their immediate family members while they abandon the ordinary people to their fate. This is why the bandits have the latitude to attack the communities. The lack of presence of security agents/agencies in various communities in Nigeria reveals the alienation of the ordinary people from the structure of power. The bandit’s assertion that they have successfully attacked the Katsina community several times, without reprisals from the security agencies, underscores further the estrangement of the community and its people by the government. Therefore, COVID-19, another agent of insecurity, is not likely to encounter any resistance from the state and its agents owing to the fact that funds earmarked to combat various forms of insecurity, including health crises, have either been misappropriated or embezzled by people in governments. This is why Ibeanu and Momoh conceived of security decision-making
in Nigeria as “highly politicized and subject to political manipulation” (69). They note that, in Nigeria, “provision of security […] is often used for political ends and to justify impunity and corruption” (69). Egbo et al underscore the same point when they declare:

The ambiguity and secrecy usually associated with the concept of national security create the enabling environment for such funds to be misappropriated by the custodians of the state, and security votes have thus become a convenient tool for disguising the looting of the public treasury. Unfortunately, security votes have also become a useful tool for perpetuating the power and control of the ruling class. (2)

From the foregoing perspective, the recurring cases of insecurity in Nigeria which manifest in banditry, terrorism and kidnapping are largely caused by the corruption of the ruling class.

In the cartoon, the symbols of violence and disorder are appropriately deployed to foreground the ubiquitous character of insecurity in the northern part of Nigeria. The blood and the smoke connote the destruction of the people and their property by the bandits. The characters of the bandits and the virus also indicate physical and medical forms of insecurity being experienced by the people in the region and the country at large. These forms of insecurity further suggest the absence of good governance in the country. The bandits’ contestation of power with the state and its actors supports Ake’s notion that postcolonial African politics, occasioned by the failure of the ruling class, is reduced “to the crude mechanics of opposing forces driven by the calculus of power. For every-
one in this political arena, security lay only in the accumulation of power. The result was an unprecedented drive for power; power was made the top priority in all circumstances and sought by all means” (Democracy and Development in Africa, 3). Just like the postcolonial politicians, the bandits too are interested in absolute power. They are, therefore, anti-democratic and anti-people forces. This is evident in the callous manner they destroy the people and their property. By telling the virus to visit the ravaged community and unleash its violence on its dwellers, the bandits show that they are agents of destruction. Hence, their anti-establishment stance is cruel and retrogressive. It does not represent the interest of the oppressed class. However, their statement—“We’ve been there many Times; just go ahead nothing will happen”—is a mockery of the Nigerian state and its security forces. Apart from connoting that the government has abdicated its primary responsibility of providing security to its citizenry, the statement also reveals that the Nigerian State is like a Hobbesian state where life is nasty, brutish, and short.

As noted earlier, the bandits’ act of violence is not a revolutionary act because it is not meant to liberate ordinary Nigerians from the perpetual sociopolitical and economic predicaments confronting them. The bandits’ violence is a form of commercial enterprise. They attack the people, kill them, and loot some of their worthy belongings. They also kidnap innocent people in order to obtain ransoms from their family members. Mbembe alludes to this commoditization of violence in many parts of Africa, including Nigeria, that:

The political economy of statehood dramatically changed over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Many African states can no longer claim a monopoly on violence
and on the means of coercion within their territory. Nor can they claim a monopoly on territorial boundaries. Coercion itself has become a market commodity. Military manpower is bought and sold on a market in which the identity of suppliers and purchasers means almost nothing. Urban militia, private armies, armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill. (“Necropolitics” 32)

From the foregoing view, many postcolonial African states may be considered as weak states owing to their inability to maintain law and order. Non-state actors, especially in some northern and southeastern states of Nigeria, enact their own laws and subject the ordinary citizens to various forms of violence. This unwholesome situation tends to show that Nigeria operates, like many other African states, on the survival-of-the fittest principle.
COVID-19 AND THE EPIDEMIC OF RELIGIOUS CHARLATANISM

Source: Facebook on April 17, 2020.

Source: Facebook on December 30, 2020.
The above two Facebook posts use both pictorial and verbal elements to capture the confusion and frustration of some self-appointed miracle-performing pastors in Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdown. In the first post, a male pastor, in a perplexing mood, puts his hands, which also contain his Bible, on his head. The pastor’s frustration and confusion are caused by the fact that the members of his congregation whom he often exploits, through church offering and tithe collections, have all stayed in their homes because of the COVID-19 lockdown. The pastor’s acclaimed “spiritual power” to perform miracles—which constitute his main source of income, has now been exposed as a mere pretension. This is because the pastor can neither prevent the spread of COVID-19 nor cure its victims. The male pastor and his ilk are frustratingly waiting for the virus to end so that they can resume the exploitation of their followers through their self-acclaimed spiritual power.

The post uses the circumstance of COVID-19 and the lockdown to satirize the self-imputed messianic character of many religious leaders in Nigeria. The reference to the unscrupulous attitudes of the pastor in the pictorial post recalls the character of Brother Jero in Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Brother Jero is a self-acclaimed evangelical prophet practicing along Lagos Beach, Nigeria. He uses false prophecies and other dubious methods to extract money from his followers. He plays on people’s ignorance and desires by giving them compelling prophecies which make them depend on him as a true prophet of God. With the endless absence of good governance in Nigeria, a majority of Nigerians turn to religious leaders, self-acclaimed spiritualists and prophets, especially Pentecostal pastors, for spiritual solutions to their existential problems. Just like the Nigerian politicians, the Pentecostal pastors and prophets subject
their followers to various forms of exploitation and oppression. They swindle and enslave their members through their artificial spiritual power and performance of miracles.

But with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the claims of these spiritualists to spiritual power and miracles have turned out to be false because they have failed to use their power to neither forestall the spread of the virus nor cure its victims. Similarly, the COVID-19 lockdown has shown that some pastors are rakes who feed on the gullibility of their followers, which is why the pastor in the first post puts his hands on his head in frustration. The absence of his church worshippers to swindle and exploit portends hunger and intensifies his dissatisfaction.

The Facebook post also reveals the role of Nigerian religious leaders in the socio-political and economic crises in the country. Obadare alludes to this reality that, in Nigeria “a cohort of Christian leaders—a theocratic class—has steadily gained influence over the course of the Nigerian Fourth Republic, due in large part to its astute construction and maintenance of a discourse whereby the country’s economic and political problems are defined in spiritual terms” (Pentecostal Republic 34). He notes that “such a definition is consistent with the Pentecostalist world view of ubiquitous and apparently inexhaustible evil, which is only (if at all) eliminable through aggressive prayer and other forms of spiritual warfare” (Pentecostal Republic 34). Obadare remarks further:

The stress placed on the ubiquity of unseen enemies and invisible diabolical forces allows the theocratic class to seize the narrative through which it is able to leverage tremendous social and political power. This power threatens the democratic project in-
Protest, Humor, and the Nigerian Establishment

so far as it is mobilised to enter alliances with various state actors, and to advance the corporate interests of the theocratic class, much to the detriment of the citizenry. (*Pentecostal Republic* 34)

A similar view has been expressed by Ake. According to him, “the trouble with Nigeria is not its governments but its ruling elite” (“The Political Question” 31). Ake remarks that “government is a small group in charge of major institutions of the state, particularly the legislative and administrative machinery. The ruling class is all the power centers, political, cultural, religious, and economic that constitute the existing political domination” (“The Political Question” 31). He explains that “in the case of Nigeria, the ruling elite includes all the powerful traditional leaders, the major religious leaders, the higher ranks of the coercive institutions such as the military, the police and the judiciary, international capital and the wealthy Nigerians who command the economy” (“The Political Question” 31). Thus, the religious leaders cannot be exculpated from the problems hobbling the country. Their behavior reinforces the hegemony of the government. For instance, the Nigerian religious clerics’ mystification/spiritualization of the crises of governance and their exploitation of the ordinary people, as revealed in the post, is a way of advancing their private material interests. Thus, the predatory character of many religious leaders is not different from that of Nigerian politicians.

The second post also questions the veracity of the spiritual product of some pastors in Nigeria. This spiritual product, known as anointed/anointing oil, is often sold to the members of church congregations by the pastors or “General Overseers” of various churches. The anointed/anointing oil
is claimed to be an antidote to several ailments and diseases, including “spiritual attacks” from known and unknown enemies. However, the post demystifies the claim that the anointed/ anointing oil has any power to prevent or cure any disease. Through the characters of a journalist and a respondent, the post contends that hand sanitizer is more potent than the anointed oil. By undermining the supposed potency of the anointed oil, the post deconstructs the self-acclaimed power of its producers, the pastors, or general overseers. In addition, the post intends to liberate the minds of Nigerians, especially ordinary people, who often regard pastors, general overseers, and other spiritualists as super-humans. It shows that Nigerians need to liberate themselves from predatory pastors, general overseers and other spiritualists who often exploit them. The hand sanitizer, a metaphor for scientific knowledge, is considered as capable of combating COVID-19. That the people resort to hand sanitizer, rather than the anointed oil, during the COVID-19 pandemic shows further that the anointed oil lacks the efficacy often ascribed to it.

As evident from the foregoing analysis, the post is a mockery of the messianic and predatory self-positioning of many Nigerian pastors and their product, anointed oil. Thus, the satiric repudiation of the anointed oil is a subtle protest against the hegemony of “the miracle-doing men of God.” The post canvasses scientific solutions to Covid-19 and other existential problems challenging the country. It shows that religions or the belief in miracle by many Nigerians cannot address their socio-political and economic problems. The post advocates pragmatic attitudes to various challenges bedeviling Nigerians. Hence, the post is not only a mockery of Pentecostalist pastors; it is also a criticism of the masses who often repose their hope in them.
CONCLUSION

This study has focused on how humorous COVID-19 Facebook posts function as protest and self-criticism in contemporary Nigeria. The study has discussed how the humorous portrayals of the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook constitute a distinctive form of protest against the manifestations of mis-governance, corruption and perversion of state institutions in Nigeria. This is achieved through postcolonial insights of Mbembe and Ake. The study has shown that the COVID-19 posts, through elements of humor, privilege sociopolitical and economic contradictions that are prevalent in contemporary Nigeria. As part of its findings, the study observes that the COVID-19 posts capture the ordinary people’s revolting distrust in the Nigerian government, its agents, and policies; the privileging of the COVID-19 pandemic as a reprisal for the alleged corrupt acts of the Nigerian ruling class; and the Nigerian masses’ rejection of COVID-19 policies. Also, some Facebook posts on the COVID-19 pandemic criticize the exploitative and the “superior” spiritual self-positioning of some Nigerian religious leaders for their failure to use their self-acclaimed spiritual power to address the pandemic and the crisis engendered by it. However, it is revealed that some posts interrogate the ordinary people for their involvement in promoting social disorder during the pandemic. It destabilizes the assumed binary difference between the ruling class and the masses because some ordinary Nigerians are in conspiratorial alliances with the establishment and their agents in the destruction of the Nigerian state.

As evident from the foregoing, this work has shown that humorous COVID-19 posts on Facebook (and indeed humor on social media in general) constitute important cultural texts which document as well as critique the debilitating sociopolitical realities in contemporary Nigeria. The humorous
COVID-19 posts serve as symbolic engagement with the Nigerian state because they are acts/arts of speaking back to the Nigerian establishment. They also constitute acts/arts of self-critique by many ordinary Nigerians. Thus, beyond the mirthless laughter that the posts may elicit from the audience, their meanings reveal deep yearnings for responsive and responsible leadership and supportive citizenry, which are ingredients of democracy, good governance and national solidarity that are required in addressing various forms of pandemic challenging contemporary Nigeria.

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Pepe versus Kermit: A Memetic Battleground about Latina/o/e-centric Immigration and Policy

By Kaitlin Thomas

ABSTRACT

Alt-right “Pepe the Frog” and left-leaning “That’s None of my Business Kermit” memes rose to prominence in the months preceding and the days following the 2016 presidential election. They were used on digital meme-centric battlegrounds to tackle issues related to immigration, immigration policy, U.S.-Mexican relations, and the U.S.-Mexican Border Wall. This article will demonstrate how such memes became the ideal creative outlet for political messaging and discussion to spread, and how memetic activism emerged as a distinctive mode of message conveyance and resistance against alt-right rhetoric.

Keywords: Media activism, Memes

Pepe versus Kermit: Un campo de batalla memético sobre inmigración y políticas centradas en latina/o/e

RESUMEN

Los memes de extrema derecha “Pepe the Frog” y de izquierda “Eso no es asunto mío, Kermit” cobraron prominencia en los meses anteriores y en los días posteriores a las elecciones presidenciales de 2016. Se utilizaron en campos de batalla centrados en memes digitales para abordar cuestiones relacionadas con la inmigración, la política de inmigración, las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y México y el muro fronte-
rizo entre Estados Unidos y México. Este artículo demostrará cómo dichos memes se convirtieron en la salida creativa ideal para la difusión de mensajes y debates políticos, y cómo el activismo memético surgió como un modo distintivo de transmisión de mensajes y resistencia contra la retórica de la extrema derecha.

**Palabras clave:** Activismo mediático, Memes

文章标题：佩佩蛙vs科米蛙：关于拉美移民和政策的数字模因战场

**摘要**

2016年总统大选之前的几个月和之后的几天里，另类右翼的“佩佩蛙”和左翼的“这不关我的事——科米蛙”模因受到大量关注。它们被用于以数字模因为中心的战场，以应对与移民、移民政策、美墨关系和美墨边境墙相关的问题。本文将证明此类模因如何成为政治信息传播和讨论的理想创意渠道，以及模因激进主义如何成为一种独特的信息传达模式和抵制另类右翼言论的方式。

**关键词：**媒体激进主义，模因

**INTRODUCTION**

Memes comprise a uniquely provocative form of “inter-textual” written matter within which a new “bottom-up expression” produces an interfusion between “pop culture, politics, and participation” that has resulted in a near total “blurring of interpersonal communi-
cation with mass” (Shifman 2015, 7). While memes are primarily shared via person-to-person social media networks, they reflect much larger societal mindsets that illuminate more precise, public sentiment (Xiao Mina 2019; Woods and Hahner 2019). The participatory culture encouraged by meme generation, viewing, and sharing has aided in the creation and solidification of a new cultural niche where issues pertinent to the U.S.-based Latina/o/e experience can exist, defend, and organize in a different capacity than previously seen. Two memetic characters that occupy this niche and have achieved a high level of notoriety in on and offline contexts are of interest: Pepe the Frog (Pepe) and the “That’s None of My Business” Kermit the frog (Kermit). Having become two of the most recognizable memetic tokens during the 2016 election process, between 2014 and 2016 a tit-for-tat virtual memetic dialogue featuring these two anthropomorphic personalities took place. Far-right leaning meme posts on the Internet chat boards Reddit and 4chan featuring Pepe would rouse the left-leaning Latina/o/e social justice-oriented Facebook page UndocuMedia to respond with one featuring Kermit. This occurred among such a scale of digital followers that the mere presence of a frog emoji (🐸) in a post or hashtag (#) became an alt-right or leftist pint-sized message.

ReddIt and 4chan were selected as sites to collect immigration and/or Latina/o/e themed Pepe memes due to their notoriety and high rate of online participation. In March 2020, Reddit ranked #18 in global internet traffic and engagement and #6 in the U.S. (Reddit.com Competitive Analysis…). It is more politically diverse than other Internet discussion boards with both sides of the aisle well-represented within its subreddits (themed threads that branch off from the main page to home in on a particular topic). While not as high of a rank at #937
(#429 in the U.S.), 41.3% of 4chan’s global users reside in the U.S. (4chan.org Competitive Analysis…). It is anecdotally and colloquially recognized as a more politically conservative oriented site (Woods and Hahner 2019). Reddit gives users the ability to share links, images, and comments while 4chan specializes in images (making it a perfect breeding ground for memes). The Pepe memes discussed in the sections to follow were selected based on their ease of access (postings open to the public), shareability (how many comments, likes, “up-votes,” or the like that they received), relevance to themes surrounding immigration, the U.S.-Mexican border wall, and Latinos/as in the U.S., and date of publication (specifically between January 2014 and November 2016).

While UndocuMedia was not a social news and opinion aggregate like Reddit or 4chan, it was prolific in the number of public posts that were built around memes, a strategy that aided in amassing hundreds of thousands of followers between Facebook (~295,000), Instagram (~26,000), and Twitter (~13,600) over the years it was operational (2012–2018). They stated in their mission statement that they sought to use “digital and social media to empower the undocumented community throughout the U.S.” with the intent to help followers “stay informed and fight for social justice” and promote the stance that (un)documented Latina/o/e immigrants were “#HereToStay.” Being a primarily online nonprofit organization aligned with questions posed for this project, namely whether or not memes were specifically being used to inform and rally, what the imagery and catchphrases being used suggested about broader socio-political themes leading up to and following the 2016 presidential election, and how its predominately left-leaning audience received the memes that were being created and shared specifically to tackle alt-right rhetoric. While UndocuMedia has since disbanded, its
memetic activity during the 2014–2016 years of interest rivaled its Reddit and 4chan counterparts in immigration and Latina/o/e-themed content, creating a type of memetic call-and-response.

MEMES: AN IDEAL OUTLET

Memes and meme creators have leveraged communal cultural knowledge over the first quarter of the millennium because of the rapidity and immensity of the Internet, wireless connectability, social networking, and perhaps most importantly, the communicative blurring between digital and non-digital spheres that is a new norm. Each individual who participates in the creation, sharing, or observing of media texts comprises the threads of interaction that “form whole tapestries of public conversations” (Milner 2016, 2). These discourses are not trickling from the top-down (the public being dictated to; the public being handed material for consumption) but rather predominantly emanate from a bottom-up series of actions such as hashtags (#), status updates, and remixed and photo-shopped images featuring characters and catchphrases. The cultural power position has shifted towards the individual and the general public who, either by oneself or within the collective, composes material to be consumed outward and upward.

For both sides of the political aisle, the creation, circulation, and transformation of images and texts have become something much more socio-culturally impactful than what was previously only a “quirky little JPG from the Internet” (Milner 2016, 3). A scholarly perception of being merely “quirky” would have been a best-case scenario in the early days of (social) media while juvenile or even meaningless at worst (blips not worthy of inclusion in sophisticated cultural anal-
ysis). The shifting of where and why memes emanate coupled with their unavoidable pervasiveness in modern media ecosystems has meant that a much more viable and verifiable worth can be ascribed to them. For example, memes have cultural functions beyond superficial banter: jokes detract from political absurdity (similarly to the catharsis of gallows humor), arguing points permits one to assume defensive and protective postures with concise imagery and verbiage that pack a punch, and friends can connect thus expanding the network of allies who extract similar motivation or catharsis from memetic banter. Successful memes are those that achieve a wide distribution of spreadability and recognition, spreading widely and quickly, achieving omnipresence within, and more importantly beyond, the Internet (Milner 2016; Shifman 2014; Xiao Mina 2019). That means that in today’s cultural sphere, commonality in one sphere (i.e., online) leads to diffusion in others (graffiti, printing on mugs and t-shirts, stickers used on protest signs, etc.), lending itself to the ongoing dissemination, simmering, and perpetuation of a particular sentiment such as the slogan, “build the wall” on the right or “undocumented and unafraid” on the left. In a political and activist sense, such “reappropriation of messages by numerous users helps in promoting a topic … which in turn draws more attention to it” via actions that have become relatively mundane: liking, sharing, and forwarding memes outward (and upward) (Shifman 2015, 33).

Two examples of successful memes that won relatively mainstream recognition between 2014–2016 are the “But That’s None of My Business” meme template featuring Kermit the frog seen in Figure 1 and the “Pepe the Frog” template seen in Figure 2.
Each was manipulated among vastly different groups: the alt-right on one side of the aisle and the liberal millennial and generation z Latina/o/e on the other. The ways that Pepe and Kermit were memetically deployed by 4chan, Reddit, and UndocuMedia illustrate the role that circulated images have had in negotiating “contested terrain in the struggle to define [one’s] place” within the social, political, and cultural landscapes of the 2000s (Habell-Palán and Romero 2002, 22).

**MEMES AND MAGA**

Pepe the Frog (Pepe) is an “anthropomorphic frog character from the comic series Boy’s Club” created in 2005 by Matt Furie (Zed 2016). Originally, Pepe was an “amphibious dude whose hobbies include[d] hanging out with his roommates, getting stoned, drinking pop, eating pizza, and watching TV” (Frank 2016). The quintessential unmotivated oddball, he spent much of his time “slinging outdated 90s clapbacks at his fellow dude-bros” (Frank 2016). By 2008, Pepe and his catch phrase “feels good man” had become popular mainstay fixtures on the Internet chat board 4chan. He was a “funny animal” who had “an expressive face with an air of mischief suited for many irreverent corners of the internet culture,” used by commenters to inject acerbic memetic reactions to discussions (Xiao Mina 2019, 101). By 2009, Pepe and his slogan had spread to other online forums like Reddit, and
five years later, in 2014, he made the leap to more mainstream social media sites like Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

The initial mundanity of Pepe cannot be overstated. His face, “whether laughing, crying, or grinning, [was] used to express emotions that words alone fail to capture,” and most often in juvenile scenarios (Xiao Mina 2019, 101). How then did this cartoon frog become a visual agent for the alt-right belief that “white identity is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization?” (Xiao Mina 2019, 100). In part, it is due to the quality of memes examined by Shifman (2015) and Milner (2016) that they can be uniquely (and quickly) “re-appropriate[d] and adapt[ed] for a new context,” depending on the motives of that context (and its corresponding community). Woods and Hahner agree: “It is precisely because Pepe can be drawn and redrawn endlessly that the image is a vehicle for a whole host of viewpoints” (2019, 85–86). Precisely because early Pepe was so malleable, the stage was set for his “far right makeover” among uber-conservative pro-Donald Trump groups just as he was becoming one of the most widely recognizable memes within online spheres.

One of the first instances of Pepe overtly aligning with then-presidential candidate Trump and his campaign rhetoric was in July of 2015 on 4chan. Figure 3 shows the version of Pepe known as “smug Pepe” with a Trump-esque hairstyle standing in front of a crude U.S.-Mexican border fence while holding a “Make America Great Again” blue button. The database Know Your Meme explains that the creator intended to depict “Donald Trump overlooking a fence at the U.S.-Mexican border holding back sad Mexicans” (Frank 2016).
Behind Trump-as-Pepe stands a man with his hands propped up against the fence and a woman holding a baby. The man is baring his teeth as though he were distraught, and his eyes are red as tears stream down his cheeks. They are both presumably immigrants of Hispanic descent seeking to cross the border but unable to do so. Beyond the division implied by the chain link fence and the smugness exuded by the Trump-as-Pepe character, the viewer notices the stereotypical dress of the man. The illustrator’s depiction of him with a large black bigote, wide brimmed sombrero, and pullover jorongo (also referred to as a serape or sarape) is one entirely informed by stereotypes fueled by scholar Leo Chavez’s theory, the Latino Threat Narrative (LTN).

Chavez makes the case that the LTN is widely perpetuated by a primarily white-nationalist perspective that reduces Latinas/os/es to tropicalized typecasts that permanently place them in a category of aggressively excluded and often criminalized “other” (Chavez 2013).  

Fig. 3. Donald/Pepé Border Fence. July 2015.

1 “Pan y circo, tacos and soccer, is what Latino culture is all about,” or “Latino history is like a crowded fiesta: masks, music, and endless ener-
icalized stereotypes appeal to the “lowest-common denominator ethnic clichés” (Rubenstein 1998, 238). This approach is evident in Figure 3 via the clothing, physical features, and stylizing of the memetic characters, as is the strategy of leaning on the criminal narratives propagated by white-nationalist spheres (that immigrants are law-breaking low-income border crossers breaking into the nation for reasons that are almost certainly nefarious). Such rhetorical strategies are effective in part because there is a long history of recycling nearly identical talking points and merely repacking them according to the popular media outlet of the day (print newspapers to radio to television to social media).

Such hindsight exposes how the U.S.-based Latina/o/e community has not just become a contemporary focus of a threat narrative construction or of pervasive tropicalization but has essentially been one in the U.S. since well-before World War I (Chavez 2013; Chomsky 2014). If societal advancements that span over one hundred years could reasonably include the advancement of collective intellect, why then does something like the LTN retain such effectiveness on such a staggeringly large scale? According to Chavez, an entire society is prey to a deliberate “discursive formation” that creates a passive idealistic legion (citizens and/or the “favored”) against entire social sects of the “undesired” (illegals) (2013, 25). Memes that feature Pepe are a part of these discursive formations because visual-text-belief associations are used to influence how and with whom an individual identifies (Miller et al. 2016). Essentially, memes have become meaningful “rhetorical images [because] they can capture public attention and interest more swiftly and endurably than verbal or written discourse (Woods and Hahner 2019, 92). Miller et
al. agree that “our relationship to visual images has reached a level of ubiquity that is historically unprecedented” and thus memes are an acceptable method to gauge what is regarded as “normative” (Miller et al. 2016, 156). Normative does not necessarily mean accurate or true; even when information is available that blatantly contradicts that which is a part of the threat narrative, it is not sufficient to change the tone of public reaction or stance or to diminish gullibility once the LTN reaches a critical mass within the collective public opinion.

Figure 4 demonstrates a merging of tropicalized stereotypes with Pepe that reinforced a version of the LTN commonly embraced by alt-right spheres during the 2016 election cycle.

“Over the Wall” hot sauce was specifically marketed to an online alt-right clientele by Jeremy Bernstein in 2017 (Cohen 2017). Bernstein’s version of Pepe uses much of the same token imagery as figure 3 with the addition of a taco in the right hand and a red chili in the left. He is leaning over what can be assumed to be another version of the U.S.-Mexican border wall proposed by Trump first in 2014 and again in 2015 (Anderson 2019). Little was left to the imagination in terms of who the intended consumer was for the product nor is the LTN component difficult to identify. As stated on the now
defunct website for the product: “Crafted with 100% culturally-appropriated ingredients, it’s guaranteed to produce Regressive Liberal and SJW [Social Justice Warrior] tears. It is Muy Picante [Very Spicy], my friends!” (Cohen 2017).²

There was a growing momentum in the use Trump-as-Pepe images as a type of memetic campaign poster that directly related to rhetoric surrounding the U.S.-Mexican border, construction of the proposed border wall, and overall immigration policy. In a move that would solidify Pepe the Frog as a moniker of Trump’s brand of politics for the alt-right community, Trump tweeted an image of him as Pepe the Frog standing at a presidential podium in front of an American flag in December of 2015 (Figure 5).

*Fig. 5. Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog. October. 2015.*

² The website for Over the Wall Hot Sauce has been placed behind a firewall. It is no longer accessible to the public.
Woods and Hahner explain the significance of this action. While “a cartoon frog might appear to the uninitiated as a rather curious association, the image was far from benign. Instead, the meme was a dog whistle to the Alt-right” (2019, 65). Trump-as-Pepe was “a wink to those 4chan and reddit members attempting to meme Trump into the presidency,” and so “[b]y circulating memes of his supporters, Trump demonstrated his investment in their values and ideals” (Woods and Hahner 2019, 67). It essentially “enmeshed his candidacy with a particular group of would-be conspirators” who frequented 4chan and Reddit and leveraged the anonymity afforded by these forums to create and share Pepe and Trump-centric memetic messaging (Woods and Hahner 2019, 65–66). Superimposing Pepe the Frog’s face with that of Trump became a strategic move that memetically granted permission for a set of alt-right beliefs to not just continue to circulate, but for users to exploit the phenomena of Internet algorithmic amplification to increase production and disseminate memetic messaging and images that reinforced Trump’s campaign (and their connection to it).

Trump-as-Pepe’s memetic presence at the border wall continued into 2016 (Hathaway 2016).

Fig. 6. Trump-as-Pepe Machine Gun Border. September 2016.
A September 2016 tweet from the alt-right account Memelord (@AltRightMemes) stated that if the user were to receive “1000 RTs” (re-tweets) he would “rent a highway billboard” to display the meme seen in figure 6 depicting two versions of Trump-as-Pepe wielding guns at the U.S.-Mexican border. While the merging of Trump’s likeness with that of Pepe the Frog is again obvious, there are two additional alt-right specific cues that now accompany him. The first is the inclusion of the frog emoji (️) in the user’s name, a pint-sized nod to Pepe the Frog. The placement of the American flag emoji (🇺🇸) immediately next to it could be interpreted as Pepe being of and/or for America; Pepe and his alt-right alignment is America/n. The second is the smirking, sunglasses-wearing, half-moon character in the upper left corner. According to Know Your Meme, “Moon Man” was co-opted by the alt-right online community around 2015 to accompany content that “speaks of racism and violence against minorities” (IDreamAboutCheese 2010). It is an example of an unsophisticated image that the uninitiated would ignore, not fully realizing the implications of its presence in either the virtual or non-virtual worlds. Given that much of the messaging does hint at or even overtly encourage violence, the cross-over aspect between virtual and real-world scenarios is significant: the previously labeled “quirky” juvenile meaningless blip now has the potential to call and rally individuals and/or groups with much more radicalized intent than merely posting on an innocuous online messaging board.

RE-IMAGINING PEPE

Woods and Hahner make the point that because of Pepe’s malleability, the “radical possibilities” of content creation “should facilitate innovation and disarticulation from the Alt-right” (2019, 85). If Pepe could be twisted to create such
anti-immigrant and problematically stereotypical content, could the political and social left reclaim him to propagate progressive messaging? Two posts found on UndocuMedia’s Facebook page appear to attempt this (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

![Pepe and DACA Renewal](image1)

**Fig. 7.** Left, Pepe and DACA Renewal. April 2015.

**Fig. 8.** Right, Pepe and DACA v. DREAM Act, August 2015.

Posted in April of 2015, Figure 7 shows what is known as “sad Pepe” contemplating the renewal process for the federal government program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a 2012 executive order that attempted to provide temporary relief while more permanent DREAM Act-esque reform could be tackled. Pepe’s dejection is caused by processing delays when attempting to renew one’s DACA status in the spring and summer of 2015, delays that were in part the result of program instability that followed campaign threats made by Trump to end it (which he eventually did in 2018).

In Figure 8, posted in August of 2015, with his face turned down and his hand resting on his forehead, Pepe appears to

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3 Before President Trump rescinded the program in 2018, DACA eligibility consisted of not possessing legal immigration status, being younger than 31 on June 15, 2012, having arrived in the U.S. before turning 16, and having resided in the U.S. since June 2007.
be incredulous at the confusion over the months leading to the election regarding the differences between DACA and the 2001 Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act). Originally proposed by the Senate in 2001 and reattempted in 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011, the DREAM Act never received the votes or bipartisan support needed to be ratified, prompting former President Obama to enact DACA as a temporary stopgap measure.⁴

Both instances of these Pepe appearances break from the alt-right depiction and represent the “disarticulation” of the image proposed by Woods and Hahner. Whether or not the UndocuMedia community felt as though Pepe could be salvaged from his deeply entrenched conservative plight is debatable. After August 2015, the re-imagined Pepe made no more appearances on UndocuMedia and was replaced by his amphibious memetic counterpart Kermit who continued efforts to respond memetically to alt-right rhetoric.

### A KERMIT-CENTRIC MEMETIC RESPONSE

The meme character “But That’s None of My Business” Kermit and his associated Instagram account @thatsnoneofmybusinesstho appeared in the summer of 2014 and quickly amassed a strong cohort of followers nearly reaching 140,000 followers within less than a week (QuesoFrogger 2015). These memes generally depict Kermit and a beverage with either his head bent down coyly drinking from a straw (Figure 9) or tilted slightly back while sipping a cup of Lipton brand tea (Figure 10).

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⁴ Consistently since 2012, there have been roughly 800,000–1,000,000 eligible individuals in the U.S., though a more exact number is impossible to know due to reporting challenges. The majority of DACA eligible individuals are between 15 to 36 years old and primarily hail from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.
The mainstream popularity of Figure 10’s tea-drinking version was solidified in 2016 when, while holding the NBA championship trophy, basketball player Lebron James wore a baseball hat with the image.

From August 2015 onward, Kermit became the go-to anthropomorphic meme character of choice for UndocuMedia. “That’s None of My Business” Kermit was a way to comment memetically on a “social faux pas” and to insert an acerbic “postscript to an insult or disrespectful remark said towards a specific individual or group” (QuesoFrogger 2015). In October of 2014, “That’s None of My Business” Kermit made one of his first appearances on the UndocuMedia Facebook wall tackling the same sentiment seen in Figure 11. The combination of the text at the top of the meme with the conclusion of “But that’s none of my business” implies that there are a substantial number of people who remain naive about such particulars, and that the confusion between two very different pieces of policy are detrimentally misleading about Latina/o/e immigration and Latina/o/e immigrants in the U.S. Thus, the underlying commentary is a sardonic critique of those who are not up to date with policy statuses and decisions underscoring immigration-centric dialogue and debate. It essentially flip-flops the standard order of how
one visualizes the stance from which one spouts rhetoric by putting the marginalized (yet experienced) undocumented individual on more sturdy ground directly opposed to the racially, economically, or politically dominant (though igno-
rant) individual.

Fig. 11. “None of My Business” DACA/DREAM Act. October 2014.

Variations of memes that feature Kermit include “sad Ker-
mit” gazing out of a rain-soaked window (Figure 12) and “evil Kermit” in which he faces his nemesis (a second Kermit dressed in a black face-covering cloak) who encourages vari-
ous indulgent, lazy, selfish, or unscrupulous acts (Figure 13) (Roy 2016).

Fig. 12. Left, “Sad Kermit” Meme Template.

Fig. 13. Right, “Evil Kermit” Meme Template.
Figure 14 illustrates a third variation in which Kermit is sitting on a couch as though he were a discussant on a panel. One hand rests on his leg while the other is held out as if to emphasize a point or to calm down naysayers. In this particular instance, Kermit responds to mounting campaign rhetoric that suggested that the U.S.-Mexican border region was a lawless zone of murderous banditry.

![Image](image1.png)

Fig. 14. “Stop, Just Stop” Kermit. August 2015.

Fig. 15. Trump Television Campaign Ad.

An example of the type of content that Kermit seeks to rebut is Trump’s use of “swarm” imagery with his campaign ads (Figure 15). The imagery in one television campaign advertisement was touted as being filmed at the southern U.S.-Mexico border. Indistinct bodies move with a sporadic urgency to cross the boundary. Predictable anti-immigrant and pro-militarized border wall political rhetoric is overlaid as the image plays with the intent to further entice the viewer towards believing that such irrepressible and uncontrollable incidents represent the “truth” of what was happening along the border. While the LTN intent is obvious, it was quickly exposed that the video imagery was from the Italian television network RepubblicaTV reporting on migrants attempting to cross into Melilla, a small Spanish-owned enclave on the Moroccan coast.
A year later in August of 2016, as the campaign barreled towards the November election, voting fraud, access to polls, and voting rights became a central talking point.

Figure 16 depicts Kermit using a memetic formatting strategy known as “top-line.” The uppermost text guides the reader towards the bottom with a combination of punctuation (…) and placing an image in between the two blocks of text. It creates a “visual ‘action verb’” that strategically “mov[es] the eye through the image” to take in the top script, pause on the image and conclude at the bottom text and final image where the memetic quip’s climax resides (Milner 2016, 68). Here, Kermit gazes out of a rain-soaked window as the top text gives the reader the impression that he is melancholy due to being excluded from the voting process. But then, as he re-
members that such a status does not prohibit him from still taking an active role by encouraging his peers to participate, the viewer is left with a Kermit who appears to be re-energized and proactive.

Interesting to note with this post is the emoji accompaniment see in Figure 17. Just as we saw with the alt-right inclusion of the frog emoji to subtly reference Pepe in figure 5, the cup and frog (🍵🪤) were identified on at least a dozen UndocuMedia Facebook posts between August – November 2016. Based on the memetic commentary that they were paired with, the emoji combination representing Kermit and his teacup provided a pint-size reinforcement towards a social or political occurrence or policy that impacted U.S.-based Latina/o/e undocumented individuals. If the “That’s None of My Business” Kermit meme was born out of the desire to function as the quippy postscript previously described, the incorporation of these two emojis essentially did the same but on an even more micro level.

In November of 2016, immediately following the election in which Trump emerged as victorious, UndocuMedia posted the meme seen in figure 18 featuring “evil Kermit.” As UndocuMedia was a left-leaning organization, the viewer can assume that the “Me” is Evil Kermit attempting to dissuade his companion from voicing discontentment at what was a divisive and polarized political moment. “Other me” is perhaps the second Kermit character who refuses to succumb to Evil Kermit’s suggestion that discord over politics has to be problematic. Alternatively, the meme could be read as regular Kermit being the villain in attempting to suggest that maintaining status quo and complacence is preferential to Evil Kermit’s rogue attitude that politics should be openly and frequently discussed despite potential for discord. In ei-
ther scenario, Kermit is aligning himself with sentiments that would eventually grow into such events as the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington, D.C., an event that attracted an estimated 3–4 million attendees in the U.S. (and upwards of 5 million worldwide) (“Women’s March”).

Two of the three accompanying hashtags – #organize and #mobilize – seen in Figure 19 represent the “hashtag activism” proposed by Pastel. They encouraged a “socially conscious viewership … a viewing practice that enhances awareness of topical issues and their impact on underrepresented minorities” (2019, 166). They are an “organizing tool for virtual communities; they solidify communities into visible ones and enable them to be found and easily joined” (Pastel 2019, 167–168). Because of the nature of Internet

Fig. 18. Top, Evil Kermit. November 2016.  
Fig. 19. Bottom, Hashtags. November 2016.
algorithms and the saturation with which social media dominates millennial and generation z information-sharing habits, groups like UndocuMedia could have confidence that their particularly liberal brand of memetic messaging that encouraged organization and mobilization reached a large audience in part because of hashtags that worked in collaboration with recognizable memetic characters like Kermit and pint-sized emoji reinforcements like the frog and tea combination.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In the pre-millennial age group, mediums such as bumper stickers, posters, and the like were the principal packaging strategy to combine cheeky phrasing with an eye-catching image in the hope of achieving cultural staying-power and mainstream recognition. Creators operated in a different space than the consumer; creative (and marketing) decisions and directions were theirs to make in order to trickle downward maintaining a relative distance between creator and consumer nearly the entire way. Post-millennium, with the ease of access and creative potential facilitated by social media networking and applications, cultural producers include the “everyman”/“everywoman” who are now able to guide, influence, and cater narrative output to ensure that their unique take is included.

Pepe and Kermit represent two starkly different examples of meme-based narrative output that had an offline impact guided principally by such demographics. They became what Xiao Mina refers to as a “signaling mechanism about one’s political beliefs and values” (2019, 107). While Pepe was perverted into an icon of solidarity with the alt-right, attempts were made to take control of his image and the nationalist and racist rhetoric with which he was often paired. When this
failed to gain momentum, influencers within progressive so-
cial media spheres like UndocuMedia began pushing memes
that featured a different anthropomorphic icon, Kermit. Each
time a Kermit-featuring meme was shared, liked, or com-
mented on it was virtually bolstering a community that used
his image to memetically rebut racist and nationalist rhetoric.
So much so, that the mere posting of the frog emoji paired
with the coffee cup was a micro-level nod of solidarity to re-
sist calls to “build the wall” and other similar talking points
of the 2016 presidential election. UndocuMedia’s relentless
usage of memes falls into the category of a type of message
promotion that is important, even when “their quantitative
impact is difficult to measure” due to the prolific nature of
the Internet-based creation and sharing (Xiao Mina 2019,
107). Due to their nearly instantaneous dissemination pow-
ered by social media, and the immortalization that accom-
panies modern-day Internet, memes have become a medium
through which deeply polarizing political and social issues
are negotiated. What is possible to measure is the number
of memes shared among news aggregate and opinion sites
like Reddit and 4chan and by social media influencers like
UndocuMedia, and even the number of times that an am-
phibious anthropomorphic character gains the attention of
a President. The real-world actions that result— referencing
Pepe or Kermit on a protest sign, voting while wearing a shirt
or hat with their image or catchphrase—take place at the in-
tersection of the offline power of memetic messaging and the
tit-for-tat position of memetic characters against each other.
WORKS CITED


Out of curiosity I asked my dad, a retired civil engineer of over 30 years, what the word “defiance” meant to him. His immediate reply was: “to rebel,” then another contemplative moment later he said, “to overcome.” Now, this is a fine enough response; but since all good poets remain ever hungry for that something more, I plugged the word “defy” into the omniscient, always-open mouth of the Internet god Google and fired away. I was immediately delivered 64 of the web’s best synonyms. According to Merriam Webster, “confront” was the #1 most closely related word. “Elude” followed shortly after, then “mock,” and near the end of the list – “withstand.” There it was: alpha and omega, manifesting in the mundane, answering my reflections by revealing themselves in the first and last of these most sacred search results. To defy means to confront and withstand.

Put simply, *Forms of Defiance* by Cynthia Sample is a catalogue of encounters. It is an unyielding investigation into the deepest depths of the human condition. The collection spans three distinct and unique sections, stratifying the experience for our understanding. Through the thoughts and emotions of each character, truths inherent to the pursuit of love, listening, and choice emerge. Slowly, or sometimes all at once, each entry faithfully and tenderly renders the good, the bad,
the unrequited, and the lost—keystone features of the first section, titled “Love, People All Around Are Looking.” Lula, the most oft-named character and the one readers come to know best, is introduced early on, but only in title. “On the Occasions that Lula Sought an Answer from Her Mother’s Bible Concordance” is a compilation of instances where the words “dance,” “lust,” “love,” “adultery,” “divorce,” “lie,” “forgive,” and “secret,” appear in scripture. The search for “love” is conducted twice, revealing contradictory outcomes—an indication that Lula has sought alternative discourse on at least two separate occasions. The words “adultery” and “divorce” leap off the page, as well as “secret,” especially when put in conversation with the adjacent entry entitled “Proof”—a sweeping sketch of a relationship on warp-speed. “You,” the unnamed character, are placed central to the rise and demise of an attraction turned relationship, turned marriage, turned affair; unwittingly complicit in a love disintegrating into nothing. “Proof” is where Sample asserts mastery over her characteristic gut-wrenching, “mic drop” ending. At the close, after a passionless coital entanglement, the nameless character “fist(s) the hem of the pillowcase. With proof” (19), delivering a devastating realization—universally characteristic of the precise moment in which the heart actually breaks—that love has officially and irreversibly atrophied. In “Special,” a young Lula transports readers out of her adolescence, through the death of her mother, and into adulthood. At the sight of a photo of herself in infancy, Lula discovers that she is both pretty and special, finally mending a long-held agony and confirming once and for all that she is loved. Equally memorable is “The Prayer Diary of Doreen Newton,” a humble and hilarious account of a widow’s candid requests of God, committed in writing. The entries range from the ordinary—“how do I fix my garage door for $100?” (37), to the
sublime—“Speaking of Harry, God – I hope You bless him wherever he is in heaven” (39).

Section II is a master class in subversion; here, the entries become a meditation in thwarting assumption. Entitled “Listen, People All Around Tell Themselves Their Own Story,” not only the characters, but the entries themselves subvert expectations of love, power, success, and ownership. Stories like “Eggs,” a play on the classic nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty,” where a husband’s superiority complex inadvertently condemns him to a disastrous and proverbial “fall,” or “Eyeglasses,” featuring a woman’s begrudging fight to preserve some small but deeply symbolic relic of her late mother’s existence—serve as cautionary tales. In “The Cream Always Rises to the Top or The Hubris of the Envious Onlooker,” readers receive a vision of God as a woman, seated in a realm detached but overlooking our own, tinkering and toying with the oblivious machinations of humanity’s most famous icons, as a scientist manipulating her own inventions.

The third and final section, dubbed “Choose, Making Hard Choices Isn’t Self-Help in a Book Store,” contends mainly with the outcome of the first two sections (love and listening) finally colliding. The characters within “Choose” are the most explicit of all, analogous to the flow of life (the days growing shorter as the nights grow longer and vice versa). The stories reach an apex of consciousness; most of the characters suffer acutely from either pain or ecstasy of enduring existence. “Champ” reduced me utterly to tears—a testament to Sample’s ability to render a character, in this case a very good boy, in stark and living detail. You feel you have experienced all of Champ’s life in the span of a few paragraphs, feel in your throat the lump that crops up on his jaw. When a willful character bearing the namesake of the author herself
emerges, the borders between writer and reader, audience and interpreter begin to blur in earnest. “Learning to Write: Divergence Gets Slippery” is unquestionably brilliant in its employment of the unsatisfying ending; that Sample deliberately leaves the experiment unfinished is a striking reminder that *defiance* is always the driving and irresistible force of impact.

Through a divine network of both named and unnamed characters, Sample creates a universe teeming with people deeply and inextricably enmeshed in their own humanity. What *Forms of Defiance* renders with impeccable clarity is no less than unmistakable proof that connection through suffering, grief, love, loss, or self-discovery is at the core of the human experience. Within this universe, Sample creates a world where the inhabitants are not only strong enough to *endure* the outcomes of their lives, but brave enough also to *face* them. *Forms of Defiance* is a first-rate, unerring read, belonging on any self-proclaimed human’s bookshelf.

**Reviewed by Karyn Stacey Panem**
In August 2022, Barnes and Noble created a policy to limit its stock of hardcover fiction, which social media warned would disproportionately affect writers of color. In the same month, *Daily Beast* interviewed laid-off HBO execs who said the channel was prioritizing content that catered to “middle America.” Their *Gordita Chronicles*, a show built around a Dominican family moving to Florida, is a clear example of a show that was diversifying Latinx representation that was not only canceled, but removed from the streaming site. With news like this, Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera’s *Latinx Teens – U.S. Popular Culture on the Page, Stage, and Screen* provides a critical examination of the diverse representation of Latinx teens that has erupted over different media.

Each chapter of *Latinx Teens* focuses on television, film, books, stage, and public influence. In so doing, they provide a foundational discussion on twenty-first century fictional and cultural significant Latinx teens across various aspects of popular culture. They position the significance of their book as “a more concerted effort to center Latinidad in U.S. mainstream culture” (5). They position their analysis of media representation in conversation with the demographic status of Latinx in the United States. Despite Latinos comprising
“roughly 17% of the U.S. population” (21), Latino characters comprise 5.8% of named characters (20). In other words, while representation has increased, popular culture’s evolution of Latinx storylines and characters are not yet comparable with the size of the U.S. Latinx population. Boffone and Herrera make this critical connection to foreground the significance of the analyses of print, visual, and other popular media representation of Latinx adolescents.

Their text stands out in comparison with earlier monographs from University of Arizona’s Latinx Pop Culture series because they center Afro-Latinx and LGBTQ teens as a critical starting point. By starting their first chapter with Glee’s Santana (played by Naya Rivera), Boffone and Herrera center the significance of Afro-Latinidad and queer representation across the dozen shows featuring and or starring Latinos since George Lopez and East Los High. In their discussion of television shows, they review content written by Latinos and starring Latinos in conversation with content featuring Latino recurring characters. While they acknowledge the distinction between Latinx content created by Latinx creators vs. context created by non-Latinx individuals, they hint at the critical distinction of both quality of support regarding Latinx character development. While their text introduces the distinction, scholars and educators will need to supplement their discussion with quantitative and qualitative reports for more in-depth engagement. Their approach, in this vein, will serve students and faculty in introductory level courses.

At a time when Latinx Studies and African-American Studies scholars and research centers contend with how and to what extent to integrate Afro-Latinx individuals’ roles in the cultural fabric of their/our communities, Boffone and Herrera’s centering reminds Latino/Latinx Studies scholars of the
necessity to remember Afro-Latinos. They speak to millennial and gen-Z’s trends of resisting to choose one group and, by extension, one political economic reality in the U.S. Their work excels in showcasing the multiplicity of Latinx lived experiences in the ways that Latinx fiction writers, playwrights and activists move beyond the historically limited themes of immigration, and heterosexual families. At a time when anti-LGBTQ policies limit how much current and future youth have access to content that reflects their lived experiences, *Latinx Teens* can be a powerful gateway for important conversations. The diversity of what they discuss can serve as a primer for educators of all levels seeking to find ways to integrate discussion of how creatives are seeking to document and share diverse Latinx storylines.

By citing the ways that playwrights and fiction writers are expanding on historically dominant themes of family and immigration, Boffone and Herrera bring important attention to the increasing diversity of the Latinx populations’ lived experiences. For example, in their discussion of Miranda and Hides’ *In the Heights*, they explain that “investors didn’t think the show could be a success unless it relied on stereotypes” like drug addiction or teen pregnancy (101). That Miranda defended his decision in the context of Stanford’s competitive nature speaks volumes of the power of both telling our own stories beyond the stereotypes productions like *West Side Story* banked on for their success.

Still, in light of the diversity of Latinx experiences, Latinx content creators and actors are reimagining the weight of stereotypes through the emotional depth and nuances of the current political moment. Boffone and Herrera excel in introducing the negotiations playwrights, actors, and writers have to make to tell the coming-of-age stories of the ever-evolving
Latinx teen in what is now the United States. Their text reminds the reader that the Latinx community story moves beyond the stereotypes of teen pregnancy and drug addiction; they also move past the immigrant struggle into the complex conditions under which Latinos navigate the social responsibility of success, reminding viewers and readers that “there is neither one way nor is there one rubric” to exist (41).

The crisis of Latinx content’s longevity and marketing in larger institutions, however, points to the need for further attention to publishers’, production companies invisible while rubrics when it comes to what and the extent to which they want to produce and promote Latinx centered content. In “browning” Hamilton in their discussion of Latinx adolescence on the stage, for example, Boffone and Herrera highlight the Trojan Horse the award-winning musical had been. As important as that analysis is, it raises the question why, after the success of In the Heights, Miranda felt compelled to tell the story of a white Caribbean immigrant. Boffone’s Hamilton syllabus provides a number of scholarly, journalistic works critiquing Miranda’s intervention, which could easily highlight the political economic barrier that often exists between an artist and the critical interventions he wants to make regarding representation. Undoubtedly, scholars will be looking to Miranda’s reach on screen and on stage as a nuanced rubric regarding the negotiations creators must make to sustain visibility and success while writing our stories.

Boffone and Herrera position each chapters’ foci within the historic trends on scholarship on the topic. Scholars and educators of the field can complement Boffone and Herrera’s coverage breadth through the additional readings they recommend and the expansive coverage outlines like Latinx Spaces and NYU’s Interventions provide. By so doing, they
situate their book within the fields of television, film, literary, and theater studies as well as Latinx and Gender Studies. Further, their list of recommended viewing and reading at the end of each chapter make the introductory text an easy tool in Latino, Gender, Media, Literature and Theater Studies courses. Whether teaching a course on representation on the page, stage, or screen, educators will find the content easy to integrate into high school or college level classrooms. These seasoned and prolific scholars excel in positioning themselves within the larger frameworks of the fields they tackle while writing in language accessible to high school upper-level students and introductory level college students.

Reviewed by Erika Abad

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Felicia Cosey is an assistant professor of English at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. Her fields of interest are film, popular culture, critical race studies, and queer theory. She is presently turning her dissertation *Father of All Destruction: Restoration of the White Father in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema* into a manuscript.

Erika Engstrom is director and professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Kentucky. Her research centers on portrayals of gender and religion in mass media. Her most recent book is *Gramsci and Media Literacy: Critically Thinking about TV and the Movies* (2021, Lexington Books).


Rabiu Iyanda teaches Literature in French in the Department of French, College of Humanities and Culture, Osun State University (Ikire Campus), Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria.
Nurudeen Adeshina Lawal teaches Literature in English in the Department of English and Literary Studies, College of Humanities and Culture, Osun State University (Ikire Campus), Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria.

Ashley McCann graduated summa cum laude from the University of Kentucky with a BA in Media Arts and Studies. Her research interests include gender in science fiction/fantasy and the importance of diverse representation in children’s media.

Kaitlin E. Thomas is an Assistant Professor Spanish at Norwich University. She is interested in intersections between social media and cultural iconography as well as exploring music and graphic narratives as sites for resistance.

Seth Vannatta is a Professor and the Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. He is the author of Conservatism and Pragmatism in Law, Politics, and Ethics (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and editor of Chuck Klosterman and Philosophy: The Real and the Cereal (Open Court, 2012).

BOOK REVIEWERS

Erika Abad is an Assistant Professor of Communications Data, Media, and Design at Nevada State College.

Karyn Stacey Panem is a poet born and raised on the Big Island of Hawai‘i. An avid slipper-wearer and long hair enthusiast, her work focuses primarily but circumstantially on the place where magic, plants, coffee, and consciousness converge – or, the precise location of the divine meeting and manifesting within the mundane. She currently lives, studies,
and teaches in Las Vegas with her pet ferret, Scooter, writing most of her poems in secret and taking long walks around the block instead of the beach.