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SPECIAL DOSSIER | STEM IN US POPULAR CULTURE: ASSESSING GENDER DISCOURSE, STEREOTYPES, AND MAINSTREAMING

MISCELLANEA |

BOOK REVIEWS |

SOLARPUNK CYBORGS AGAINST CYBERPUNK'S PESSIMISM: THE EVOLUTION OF THE FEMINIST CYBORG ARCHETYPE FROM MOXYLAND, TO "SOLAR CHILD" AND "FOR THE SNAKE OF POWER"

Alejandro Rivero-Vadillo[1]

ABSTRACT

This article explores the different ways in which some female-authored solarpunk stories employ cyborg models developed by feminist cyberpunk fiction. The text explores contemporary critical readings of cyberpunk fiction and analyzes Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* (2008), Camille Meyers's "Solar Child" (2017), and Brenda Cooper's "For the Snake of Power" (2018) focusing on the way in which embodied and disembodied female cyborg(esque) subjectivities are represented. The article argues that, although solarpunk has abandoned the idea of subversion in cyberspace developed in early cyberpunk, some of the techno-human alliances embodied by cyborgs that are inherent to this punk movement have remained. Either developing physical bio-cyborgs liberated from the biological limitations of materiality, as in Meyers' story, or representing STEM-experienced women who cooperate with AIs in order to fight against green capitalism's material structures of power, contemporary solarpunk hybrid subjectivities are greatly influenced by feminist cyberpunk's portrayals and symbolical uses of the cyborg.

Keywords: feminist cyberpunk, solarpunk, feminist cyborg, STEM female cyborgs.

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Climate change is forcing cyborgs to abandon cyberspace, and through that, a renovated feminist posthumanism is being materialized in contemporary evolutions of the cyberpunk genre. The models that described the female techno-humans of old, produced during the different waves of feminist cyberpunk, are finding their own space in contemporary solarpunk short stories, although with new concerns in mind. Solarpunk is a literary, performative, artistic and political movement that aims to inspire optimistic futures in which humans and sustainable industrial technology can coexist on Earth. Although

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solarpunk imaginaries are heterogeneously built, both in terms of visuals and ideas, the corpus of published solarpunk stories opens the door for comparative analysis of technology between the cyber and solar modes of worldbuilding. The liberatory role traditionally associated to the cyborg in feminist cyberpunk has offered a suggestive model that some female authors have replicated in their own solarpunk stories. This article explores how cyberpunk feminism has codified an idea of the cyborg, developing two different models engaging with embodied and disembodied portrayals of "the female cyborg," and comments on how both of them have influenced later solarpunk imaginations of "ecologized" techno-women. By analyzing contemporary literary theory on feminist cyberpunk and exploring Lauren Beukes's post-cyberpunk novel *Moxyland* (2008), Camille Meyers's "Solar Child" (2017), and Brenda Cooper's "For the Snake of Power" (2018), this article illustrates how cyborg models have mutated from their original techno-optimism to post-cyberpunk techno-defeatism and back to techno-optimism in recent solarpunk, thus changing the very notions of what it is to be a cyborg.

1. The Cyberpunk Techno-Woman

Before delving into the complexities of solar and (post)cyberpunk cyborgs, it is necessary to briefly comment on how the cyberpunk feminist cyborg came into being. Cyberpunk's portrayal of feminine bodies within its feminist and non-male-authored branch is far from monolithic and has substantially evolved since the early 1980s. Scholar Lisa Yaszek (2020) defines three main historical subdivisions of the feminist cyberpunk movement. The first one (from 1980 to 1990) is characterized by narrative subversions of the more masculinist sense of cyberpunk popular at the time (34). Mainstream representations of cyborg bodies during this decade were patterned and reinforced by stereotypical gender dynamics and so, "male cyborgs [such as Robocop or Terminator] became invincible while female cyborgs were sexually exploited [such as Molly in Gibson's *Neuromancer*]" (Lavigne 83). This view of technology overemphasizing patriarchal gender relations may also be observed in the very same cyberspace created by many male authors. As Yaszek claims, commenting Nicola Nixon's "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" (1992), "cyberpunk was an antifeminist mode of storytelling that gutted the future of meaningful female actors and cast both cyberspace and corporations as feminized spaces to be penetrated and tamed by male hackers more interested in profit than revolution" (Yaszek 2020, 34). These female cyborgs, mostly virtual AIs, merged with a technologized territory to be conquered by masculine characters. In contrast to this trend, feminist authors from that time. For instance, Pat Cadigan,

> casts women as resourceful heroines who oppose the exploitative practices of an inherently masculinist capitalism. . . . Rather than following the adventures of a lone man whose efforts to ensure justice are compromised when he is seduced by a femme fatale who enmeshes him in corrupt and uncontrollable social, political and legal institutions, Cadigan's protagonists

> are usually women whose efforts to do good in the world are compromised by men who make bad choices that enmesh them in corrupt and uncontrollable social, political and legal systems. (Yaszek 34)

Cadigan's cyborgs embodied a gender-liberatory view of empowerment represented by technologically enhanced women. They were feminized versions of the Robocop/Terminator cyborg archetype, making them not only protagonists (which were rare in early cyberpunk fiction [Cadora 1995, 358]), but also agentic beings that provided a critique of real-world patriarchal domination, despite still adhering to highly gender-normative behaviors.

For Yaszek, the second wave of feminist cyberpunk (from 1990 to 2005) represented an abrupt change in the representational politics of cyberpunk women (35). This is traditionally linked with the rise of much of the cyber-feminist theory in the 1990s that enriched both debates and narrative creations. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and the works of other cyber-feminist theorists such as Sadie Plant (1995), Rosi Braidotti (1997) and Katherine Hayles (1999) inspired different reflections on the role of cybernetics with regards to feminist thought, embracing ideas that dislocated previous understandings of women as subjectivities essentially associated with a non-anthropogenic nature. In this view, the link between machinic and female bodies is observed as one communicating two subalternized subjects that liberate or even enhance patriarchal humanism. As Sadie Plant (1995) puts it:

> The machines and the women mimic [men's] humanity, but they never simply become it. They may aspire to be the same as man, but in every effort they become more complex than he has ever been. Cybernetic feminism does not, like many of its predecessors [. . .] seek out for woman a subjectivity, an identity or even a sexuality of her own: there is no subject position and no identity on the other side of the screens. And female sexuality is always in excess of anything that could be called 'her own'. Woman cannot exist 'like man'; neither can the machine. As soon her mimicry earns her equality, she is already something, and somewhere, other than him. A computer which passes the Turing test is always more than a human intelligence; simulation always takes the mimic over the brink. (63)

The cyber-feminist critique is, nonetheless, not homogenous, and the perspectives through which the alliance between female and machinic subjectivities have been explored were already complex in the 1990s. However, all of them embraced a common ethos of liberation from patriarchal control utilizing machinic integration within their bodies.

The 1990s produced a high number of feminist works in which the "Cadiganesque" trend of portraying "reversed-male-cyberpunk-heroines" shifted to a different paradigm, one dominated by women characters in STEM professions. Thus, readers may find women as experts in nanotechnology, data analyst, hackers or even internet magicians in some fantasy/sci-fi worldbuildings (Yaszek 2020, 35). Early feminist debates on cyberpunk cyborgs have historically been divided between two theoretical views, one aiming

to feminize the techno-body (and the technologized space) or exploiting its patriarchal feminization for feminist purposes, and another one based on Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" ideas on science, technology and gender, aiming to "androgenize" both bodies and space (Lavigne 2013, 84). The two of them challenge the original masculinist idealizations of cyberpunk worlds. Machinic interfaces mediate questions regarding feminist discourses by presenting technology as a transgressive and definitive tool against patriarchal logics, either through depictions of women in STEM jobs or through representations of technologically enhanced human bodies, such as the protagonists of Marge Piercy's *She, He and It* (1991) and Kathleen Ann Goonan's *Queen City Jazz* (1994), and the proxies in Laura Mixon's *Proxies* (1998). Representations in the 1990s introduced a new sense of cyborg that is not necessarily characterized by its ontological combination of technology and flesh and interacts with the machine in a reactive and disembodied way. These STEM feminist cyborgs employ machines as an externalized body and push women's progressive incorporation into the technoscientific job market.

The feminist cyborg can therefore be understood in two different ways that will later influence solarpunk representations of female cybernetic subjectivities. On the one hand, there is the figure of the the classical "literal" techno-body composed by a mixture of heavy machinery and human flesh. Her symbolic power can be found in the physical communion between organic and inorganic matter that they embody. On the other hand, we may find a "post-cyborg" representation of women in which the union with a machinic apparatus is less self-evident, as it lies in the collaboration between a STEM technician and the machine they operate. Both observe integration with (embodied or disembodied) inorganic organisms as a vital "first step" towards any kind of feminist enunciation. Whereas the former produce a sense of cyborg identity that only operates in allegorical terms, the less self-evident cyborgs reflect a more realist approach toward cyber-feminist politics and ontologies. These "post-cyborg" women present a clearer view of how gender emancipation through technology can be performed in out-of-fiction spaces. Although technically fully organic, their use and knowledge of cybernetic tools (and of how to hack or manipulate them) makes them as connected to the machine as the literal cyborgs.

It must be noted, however, that the feminist undertones of cyberpunk fiction evolved from dealing with concerns related to cisgender female bodies and patriarchal oppression to an increasing interest in queer themes. As Carlen Lavigne (2013) comments, in the 1990s "queer concerns were gaining cultural traction, and their inclusion within feminist cyberpunk's speculative futures is therefore, on one level, easily accounted for. On another level, the challenge of rewriting cyberpunk's hetero paradigms has obviously appealed more to feminist authors" (145). The feminist cyborg body is, therefore, also a queer one, since the deconstruction of the biological body through technology opens the gate to an eventual deconstruction of sexual and gender identity paradigms. On one side,

the virtual space that configures the immaterial cyborg "becomes a zone of possibility in which a multitude of genders *and sexualities* may be explored" (147); on another, the androgyny that characterizes the material cyborg, as explained by Teresa de Lauretis, "is not only beyond gender or ungendered, but also efficient, clean, indestructible and sexless" (qted. in Lavigne 2013, 152). These ideas were expressed in much of 1990s women-authored cyberpunk narratives , "provid[ing] a place where lesbian viewpoints may be safely explored, and queer issues may be advanced within a feminist paradigm (160).[2]

The alliance between cybernetics and (queer) feminism presented in both theory and literature might be, nonetheless, problematic from an environmentalist perspective. Although it can be argued that cyberfeminism managed to cut loose from the ecological binaries that traditionally entangled feminist identities, this cyber-queer entente only operates in the isolated discourse of gender (and by extention, of sexuality and queerness). Beyond that framework, cyberfeminism is problematized by the industrialist dynamics that generate the existence of the machine, ones that also pollute an Earth that seems to be doomed to collapse once humanity depletes all resources. In early works of cyberpunk (both feminist and masculinist) "environmental devastation is common, but environmentalism is not" (Lavigne 2013, 98), and whenever ecological collapse is critically dealt with, it is predominantly portrayed in the form of a dystopian landscape that can be interpreted as a either a warning message or a defeatist statement, as in the cases of Mixon's *Proxies*, or Edith Forbes' *Exit To Reality* (1998) (Lavigne 2013, 112). The cyberfeminist discourse embedded in these narratives becomes seemingly incompatible with a protection of the environment since, for a feminist liberation to be catalyzed, a ferreous techno-industrial and capitalist infrastructure must support human's desire to escape their biological body, sexualities and gender concerns.

This ambiguous relationship between gender and/or queer liberation and climatic defeatism has been reproduced in many contemporary cyberpunk narratives. It has embraced a generally pessimistic attitude towards technology that disconnects from the techno-naivete of cyborg subversions in many cases. In novels addressing environmental dynamics and cyborgian natures—such as Lauren Beukes' *Moxyland* (2008), a novel that may very well belong to what Yaszek (2020) defines as the third wave (from 2005 onwards)—the protagonists manage to problematize and sometimes even subvert techno-patriarchal power. However, both authors equally situate techno-industrial societies as clearly dystopian with regards to the sustainability of a hyper-cybernetized future.[3]

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[2] For the sake of concision, an exploration of queer themes in early cyberpunk fictions has been omitted, but a clear structured analysis can be found in Lavigne's quoted chapter.

[3] I use Beukes' text for the purpose of this analysis but there are many more works of post-cyberpunk fiction with similar themes in a similarly pessimistic manner: i.e., Rosa Montero's Bruna Husky's Trilogy —

In *Moxyland*, readers find two examples of critical representations of gender/queer cyborgs who fall prey to techno-capitalist dynamics in an attempt to subvert them. The clearest example is Kendra, a young girl who enhances her body through nano techonology in order not to suffer any injuries and to better heal from disease. In exchange, she is forced to become "a living bill-board" of the company that carried on her cyborgization (Duncan 2020, 89), and also their property legally speaking (Beukes 2008, 303). This allows the company to eventually euthanize her when it finds out that she has participated in a protest against Cape Town's authoritative use of digital technologies. In this sense, Kendra is an example of the classical cyborg, the one with a machinic body whose concerns, in the novel's case, derive from the (lack of) bodily autonomy that their machinic parts allow her to have. On a different "cyborg" side is Tendeka, a gay cisgender young boy, who keeps entering a metaverse-like space to freely perform his sexuality whilst also calling to action against the political problems of a Cape Town that has seen the rise of a ecocidal neo-apartheid regime[4]. Tendeka is an example of the "post-cyborg" above defined. He is technically organic, but his knowledge and use of cyberspace as both an extension of his identity and a tool for political dissent reflect a cyborg connection as equally symbolic as Kendra's.

Tendeka, however, ends up rejecting his cybernetic idealism and so, his post-cyborg identity—even willingly sacrificing his online relationship with Ashraf, his partner—"essentially nullifying the potential for expressions of queer love" (Andrews 2020, 136), when seeing himself in need to confront the techno-colonial police regime of the physical world. His fate in the novel, nonetheless, still sees some subversion through technology, since, in the end, he films his death—after been intoxicated by a lethal virus dispersed by the police during the same anti-tech riot in which Kendra participates—aiming to upload it to the Internet in an attempt to use cyberspace as a counter-discursive tool that could inspire social change. He wants to transcend and become a mere specter of Cape Town's digital space in order to instigate its citizens to rebel against their technocratic government. Tendeka uses his post-cyborg identity to destroy the very same processes that produce it. The results of that action, however, are unknown as the novel finishes with Toby, the character who filmed it, exiting a room with the Tendeka's tapes, and thus, Beukes does not tell us whether this action actually served any purpose. This ambivalent approach toward the subversive opportunities offer by hypertechnologization is

Lagrimas en la lluvia (2011), *El peso del corazón* (2015) and *Los tiempos del odio* (2020)—(see Leone 2017), or Nicky Draiden's *The Prey of Gods* (2017) (see Andrews 2020).

[4] Beukes depicts a place out of the city, the Rural, an area with "a decimated biosphere without infrastructure or employment that lies beyond the virtual networks of the corporate urban enclave" (Duncan, 87) and that reflects the environmental and colonial violence exercised by capitalist structures outside the more "privileged" sphere of consumers.

representative of a debate that cyberpunk narratives (feminist or not) tend to tackle but never fully solve. High technology is a tool to both control human biopolitics and subvert that very same power that is enforced through technology, but whilst the former is a secure asset, the real possibilities of the later are still subject of debate.

Moxyland is a good precursor of the eco-technological dynamics that will condition solarpunk's attitude toward the feminist representation of the cyborg. Although highly pessimist, since the corporate state seems to be in almost full control of life in Cape Town, the novel makes it clear that the cause of the ecocide is not human but capitalist, anticipating contemporary conversations on the notions of Anthropocene and Capitalocene. According to Duncan,

> Technology's pervasive reach in the narrative is, after all, bound up with post-apartheid financialisation and the concomitant production of surplus humanity in the construction of Cheap Labour on a planetary scale. While the narrative is concerned with the "manipulation of nature," its agent is capital and its socio-ecological binary, not humanity generally. (2020, 89)

As a result, industrial technology is not a concept immediately related to natural destruction, but one that has been employed by the corporate state for that purpose, leading to the conclusion that it can be used to subvert capitalism's own power—advancing ideas later developed by Laboria Cuboniks in the *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2015)—and create a political alternative in line with liberal and Marxist discourses on equality, multiculturalism and sexual freedom.

Still, cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk, when imagining environmentally critical (and even sustainable) societies, only position them through the open rejection of industrialism. In other words, many cyberpunk fictions recognize that, in terms of earth-human relationships, sustainability and social justice can only be achieved by obliterating the very cybernetical infrastructures constructing the represented society. Virtuality, in this sense, operates "as a form of escapism for characters who wish to literally repress their ecologically damaged and traumatizing background by exchanging toxic materiality with sanitized virtuality" (Herzog 2021, 95). The feminist cyborg (sometimes also a gynoid or android) is then conceptualized as a subject who can only find gender or sexual liberation and self-determination either through the consumerist fantasy of the virtual world, or through the technological enhancements, both produced by a hyperextractive, ecocidal and genocidal system. *Moxyland*'s view of a cyberpunk society does not simply reflect on the idea that the corporate system co-opts feminist cyborgs, forcing to accept the immoral conditions of an unjust technocratic government, but also implies that gender and queer subversions are limited in time and space, since the system will eventually fall in the hands of a highly disrupted planet. In line with the ideas of degrowth economists such as Giorgios Kallis (2018), capitalism is a system based on an eternal-growth drive which cannot comply with the limited resources of our planet (or any other material

space), and thus, the cyberpunk space (as a hypercapitalist territory), although miraculously alive thanks to the magic of fiction, is doomed to collapse.

2. From Cyborg Defeatism to Cyborg Optimism

From the perspective of the environmental humanities, solarpunk literature can be observed as an optimistic reaction to post-cyberpunk dystopic landscapes, as it is a subgenre primarily focused on the depiction of technologically sustainable spaces. Although solarpunk has no homogenous sense of aesthetics (sometimes authors depict post-cyberpunk societies, sometimes post-apocalyptic ones and sometimes even locations based on steampunk visuals), the genre almost always portrays futures in which the ecological issues of post-cyberpunk have been somehow solved. There are dozens of solarpunk stories conveying this idea. For example, non-binary author T.X Watson's "The Boston Hearth Project," from the collection *Sunvault* (2017), situates the narrative in a cyberfuturistic, climate-change-affected Boston in which a couple of cyborg underdogs infiltrate a self-sustainable state-of-the-art residential building for a corporate elite and liberate it for the working class living around it, forcing the US government to hand these high-tech building to activists fearing "another hostile takeover" (24). Although a great quantity of solarpunk stories present greenified cyberpunk aesthetics, some others show a more post-collapse state of technology, which, nonetheless, maintains the idea of human adaptation to planetary dynamics through industrial technology. In M. Lopes da Silva's "Cable Town Delivery," from the collection *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers* (2018), the city through which the characters move is described as

> a city built on the cavernous carcasses of several other cities. Odd structures were improvised along the planes and sides of collapsed skyscrapers, tenaciously clinging to the concrete skin like brilliant particolored mold. . . . Above all the buildings the endless rows of cable cars spanned, creating what Lyka called a "town of treehouses." (225)

Solarpunk narratives tend to represent technological spaces constructed either over cyberpunk cities or their ruins, but almost always with a positive emphasis on the possibilities of sustainable technologies.

This construction of the territory is also represented in solarpunk female (but also feminist) cyborgs. Solarpunk fiction does not only convey the most representative qualities of their cyberpunk foremothers, but also incorporates contemporary reflections on posthumanism and ecological theory to its ontologies. In this sense, the evolution of Harawayan current of thought seems to run parallel with cyberpunk's transformation into solarpunk. If the guide to read cyborgs in cyberpunk narratives has always been *The Cyborg Manifesto*, solarpunk identities can clearly be addressed through the eyes of Haraway's (2016) post-compost identities (97) as exposed in *Staying with the Trouble*. In this

now seminal text of posthumanism,[5] she defines a new sense of subjectivity that might theoretically help restoring planetary biotic self-regulation: that of the holobiont (or symchtonic/sympoietic being). This notion implies constructing a "robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition" (101) of the necessary interspecies relationships that allow survivance in the natural world, which also include the human world. Haraway expands the 1990s cyberfeminist notion of the cyborg that entangled the female body with the machine as a subversive feminist ontology. In different ways, solarpunk takes the idea of ecologically connecting with the non-human bioticly (through connection with nonhuman life) or abioticly (through high or low non-organic tech), presenting a new sense of cyborg that fits Haraway's conveniently proposed slogan of "Cyborgs for Earthly Survival!" (102). Haraway's posthuman "cyborg" is, therefore, different from the ones inspired by cyberpunk feminism. Its sense of connection with technology is not dependent on an industrial infrastructure (green or not), it does not create a natural alliance between gender subversion and technology and it expands human/non-human collaboration outside the field of cybernetics. Nonetheless, these subjectivities (composites of different organic and/or inorganic holobionts) are still so in relational ways as they collaborate with other intelligences, mix with them and, through their interactions, aim to liberate from the technoscientific capitalism that enforces power over them.

This new model of feminist (bio)cyborgs is constructed over the material cyborg developed in cyberpunk narratives, abandoning transhuman reflections on cyberspace that characterized much of cyberpunk through its history. Although in some stories (i.e., the above-mentioned story by T.X. Watson) there are some technical virtualizations or basic uses of the Internet, the solarpunk virtual world is almost inexistent, and the alliances between humans, non-humans and technology always operate on the physical world. This is seemingly a logical approach, as solarpunk narratives tend to be critical with the use of excessive-energy-consuming infrastructures and cyberspaces require great amounts of energy to be operative. Its abandonment is also derived from a focus based on imagining green infrastructures specifically designed to help with material concerns. Commenting on possible solarpunk infrastructures, solarpunk author and theorist Andrew Danna Hudson (2015) states that

> I like the idea of focusing on large-scale infrastructure projects that will provide value for communities into the long term. A seed bank; a hyper-dense vertical permaculture farm engineered for carbon fixing; a massive, low-maintenance desalination system; a space elevator. These projects could themselves be the organizing principle around which unique solarpunk communities are organized. (n.p.)

[5] Even though Haraway rejects any identification with this category (2016, 101)

Solarpunk narratives assume the inefficiency of cyber-territorial subversions that had previously been advanced by post-cyberpunk novels such as *Moxyland* and prefer to focus on those which affect humans collectively. The virtual world, as seen in post-cyberpunk literature, often provides a sense of individualistic dissent against the system (regarding gender or queer identity, for instance), but is incapable of enabling full communities precisely because of its consumerist-oriented ethos.[6]

2.1 Solarpunk Embodied Cyborgs

Since there's no virtual simulation in solarpunk narratives, posthuman cyborg models are mostly presented in a material way. Their physicality, nonetheless, has not been homogenously represented through history. In general, the "literal cyborg"—the one envisioned as a subject integrating non-human technological components in their own body—has been scarcely represented either by male, female or non-binary authors. Since solarpunk's concerns are predominantly locational, subjectivities have tended to remain corporally human, showing machine-nonhuman integrations through human-environment relations following the post-cyborg STEM-like model of second-wave feminist cyberpunk. There are nonetheless a few exceptions to this trend.

In "Solar Child" (2017), Camille Meyers sets her narrative in a late-Anthropocene scenario in which humanity has managed to develop different biotechnologies that allow our species to industrially thrive and survive an anthropogenic climate change (188). Essentially, sectors with a high energy demand, like transportation or food production, are now covered by solar energy production (185, 188). This future is, however, far from idyllic, as the human species itself is still biologically vulnerable to the dry, hot and sunny climate of this future Earth. The first few lines of the story show Jamie, a biotechnologist, arriving at a research station carrying out genetic experiments on humans in order to make them more biologically attuned with the planet's transformed climate. Jamie is introduced to Ella, "the first photosapiens," a plant-girl symbiont grown in a vat and capable of photosynthesis. Fernanda, the chief director of the office, describes her in the following way:

> The project was modelled after the relationship between corals and sea anemones with photosynthetic zooxanthellae. The host animal, photosapiens or solarsaur, for example, provide shelter, transportation and protection, for their photosynthesizing partner. In return, the little green cells gift a bit of glucose, food essentially, straight into the bloodstream of their host.

[6] There is an interesting meta-irony concerning solarpunk and cyberspace, since not only the genre and political movement emerged on the Internet, but also promote ideas of open source/open access knowledge (see Gregory Scheckler's "Grow, Give, Repeat" (2018) in which the young protagonist makes her sustainable-food infrastructure designs publicly available online). The movement itself has also been defined as "open source" (Hudson, 2015), denoting its strong structural connections with our contemporary cyberspace.

> Ella still needs to eat, but not as much as normal humans. Of course, she also needs to spend plenty of time in sunshine. (189)

Ella may be categorized as a sympoietic being, since her body is in itself different biologies (vegetal and human holobiontic natures) coexisting and developing mutual need relationships that allow her to better resist current atmospheric conditions. Contrasting with cyberpunk techno-industrial embodied cyborgs, Ella has no heavy machinery incorporated in her body. This machinic part has been substituted by plant cells that required an industrial infrastructure to be made (she is, after all, conceived in a vat). She is constructed imitating the hybrid nature of the cyberpunk literal cyborg, as she represents a symbolic alliance with a non-human otherness that brings hope for a better future of "human" life on Earth.

Ella, and her brothers and sisters in development, are kept secret from the public for fear of a terrorist group of revolutionaries called "The Revelationers" killing them. As the demonstrators of *Moxyland*, they see technological development as the cause of the socio-environmental crisis and have bombed other stations in the past. The technophobic argument of cyberpunk's approach to techno-scientific progress embodied by the Revelationers is contested by Jamie, who appeals to an alleged need to learn to live with our own biological nature: "The human race does not need revolution. We have tried that so many times, and here we are. No, what we need is a new way of living with ourselves, a way to adapt to the world we have created. We need to evolve. And evolution takes love" (191). Jamie's defense of evolution over revolution (problematically binarized) calls for a sense of technological thought escaping the political dynamics that condition the approach to scientific research in the narrative. Thus, high technology is observed in very optimistic terms, since it seems to be the only tool capable of ensuring (post)humanity's survival during the Anthropocene (in contrast to a "return to nature" perspective).

Although "Solar Child's" primary concern when depicting its bio-cyborgs[7] is the universalist issue of species survivability, Ella's subjectivity as a vat posthuman child also opens the door for feminist readings. In this context, xenofeminist ideas on antinaturalism and the role of technology when dealing with reproduction are worth mentioning. Xenofeminism's much echoed slogan, "if nature is unjust, change nature" (Laboria Cuboniks 2015), bears a special relationship in debates over liberating women's allegedly biological burden over gestation. In the book *Xenofeminism* (2015), Helen Hester (member of Laboria Cuboniks) criticizes traditional ecofeminists mantras attacking

[7] Since solar children are technically not cyborgs (they are not half machine and half human creatures), I believe the term "bio-cyborg" describes them more accurately. Vegetal integration with the human body takes the role that machines bear in much of cyberpunk, showing an evolution of the bases that conform the cyborg paradigm that transforms steel and gears into plant cells.

> technologically assisted reproduction, in which bioengineers are viewed as constructing the child as if it were a machine, made from isolated component parts. In this version of the reproductive process, human beings are in possession of a far greater degree of direct agency and control; ergo, the process loses its magic and is no longer experienced as "creative, productive and spontaneous." (16)

In contrast, xenofeminist anti-naturalist proposals embrace the idea of employing scientific progress under a gender liberatory perspective, and thus "rather than cede this territory to conservative or corporate interests—which have been angling for the enclosure of biomedically manipulable bodies for several decades—we must reframe the evident (if partial) changeability of nature as a space for emancipatory politics" (19). From a feminist perspective, a purely technological reproduction of human subjects that leaves gestation in the hands of a machine prevents much of the unwelcome suffering that impregnatable individuals might experience during and after a pregnancy.

This techno-feminist alliance is specifically addressed in Meyers' story when the character of Fernanda asks Jamie to adopt one of "the solar children" they have created. The main reason why she wants to take one of them is adoption already reflects her traumatic experiences. As she comments, "in my early thirties, my husband and I tried to start a family. Even with all the medical expertise money could buy, I suffered three miscarriages. One so far along I counted fingers and toes as the bloody fetus grew cold in my cupped palms . . . Finally I carried a baby to term. My son lived two months before his lungs collapsed" (191). Solar children like Ella present a solution that alienates and alleviates physical but also psychological damages that the gestating subject might endure. This not only makes Ella and the other solar children bio-cyborgs who ensure a future for a (post)human world, but also positions their non-humanly-originated existence in feminist terms. Photosapiens' technologically mediated biology becomes ontologically xenofeminist and thus, recovers early cyberpunk's idealization of machines (which are now shaped as micro-plant holobionts) as a potential ally in the fight for a bodily appropriation of the female (or, in this specific case, impregnatable) body.[8]

"Solar Child" is a *rara avis* with regards to the most common depictions of posthuman cyborgs in solarpunk short stories. There are other representations of them, although less developed and openly engaging with feminist proposals. For example, female authors like Natsumi Tanaka in "A life with Cibi" (2021) or Meyari McFarland in "Old Man's Sea" (2021), portray animalistic—yet very human in behavior and language—bio-cyborgs blurring the boundaries between human and non-human animal communication. Other stories, like the already-mentioned "Boston Hearth Project," present minor characters in line with the Cadiganesque's idea of cyborg heroine characteristic of early

[8] Complementary to this idea, there is the fact that biology is a STEM field highly associated with women. This reinforces the feminist undertones developed in the story, as it suggests that biology is the techno-scientific field through which feminist liberation may be eventually achieved.

cyberpunk. Juniper, the female cyborg represented in the story, is only shown as an action figure, yet almost no context of her identity (or even a voice) is given to her. Meyers' representation of the bio-cyborg is, in this sense, highly valuable, as it presents a symbolic link between the material, more self-evident depiction of the cyborg that characterized cyberpunk narratives and the posthumanist ethos of solarpunk themes.

2.2 Solarpunk Dissembodied Cyborgs

Solarpunk authors have prioritized STEM-like representations of the cyborgs introduced during the second feminist wave of cyberpunk. Not only many stories present non-cishetero masculine bodies as college educated characters (see i.e., Fernanda in "Solar Child"), but also in many cases the narrative forces the character to employ their scientific knowledge to operate different machines with proficiency in order to solve a particular problem posed by the author, making some sort of posthuman communion. Examples of this model can be found in many collections, but there is one that makes a specific emphasis in visualizing these subjectivities: *The Weight of Light* (Eschrich and Miller 2019)[9]. Although not marketed as a solarpunk collection, the compendium features stories by important figures of the literary movement, such as Andrew Danna Hudson, who has participated in previous collections, or Brenda Cooper, author of the solarpunk novel series *Project Earth* (composed of *Wilders* [2017] and *Keepers* [2018]) and it directly engages with some of solarpunk political ethos of techno-optimism, development of solar-powered imaginaries and liberal politics.

This collection differs from previous ones in that its texts aim to portray both scientifically accurate energetic solutions to overcome our contemporary petro-chemical dependence, and the dilemmas that will feature these potentially immediate solar futures. The stories narrate answers to questions such as:

> Where and how will solar energy systems be deployed, e.g., on buildings or in the desert? What impacts will they have on those spaces and how they are used? Will solar energy disrupt or reinforce existing energy technologies and markets? Will the resulting power plants be ugly or beautiful? Who will own them? Who will regulate them? What kinds of jobs will they create, and for whom? How will solar systems be integrated into broader systems of power, transportation, manufacturing, and computing, not to mention food and water systems? How will they shape global patterns of security, power, and wealth? (Eschrich and Miller 2019, 18)

The material viability of the ideas presented in the four stories is explained after every narrative, with texts in which different scientists and scholars analyze the stories and explain the potential interest (and problems) that developing a specific solar infrastructure might entail for different communities, particularly those that might be most negatively affected during the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energies.

[9] A similar project coming from the same editors was published in 2021: *Cities of Light*.

Whereas the collection is focused on energy debates, the stories also feature narratives with much interest from a (purely) feminist perspective, as they tend to present female protagonists (and characters in general) expressing their concerns with issues such as working conditions or motherhood in this possible solarpunk future. "For the Snake of Power," by Brenda Cooper, is relevant to the analysis of solarpunk post-cyborg identities, as it features a renovated approach to this figure. The story follows Rosa, a worker of the local energy company providing solar power to the city of Phoenix. She discovers the energy production meant to power working-class districts is being sold to some of the northern cities, enriching the state's treasury at the expense of lowering the living conditions of Phoenix's citizens, who are increasingly dying due to the hot weather. Rosa, with the aid of a (feminized) AI, HANNA, and her former mentor, Callie, exposes these treaties and organizes a protest against Arizona's governor that culminates with the state government canceling the energy sellout when realizing that the electric lines to Chicago have been sabotaged.

Rosa's relationship with HANNA illustrates an interesting revision of the post-cyborg archetype of 1990s cyberpunk. Rosa is a maintenance technician with university training (47), who, along with HANNA, is in charge of repairing and arranging the necessary logistic operations of the "solar snake" infrastructure. HANNA, in principle, operates as a machinic helper who compensates the psychical limitations of a human body with regards, for instance, to the obtention of immediate data when repairing a solar panel (43–44). She is, nonetheless, not just a technical helper, but a machinic subject that sometimes shows a conscience of her own. For instance, even though she "wasn't responsible for maintenance on [Rosa]," she informs her when she is too tired to work (44). Although technically at service of the company, HANNA is depicted ambiguously, and Rosa is sometimes surprised that she is following her orders, even when she feels she is not supposed to have access to some of the information that HANNA provides her (44). Thanks to HANNA, Rosa manages to get all the documentation regarding the energy transfer to the northern cities (49), and, in the end, it is HANNA, trough Callie's intervention, who blocks "the [energy] lines to Chicago." HANNA's actions in the cybernetic world (the use of the system's infrastructure in its own prejudice) and Rosa's actions in the social sphere organizing the protest can only be successful in combination. Information and sabotage could have only been carried out by the machine but the successful protest resulting from it requires an embodied subjectivity to be organized (and to participate in).

Resistance to administrative corruption is then performed in both superstructural and infrastructural planes by two subjectivities (Rosa and HANNA), who are nonetheless interconnected in ways that make them one individual. HANNA may be considered a disembodied limb—and yet a conscious one—that acts in the same way STEM post-cyborgs operate in the above-mentioned narratives by Marge Piercy and Kathleen Ann Goonan. HANNA tends to carry out every operation Rosa asks her to do. The results of their

mechanic-organic alliance, however, may complicatedly be referred as "feminist" in its purpose, but it reflects a clear feminist sense of empowerment. Rosa and HANNA save the city from power shortages not in an explicit attempt to help, enact or liberate subjectivities from a patriarchal system, but from a capitalist, class-hierarchical one (47–49), and yet, the fact that the liberator protagonist of the story is represented by a woman reproduces uses of feminine subjectivities replacing narrative places traditionally deserved to men. This is easily observed when looking at how structures of power in the energy company work, and who represents power inside of them: Rosa's boss, Christine, is a woman; Callie, Rosa's former master is also a woman; and as far as the story tells readers, there seems to be no man other than the governor in a higher power position. Women seem to be running the public company in charge of the distribution of energy for working and middle classes in the city (47). From this perspective, the company also reflects feminist anxieties, as it oversees the wellbeing of Phoenix's citizens with less resources, maximizing to an urban level traditional roles enforced on women. Rosa and HANNA's actions obey an apparently not-explicitly-feminist purpose and yet, their actions are tainted by ideas of representation and gender roles conditioned by the patriarchal structure that they try to confront.

3. Conclusions

Although, not self-evidently concerned with feminist philosophical messages, solarpunk offers the possibility of reading new (and yet very old) types of feminist human/non-human bodies. If late post-cyberpunk texts' such as Beukes' *Moxyland* depict a subversively ambiguous representation of the cyborg (ultimately tending towards pessimism), solarpunk's take on the cyborg figure recovers its original optimism and attempts to apply it to the ecological (but still feminist) concerns of the genre. Female authors are producing stories that rewrite the main models of cyborgs generated during the development of the cyberpunk movement, either portraying posthuman bio-cyborgs, such as the photosapiens of "Solar Child," or through the depiction of alliances between female and machinic AIs that enact historical concerns debated in the history of feminism(s), as in the case of "For the Snake of Power." In both cases, nonetheless, the environmental preoccupations that haunt and nurture solarpunk narratives are also embedded in these representations, displaying cyborgs that are no longer interested in individual subversions but in developing actions that might benefit societies as a whole and help them survive the Anthropocene. In this sense, post-cyberpunk's techno-human defeatism is transformed, in these narratives, into an optimistic reaction in which bio-cyborg or post-cyborg natures embody subjectivities that overcome capitalism's elitist and ecocidal power relations. The new-yet-very-old solarpunk "cyborgs" presented by Cooper and Meyers, open the door for less fatalistic understandings of machinic-human interactions that

might help us face the incoming era of climate (and so social and economic) crisis that we are headed to.

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Of Blackboards and Bathrooms: Space as Metaphor for Power Relations in *Hidden Figures* (2016)

Cora Zoé Övermann

Abstract

This paper examines the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) from a critical perspective which combines concepts of intersectionality, gatekeeping, and spatial analysis. Through its depiction of the space race in 1960s America, the film superficially focuses on outer space. Nevertheless, much can be gleaned about the inclusion and exclusion of groups and individuals within the inner space of the NASA campus. The analysis thus centers around two questions; the question of who cannot access spaces, privileges, and knowledge, as well as the question of who can. In emphasizing the role of the gatekeeper, more attention is afforded to the male characters in the film, which have received little previous regard in comparison to the three Black female leads. In this paper, I argue that the White men's range of movement and their degree of belonging at NASA stand in crucial relation and opposition to the Black heroines. Three characters have been chosen to exemplify this point; Katherine Johnson, Al Harrison, and Paul Stafford, who interact with one another in a triangular relation of inclusions and exclusions. Five locations have been selected to illustrate their interplay in terms of power and space: the West Computing Group, the Space Task Group, the bathroom, the hallway, and the home.

Keywords: space race, spatial analysis, gatekeeping, intersectionality, 1960s America.

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Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) have traditionally been the domain of White men in both the real world and the media. In a joint overview titled "Portray Her: Representations of Women STEM characters in Media" (2021), the Lyda Hill Foundation and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media relate that male "STEM characters significantly outnumbered women STEM characters in film, television, and streaming content from 2007–2017" (9). Moreover, the "vast majority of STEM characters in entertainment media" were White, accounting for more than seventy percent of all characters. In contrast, only 16.7% of STEM characters were Black. The averages that the Lyda Hill Foundation and Geena Davis Institute present cover three visual media formats: film, television and streaming content. Out of these three, film is frequently less inclusive towards both women and Black people than television and streaming content (9–10). At

the intersection of race, gender, and the fact that few STEM characters function as leads in popular media, one finds an underwhelming two percent of Black female leads (11). It is against this backdrop that one understands the significance of the American biographical drama film *Hidden Figures* (2016). With immense success at the box office and a number of charity screenings directed at youth to promote careers in STEM, *Hidden Figures* features characters who often have little prominence on screen.

Directed by Theodore Melfi and based upon the novel by Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures* portrays three Black women who worked for the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during the era of the space race. Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe), Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson) and Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) are shown as three talented friends who made critical contributions to NASA in 1961 and 1962, culminating in the first crewed American orbital spaceflight. Since its release in 2016, scholars from all over the world have examined how the Black heroines are portrayed in the film. While some note the positive impact of bringing these "hidden figures" to light and providing role models for a new generation of women in STEM (Robert 3), others critically inspect the White savior figure Al Harrison and the isolation that the women operate in (Frühwirth et al. 2021, 84). Since both Theodore Melfi as director, as well as Allison Schroeder as screenwriter, are White, the question of who tells this story can be further taken into consideration. In addition, one might also ponder the significant changes that have been made in the process of adapting the book, and history, to the screen. Quoting author Margot Lee Shetterly, Timo Frühwirth et al. (2021) assess that "[f]or better or for worse, there is history, there is the book and then there's the movie" (88)—which dramatizes the heroines' experiences by adding instances of discrimination which never happened, while surreptitiously glossing over ongoing discrimination and segregation outside of NASA at the time.

With this paper, I intend to join existing scholarly interest regarding STEM in popular culture. Since role models for women in STEM remain rare, students "conclude consciously and unconsciously that these careers are not for them because they don't see people like them" (Valantine in Shen 2013, 22). If representation is low, it can "affect young people's career choices, leading to a mutual reinforcement of gender stereotypes," as Elena Makarova et al. point out (2019, 2). Similar arguments are presented by Jocelyn Steinke (2005, 27), Carol Colatrella (2011, 8) and Tara Nkrumah (2021, 1336), all pointing to the significant influence of mass media and American popular culture on Western perceptions about who belongs in STEM—and who does not.

The purpose of this paper is to examine who is shown as belonging in STEM via the example of spatial relations in the film *Hidden Figures*. Since both segregation, which has lasted into the era that the film portrays and which was protested by the then ongoing civil rights movement, as well as the medium of film itself, are highly spatialized, the examination of spatial relations as metaphor for power becomes a suitable tool for

analysis. For a film that focuses on outer space, much can be gleaned about the access, inclusion and exclusion of groups and individuals within the inner space of the NASA campus.[1] As Nkrumah (2021) notes, "[r]epeated examples of restricting individuals from certain spaces due to gender norms," as well as racial inequalities, "surface in the film" (1346). Yet these have not been previously examined from an intersectional perspective. Such an analysis should not only include the question of who *cannot* access spaces, privileges, and knowledge, but also the question of who *can*. Next to intersectionality and a sociopolitical reading of space, this paper therefore operates with the concept of gatekeeping. In emphasizing the role of gatekeeper, more attention is afforded to the White male characters in the film. Their range of movement and their degree of belonging at NASA stand in crucial relation and opposition to the Black heroines. The following analysis will treat this opposition on basis of the triangle formed by Katherine Johnson, Al Harrison, and Paul Stafford.

1. Theoretical Approach

1.1 Intersectionality

The film *Hidden Figures* portrays a segregated 1960s Virginia. Due to conventions of gender as well as race, the White male characters are shown as being significantly less restricted in their movements than the three Black female leads. Both their gender and their race position Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan as initially outside of the prestigious circles at NASA. Their experience can and should therefore be considered from an intersectional perspective. First introduced by the feminist theorist Audre Lorde in the 1970s and later coined by American civil rights advocate and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality "is the concept that social identities, such as race, class, and gender, create overlapping systems of discrimination and oppression" (Lyda Hill Foundation and Geena Davis Institute 2019, 10). It can be defined "as a theoretical and methodological approach to understanding the meaning and consequences of holding multiple coconstructing categories of social group membership" (Ireland et al. 2018, 230). Referring to recent work by Crenshaw, Danyelle T. Ireland et al. (2018) clarify that intersectionality is "a theory not of multiple identities but of how holding certain identities makes one vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion" (230).

Especially in STEM, unconscious bias and traditional Western gendered values can make intersectional factors of discrimination difficult to detect. As Katherine Robert (2021) explains:

[1] I would hereby like to thank the Bremen research colloquium of July 2019 for the animated discussion of this film, which has in part inspired the present paper.

> Intersecting social identities like age, gender, and race as well as academic and professional disciplines and degree attainment generate a hierarchy of power in STEM that is difficult to study due to the complex relationality between these various social identities. (3)

While the intersections between racial and gendered discrimination complicate many careers, STEM in particular is a field which has been constructed around White ideals of rationality and masculinity (Ireland et al. 2018, 227). Furthermore, there persists a "culture of no culture" (Rose 1994, 2), which denies cultural influences on the sciences and therefore makes them resistant to revision. Taking up the example of engineering, Robert (2021) points to the increasing difficulty of countering inequalities due to "the culture of engineering, which is apolitical, ahistorical, and locked in a positivist mindset that research finds often denies the space to acknowledge how different bodies experience engineering culture" (3). As a result, a White and patriarchal status quo is maintained, which present gatekeepers further contribute to.

1.2 Gatekeeping

Gatekeepers are persons in a professional network who hold the power to grant access, resources, and professional advancement to others. In the words of Massimiano Bucchi (2015), gatekeepers are "those scientists or other individuals who, because they occupy particular positions within scientific institutions, are able to influence the distribution of resources such as research funds, teaching posts or publishing opportunities" (246). In the film *Hidden Figures*, notable examples of gatekeepers include Al Harrison as head of the Space Task Group, his employee Paul Stafford, the judge who enables Mary Jackson to attend advanced classes, and to some extent, Vivian Mitchell. With the exception of the latter, all of these gatekeepers are White and male. They are part of the dominant group which reproduces itself through gatekeeping (van den Brink and Benschop 2014, 464).

According to Robert K. Merton, gatekeepers as a collective "evaluate the promise and limitations of aspirants to new positions, thus affecting both the mobility of individual scientists and, in the aggregate, the distribution of personnel throughout the system" (Merton in van den Brink and Benschop 2014, 464). Gender is a deciding factor in this evaluation (ibid). Therefore, "[w]hen the gatekeepers are predominantly men, women have difficulty gaining access to desirable academic networks" (van den Brink and Benschop 2014, 464). Marieke van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop relate this phenomenon to the principles of homophily, homosociality, and the "similar-to-me-effect" (2014, 464). In the case of *Hidden Figures*, these aspects cover not only gender, but also race. If NASA is controlled by White and male individuals, then the power these parties hold is likely to be maintained, unless active change is enforced. To date, "making the organization [NASA] inclusive and equitable is an ongoing mission," as Robert notes, observing that the "whiteness, and maleness, of STEM remains in place" (11). I argue that this status

quo not only remains in its place, but further determines what space is afforded to diverse actors in STEM, which the film *Hidden Figures* exemplifies.

1.3 Spatial Analysis

It was Nancy Hopkins who first measured women's offices in STEM and found that they were considerably smaller than their male colleagues' in the 1990s (Humphries 2017). In a study conducted from 2012 to 2018, British researchers still observed that women starting their first research labs "have access to less laboratory space than their male peers do" (Else 2019, n.p.). In a metaphorical as well as literal sense, it becomes clear that women to date are afforded less space in STEM. While space is only one of a number of critical resources—such as funding, equipment, and staff—it is a crucial one. Therefore, the present paper treats space as metaphor for autonomy and belonging in STEM.

As a visual medium, film provides clues towards space both through its settings as well as through character movements in relation to their environment and one another. Space does not exist as neutral territory—rather, it is shaped by human relations and experiences. Even though the work of Henri Lefebvre, a pioneer in spatial studies, has been contested in the decades that followed its publication, "his primary call to attend to the agency and complexity of space as a lived, social product remains a central insight" (Zacharias 2016, 214). In their paper "Time for space: A narrative review of research on organizational spaces," Scott Taylor and André Spicer (2007) define space among three dimensions: "[t]he first conception treats space as distance between two points. The second conception treats space as materialized power relations. The final conception treats space as the manifestation of our imagination" (327).

It is the second conception that becomes relevant to my analysis of *Hidden Figures*. As Taylor and Spicer outline, the great value of viewing space as physical manifestation of power relations lies in moving away "from a focus on *how* surface manifestations of organized spaces operate," and instead considering "the reasons *why* spaces are configured as they are" (332). To Norbert Schaffeld (2016), "the dominant distribution of scientific space" in science narratives can give insight into gendered exclusions from areas where new knowledge is produced (182).

Next to perceiving space as a metaphorical manifestation of access, inclusion and exclusion, there are two further considerations that can meaningfully contribute to an analysis of Black women in STEM on screen. The first one is presented by Teresa Bridgeman (2007), who argues that while "[o]bjective spatial relationships between aspects of a narrative are helpful in enabling readers to visualize its contents," equally important are the ways "in which characters inhibit the space of their world both socially and psychologically" (55). How women experience their working environment can provide clues to their sense of belonging (55), which is "a key predictor of persistence in STEM fields" (Diekman et al. 2017, 156).

The second theory turns from the individual character to the United States as a nation. Especially during the space race, borders are relevant within buildings, cities, states, and in between nations. As Dora Holland and Jack Burns (2018) point out, "[s]pace, by the nature of the word, means thinking outside of the boundaries of our own border, be it country or global borders" (13). In *Hidden Figures*, outer space is something to be conquered, an expansion which echoes the previous drive of the Western frontier (Méndez González 2001, 10). "Because national interests have dictated U.S. direction in space exploration, this has meant that as the country finds itself at the crux of where it stands on the global stage politically, it also does so in space endeavors," Holland and Burns relate (13). In effect, "[t]he examination of the changing narrative of space exploration in the United States is also an examination of the changing self-perception of the country in relation to the rest of the world" (13). The film *Hidden Figures* itself notably adds to the narrative of the United States as an innovative country facing ahead.

2. Film Analysis

The narrative of the United States dominating the space race permeates the entirety of *Hidden Figures.* It also aids the three Black heroines in interacting with White male gatekeepers throughout the film. From the policeman who interrogates Katherine, Dorothy and Mary in their first joint scene to the judge who grants Mary access to higher education, most depicted male figures can be convinced by arguments that point to the space race and simultaneously flatter their own image as White American men. Three of the most prominent male characters are the astronaut John Glenn (Glen Powell), head of the Space Task Group Al Harrison (Kevin Costner), and his employee Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons). All three figures are shown as unrestricted in their movements and have access to spaces and knowledge. In relation to Katherine, Al and Paul perform the role of gatekeepers, while John on occasion functions as a catalyst.

2.1. A Note on Masculinities

Because it has not previously been discussed, I would like to note in this instance that John, Al, and Paul can among themselves be ranked in a hierarchy of masculinities (Connell 1998, 5). The fact that all of these characters are White—as are all the portrayed men working at NASA—is crucial, because it limits the given depiction to White, middle-class masculinity in the workplace. While the following analysis will have to disregard John as a side character, it is he who embodies the most prestigious facets of American masculinity. As an astronaut who advances the United States in the space race against Russia, John is a public figure and national hero. He is depicted as young, healthy, fit, conventionally attractive and level-headed, as well as just and humorous. He thus symbolizes White American hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1998, 5).

Al approves of John, even though he cannot embody the same degree of hegemonic masculinity himself. Al is notably older, less attractive, and less directly associated with physical action. Nevertheless, as head of the Space Task Group, he combines authority, rationality, and a sense of justice and appreciation of hard work and efficiency. Out of all characters introduced in the film, Al is the one who moves most freely across Langley campus. He is also the one who most prominently underlines the national spirit and position of the United States in the ongoing space race. Put under pressure at the beginning of the film by President John F. Kennedy and his own superior, Al highlights his authority by positioning himself above Paul.

Portrayed by Jim Parsons, who viewers will be familiar with as Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* series, Paul ranks the lowest in terms of masculinity. He possesses neither John's physical nor Al's professional prestige. Nevertheless, since he is White and male, the gendered and racial hierarchies in the given context of the 1960s United States position Paul as superior to the Black and female Katherine, whom Paul selects as the target for his own frustrations. As a result, a hierarchical flow of pressures and humiliations can be detected throughout the film, which trickles down from the president of the United States, to the higher ups at NASA, to its White male employees, and finally to its Black female members.

I argue that a significant portion of dramatic tension within the film *Hidden Figures* arises from the triangle constellation between a disadvantaged Katherine, a prickly Paul, and an avuncular Al, who helps Katherine while continuously disparaging Paul. Even though Al can be read as an unsympathetic character, it is Paul who is positioned as the unlikable and spiteful foil to Katherine's rising mathematical success throughout the film. Meanwhile, Al is presented as the White savior who helps Katherine to advance and who upholds American ideals. The following paragraphs examine how these relations and power dynamics are mirrored in space throughout the film, organized by relevant locations and in a roughly chronological order.

2.2 The West Computing Group

The West Computing Group constitutes the cradle of professional development for Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary. At the beginning of the film, the three women are shown in a room labelled "colored computers," which appears to be their regular workplace. The room is located in the basement and has no windows. Even though the women who work there are dressed brightly and maintain a cheerful atmosphere, the room itself is dim, grey, and unappealing (00:10:41). As the viewer soon finds out, the West Computing Group is removed by a considerable distance from strategically significant offices such as the Space Task Group. By assigning a room in the basement to its Black and female employees, their lower social status is exemplified in space.

As a room, the West Computing Group embodies a segregated and patriarchal status quo. The action centering on the three Black heroines begins on the day that this status is disrupted. In receiving new assignments, both Mary and Katherine are enabled to step outside of their familiar zone and into new environments. Mary is invited to work in engineering, while Katherine is spontaneously recruited by Vivian Mitchell for the Space Task Group, which needs a mathematician capable of handling analytic geometry. Since the position cannot be filled from the talent pool in the White male Space Task Group or the White female East Computing group, Katherine is presented a chance she would otherwise be denied.

The fact that assigning a Black woman to the task is a last resort is echoed in Vivian Mitchell's parting words: "didn't think I'd come all the way down here" (00:11:52 – 00:11:54). The brief interaction illustrates that the West Computing Group is indeed located outside the usual range of movement of a White female employee such as Vivian Mitchell. Yet even though the environment is comparatively foreign to her, Vivian Mitchell is able to move through it freely and ask for favors. For the Black female employees to be able to leave the "colored" spaces they are assigned, they depend on the need that others have of them. This holds true for Mary (needed in engineering), Katherine (needed in the Space Task Group) and Dorothy, who is eventually needed in operating the new International Business Machines (IBMs).

In each case, the eventual relocation is significant, because it signifies boundary crossing, movement, and progression. While progression is something that is celebrated by the heroines, they are also wary of the unfamiliar risks that the new environments entail. While Mary faces physical dangers in engineering, it is the threat of failure that bothers Katherine. After her first day in the Space Task Group, she confides in her friends that she is concerned about not being able to "keep up in that room" (00:27:52). She prophesizes that she will either be back with the West Computing Group within a week, or out of a job entirely. While the first option signals regression from a professional as well as spatial point of view, the latter option denotes Katherine's possible exclusion from Langley campus.

Katherine's predictions turn out to be warranted in so far as she does return to the West Computing Group once the Space Task Group no longer has need of her. However, this setback turns out to be temporary. All three leads are permanently reassigned to new positions by the end of the film. Dorothy, acting as supervisor of the West Computing Group, successfully advocates for herself and the "colored computers" to be assigned to the new IBMs. Near the end of the film, it is she who spares the West Computing Group a last glance before switching off the lights and closing the door behind her (01:50:30), thereby signaling that the days of segregated work places are now over.

2.3 The Space Task Group

In comparison to the West Computing Group, the interior design of the Space Task Group is considerably nicer. Even though the walls are similarly monochrome, they are glossy grey instead of concrete, interspaced with warm wooden highlights. As the first Black woman entering this realm, Katherine is a pioneer. "They never had a colored in here before, Katherine," Vivian tells her, adding "don't embarrass me" (00:16:20 – 00:16:25). Vivian leaves Katherine behind to open the door to the Space Task Group, with a box tucked under her arm and inspiring music rising in the background. The fact that Katherine opens the door herself suggests that she has gained entry on her own, being judged on her mathematical abilities which grant her access. However, the door closing behind her indicates that Katherine is the exception, and that no other Black women are expected to follow.

Hesitant and conscious of the boundaries she is crossing both in terms of race and gender, Katherine surveys a large circular office. A few steps into the room, she is mistaken for the custodian, an occupation which would constitute a more common relationship between Katherine and the present space. As a mathematician occupying one of the desks, Katherine stands out socially and visually—clothed in a colorful dress in an environment of men in white shirts (Nkrumah 2021, 1344). Ruth, the only other woman in the room, advises Katherine to "do your work, keep your head down" (00:17:25), and directs her towards the desk in the back. While this direction initially seems to place Katherine at the periphery of the group, and thus position her as an outsider, the desk she is assigned in fact stands closest to the steps that lead up to Al's office—a position which may symbolize the sympathy these characters eventually develop for one another.

Al himself occupies a superior position both socially and spatially. This is illustrated by the fact that he inhibits a separate section of the office, which is located a level above the desks of his employees. In his office, a black and white portrait of President John F. Kennedy can be seen on the walls, which accentuates his pride as American citizen. The walls of the office are glass, so that Al is able to survey his employees, which brings to mind Foucault's panopticon (Taylor and Spicer 2007, 330) and demonstrates the power that Al has over others. Both his office and the circular room hold at least one blackboard. These blackboards convey the mathematical nature of the work that is being done and are frequently crucial in demonstrating Katherine's brilliance. Furthermore, the circular room holds both a globe in its center as well as a large map of the world on its wall, which underlines the characters' awareness of their work in relation to the global context.

The constant awareness of global competition motivates Al to walk down from his office and address the room. He stops in front of Paul's desk and pointedly deposits his half-eaten sandwich in Paul's trash can, which can be seen as a gesture of dominance over Paul, especially since Al tasks the newcomer Katherine—the lowest ranking person

in the given hierarchy—with checking Paul's work in the same instance. Al takes center stage both in terms of camera movement as well as in terms of spatial position. He stands in the middle of the room with his employees around him and imprints upon them the importance of making significant progress in the space race (00:19:12). Al once more singles out Paul in asking "America's greatest engineering and scientific minds are not gonna have a problem with having their work checked, are they, Paul?" (00:20:00 – 00:20:03). Having been publicly humiliated, Paul waits until after Al has left before handing over his work to Katherine. A large portion of the file has been blacked out. Noticing her reaction, Paul informs Katherine that the numbers are "classified" and that Katherine does not have clearance (00:20:59). In this instance, Paul thus purposefully withholds information and makes it harder for Katherine to complete the task that Al has set for her, exercising his power as gatekeeper.

Throughout the day, Katherine continues working until only she and Al are left—Katherine at her desk, and Al up in his office. When Katherine moves to hand in her work, the empty room and low lights make clear that she has worked significantly overtime. She makes her way to the edge of Al's office and speaks his name, startling him from his train of thought (00:24:50). It is only after Al acknowledges her and instructs her to deposit the work by his desk that Katherine may enter his space, her movements less restricted once less people are present. She further needs permission to leave, politely asking if she may go home. Al absentmindedly agrees, seemingly distracted and unaware of time, which plays into his image of White male dedicated scientist. It also shows that Al controls the movements of his employees both in a spatial as well as a temporal sense. It is up to him to decide where they may go, and when.

This authority is mirrored in a later scene when Al calls upon his employees to work harder than the competition (00:54:32). He thanks everyone for staying behind after hours since they have received news that the Russians have once again made headway. Again, Al moves through their midst, the only one in a vest as every other man is wearing a plain white shirt. It is noticeable that he stands half a head taller than his employees, which adds to the space he occupies and underlines his air of authority. As the only women present, Katherine and Ruth stand apart in their colorful dresses. Yet they seem invisible to Al, who concludes his speech as follows:

> There's only two things you need to know going forward, one is staying here, working late, that's gonna be a fact of life. And two don't expect your paychecks to reflect the extra time it's gonna take to catch up and pass those bastards. For those of you who can't work that way I understand and thank you for what you've done. For everyone else: I suggest you call your wives, tell 'em how it's gonna be. I'll start with mine. (00:55:38 – 00:56:07)

Phone in hand, Al is shown surveying the room from his own office, as everyone present dutifully informs their family. Katherine, a dedicated worker, is shown calling what may

be presumed to be her mother. However, Katherine's dedication is called into question when Al notices her frequent absences from her desk.

2.4 The Bathroom

On the first day in her new position, Katherine politely inquires about the women's restroom; "Excuse me, may I ask where the ladies' room is?," to which Ruth replies, "Sorry, I have no idea where your bathroom is" (00:21:21 – 00:21:26). The given reply alters the question. While Katherine had asked where the ladies' bathroom was, the answer she is given specifically refers to the "colored" ladies' restrooms, which subtly excludes Katherine from using the present bathrooms in the building. Discouraged, Katherine resorts to the ladies' restroom she is familiar with—the "colored" restroom in the West Computing Group. However, that bathroom is half a mile away from the Space Task Group. It thus takes Katherine a significant amount of time to walk between the two.

Intersectionality is important in this scenario. It becomes apparent in the way in which Katherine had asked about the bathroom in terms of gender, and is given an answer which refers to race. Different aspects of her identity intersect and create interdependent disadvantages. When Al confronts her about the significant amount of time she appears to be missing from her desk every day, Katherine fiercely explains:

> There is no bathroom. There are no colored bathrooms in this building, or any building outside the west campus, which is half a mile away. Did you know that? I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself. And I can't use one of the handy bikes. Picture that, Mr. Harrison. My uniform; skirt below my knees, my heels, and a simple string of pearls, well I don't own pearls, lord knows you don't pay coloreds enough to afford pearls! (01:01:47 – 01:02:42)

In this instance, Katherine demonstrates that she is excluded from spaces due to the color of her skin. However, getting to the places she is allowed to go is made harder due to her gender. She cannot use one of the bikes to commute between the Space Task Group and the West Computing Group because it would compromise her social standing as a woman. Up to the point of this confrontation, Katherine is therefore frequently shown running across campus in her heels and working in the bathroom when she gets there.

It might be noted that based upon biographical sources such as Shetterly's book, "Katherine felt completely at home at Langley" from the very beginning and remained unaffected by policies of racial discrimination (Shetterly in Frühwirth et al. 2021, 84). It would seem that the real Katherine Johnson had comfortably inhabited the Space Task Group for several years before being made aware of the segregated bathrooms—"[b]y then, she simply refused to change her habits" (Shetterly in Frühwirth et al. 2021, 84). The assessment that Katherine Johnson felt completely "at home" at Langley underlines her sense of belonging as a woman in STEM. In the film adaptation, this sense is shattered. What results is a very different image of the woman in question, who in the film is dependent on the White male savior (Nkrumah 2021, 1347). The focus is therefore put on

Al in what may be seen as one of the most dramatic scenes within the film—the destruction of the colored ladies' bathroom sign in the West Computing Group.

Upon witnessing Katherine's outburst, Al takes it upon himself to remove the colored ladies' bathroom sign in the West Computing Group with a crowbar. The action is visually impressive, if somewhat exaggerated. Based upon the prior logic of unlabeled ladies' bathrooms, the missing sign would indicate that the bathroom is intended for White women only. However, Al's accompanying speech makes clear that instead, he is abolishing the racial segregation of bathrooms at Langley: "There you have it. No more colored restrooms. No more white restrooms. Just plain old toilets. Go wherever you damn well please. Preferably closer to your desk. Here at NASA? We all pee the same color" (01:03:58 – 01:04:26).

What is remarkable about this scene, which cements Al's role as White savior, is the control he demonstrates over a space that lies far outside his own jurisdiction, as well as the bodies that move across a whole campus. Even though the bathroom lies half a mile from Al's place of work, he does not seem to question his own authority in physically altering it. Since the space is designated for Black female workers, Al as a White male automatically assumes control over it. Moreover, he dictates how bathrooms are to be used by all employed women in the future. He points at Katherine when instructing her to use a bathroom closer to her desk. This gesture illustrates that it is not necessarily a sense for equality which drives Al, but rather a focus on efficiency in the ongoing space race. Therefore, he is arguably not motivated by a desire to support minorities within his institution, but by international competition and American masculine ideals.

2.5 The Hallway

In order to be able to support NASA in the ongoing space race, access to information is crucial for Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary. While Dorothy and Mary fight their own battles for educational materials and opportunities, Katherine too struggles with what information she is privy to and which she is excluded from on a daily basis. This struggle begins with the first mathematical report that Paul gives her, which is heavily redacted. It is Al who eventually grants Katherine access to the data. Throughout the film, repetitions of the same dynamic—Paul withholding information and Al providing it—arise. A series of exchanges takes place in the hallways around the Space Task Group. As an unfixed space where either direction can be taken, these hallways illustrate the tug-and-pull nature of the arguments. The first exchange between Katherine and Paul in the grey, glossy hallway of the Space Task Group is given below:

> **Katherine:** Mr. Stafford!
>
> **Paul:** What, Katherine?
>
> **Katherine:** If I could attend the briefings, I'd be more useful to the project.

> **Paul:** Pentagon briefings are closed-door.
>
> **Katherine:** Yes, but if we don't have the information of the changes, we can't keep up, I need those changes as they occur, as you said, it's a pinhead.
>
> **Paul:** Katherine, that's the job. You asked for this assignment. So just calculate with what you have. Or we'll find someone who can. (01:18:38 – 01:19:05)

In this argument, Katherine refers both to increased efficiency, as well as Paul's own established difficulty of the task they are facing. She thereby flatters Paul and underlines her own interest in being useful. Yet Paul cannot be swayed and denies Katherine access—additionally hinting at her dismissal from the Space Task Group if she cannot successfully operate on basis of the information she is given.

Since physical access to meetings directly translates into access to vital information, it is not surprising that Katherine persists in a following scene:

> **Katherine:** Sir. If I could attend briefings, I could stay –
>
> **Paul:** Katherine, we have been through this, it is not possible, there is no protocol for women attending.
>
> **Katherine:** There's no protocol for a man circling the earth either, sir.
>
> **Paul:** Okay, you know what, that is just the way things are. (01:20:13 – 01:20:26)

In this second exchange, Katherine once more begins to point out her improved ability to aid with the project if she could attend briefings. While this argument would likely prove effective with Al, whose dedication to winning the space race has been amply illustrated throughout the film, Paul once again remains indifferent. Instead, he resorts to pointing out the status quo of gendered relations and protocols, which he has no interest in changing.

Al eventually steps in after witnessing the frequent and increasingly heated exchanges between Katherine and Paul. Katherine petitions Al by reminding him of the upcoming launch of John Glenn, stressing that "[w]e don't have the math figured out yet" (01:21:25 – 01:21:31). Just minutes prior to this scene, Al had relayed his motivations for bringing John home safely to the Pentagon:

> Let me say first, discovery is never for the sake of discovery, gentlemen, but for the sake of human survival, and it will always come with a risk. Whoever gets there first makes the rules, that's been true of every civilization, and so I think the bigger question for this body to consider is; who do you want calling the shots in space? We have to know what's out there, senator. We have to touch the stars if only to ensure our own survival and only a man can do that. We'll get John Glenn home safely because we have to. (01:15:53 – 1:16:31)

Al is keenly focused on the importance of bringing John home, because he believes that it is a crucial step in ensuring that America wins the space race. He believes that human survival rides on a Western victory, calling upon ideals of White masculinity and dominance. It is this motivation which, shortly after, prompts him to act as gatekeeper and

open the door to Pentagon briefings for Katherine. Thus, when Paul repeats his argument concerning a lack of protocol for women attending, Al cuts in: "Okay I get that part, Paul. But within these walls, who uh, who makes the rules?" (01:21:51 – 01:22:00). Seizing her chance, Katherine is quick to supply an answer: "You sir, you are the boss. You just have to act like one. Sir" (01:21:11 – 01:22:12).

In this scene, Al directly refers to his own role as gatekeeper. This illustrates that he is aware of the authority he wields. Katherine supports him in this role because it is a gambit likely to win her what she needs: access to the briefings. Al grants it, on the condition that Katherine keeps quiet once they enter the room. Both of them interact with John in the meeting, and it is John who later requests Katherine's attendance and verification of the calculations before his launch. Once the calculations are completed and delivered, the door to the meeting closes in Katherine's face until Al opens it, provides her with a pass which signals clearance, and motions for her to join him inside (01:45:50).

2.6 The Home

It is pertinent to note who is where when important events, such as John's launch, happen. Consequently, it is worth taking a closer look at the home, where the heroines are predominantly located during game-changing developments. While much of *Hidden Figures* centers around the events at Langley, the viewer is nevertheless presented glimpses into the heroines' private lives outside of work. This includes their homes, their loved ones, and their joint Black community. Scenes set at or around the home stand in direct contrast to scenes set at Langley. They are colorful where Langley is monochrome, and lively where Langley maintains a serious atmosphere. They are of little consequence to the overall narrative and function as breaks between the tension-ridden interactions at Langley. One might note here that the private lives of Katharine, Dorothy, and Mary are the only ones the viewer sees, while all male characters are strictly shown at work.

I argue that balancing work with the private life presents the leads as more feminine and thus affirms their identities as women, next to their identities as scientists. This sense is fostered by the fact that all of them have two to three children and a heterosexual love interest. Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are shown as operating in two spheres: the private and the public. While Al's demand of working overtime makes clear that the home may not interrupt work, work is shown interrupting the home. In their private lives, the heroines turn to the radio as the following news are relayed:

> We interrupt this musical programming with breaking news: the Soviet news agency has announced that Russian cosmonaut Juri Gagarin has become the first man in space. Gagarin completed one full orbit around the planet in one hundred and eight minutes. Stay tuned to the station for more details as they become available. (00:53:31 – 00:53:51)

The scene cuts to a historical montage of Gagarin's success and then to the men at Langley, who are viewing the news on a large screen. The only woman present is Ruth, who

stands next to Al. A similar montage of historic footage and film images of Langley is employed when the news of American progress in the space race around Gus Grissom and the Liberty Bell 7 capsule are made public, which the three heroines once again receive at home (01:15:03). Furthermore, the same format had previously been used to relate the launch of Alan Shepard (01:05:40). This shows that Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary receive the latest news regarding developments pertinent to their work at home *regardless* of whether developments are achieved by a foreign country or their own. In either case, they are not among the White men whose ambitions in the space race they passionately share.

3. Conclusion

Hidden Figures as a film creates a story, and a space, for three women who had previously received little attention for their outstanding work for NASA. The prominent setting is Langley campus, the mood anxious but excited. *Hidden Figures* champions its country of production, America—where racial and gendered inequalities, the film suggests, are things of the past (Nkrumah 2021, 1350). This paper has argued that throughout the film, intersecting inequalities can be observed in space, which has been treated as a materialization of power relations (Taylor and Spicer 2007, 327). Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson each enter new spaces throughout the film, which allow them to advance their careers. On this journey, they are hindered or aided by several gatekeepers. As the analysis has illustrated, Paul Stafford and Al Harrison in particular interact with Katherine, creating a triangular dynamic of exclusion and inclusion.

Hidden Figures is a story of exceptionalism (Nkrumah 2021, 1350): exceptional innovation, exceptional national spirit, and exceptional scientific genius that especially Katherine embodies. Yet while the film portrays a country on the move, it nevertheless focuses on "individual victories" (Cruz 2017, n.p.) especially in terms of gendered and racial equality. Little structural change is enforced within the film, with the exception of Al's heroic destruction of a bathroom sign. The doors that Katherine and Mary have walked through have likely closed behind them. It is Dorothy who makes sure that she brings her coworkers with her into new and better environments.

Through its immense success and subsequent scholarly attention, *Hidden Figures* has secured its place within American STEM-centered popular culture. At a first glance, science is brought into culture and to viewers all over the world. At a second glance, *Hidden Figures* makes visible how much of *culture* is in *science*. The film exemplifies how factors of race, gender, career stage, and the (inter)national context intersect and influence the very results that science seeks to produce. In the end, orbital spaceflight in outer space is achieved because of the changes that have occurred in the inner spaces of Langley.

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MISCELLANEA

"Their Time, Their Moment, Their City": A Critique and Black Feminist Reading of *Harlem*

Mónica García Morgado

Abstract

This article analyzes the first season of Tracy Oliver's comedy series *Harlem* (2021) through the lens of Black Feminism. Invoking combined traces of *Living Single* (1993–1998) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), I contend *Harlem* opposes the lack of representation that has erased Black women from mainstream comedies that are reduced to the White experience as it also pursues to transgress the stigmatizing image of Black women in mainstream popular culture. In this manner, Oliver's *Harlem* addresses several aspects of the Black female experience and shows the gendered racism Black women endure, such as racial stereotypes, medical mistreatment, or White women's tears, among many others. Prioritizing social accuracy and racial sensibilities through comedy, *Harlem* follows the lives of four Black women in the neighborhood of Harlem in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Black Women; Black Feminism; Popular Culture; New York City; Racial Stereotypes, White Women's Tears.

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The lack of inclusion and diversity in the most popular (White) American TV series, such as *Friends* (1994) and *Sex and the City* (1998), is nothing new. This might be the reason why the reboot of the latter, *And Just Like That...* (2021), included new characters from diverse backgrounds, with articulated identities and different ethnicities. In a recent article published in *The Guardian*, Andrew Lawrence (2022) notices that "[t]elevision in the 90s assumed its audience was either Black or White" (n.p.), and points out that Marta Kauffman, the producer of *Friends*, recently confessed that she regrets the lack of inclusivity in the production and narrative shaping of the show. Kauffman argued that the exclusion of people of color from her show, following Greg Braxton's words, "was a symptom of her internalization of the systemic racism that plagues our [US] society" (2022, n.p.). However, Lawrence asserts that Kauffman has produced more "Whitewashing" shows after *Friends* and emphasizes that sitcoms such as *Living Single* (1993)—produced by Yvette Lee Bowser and which follows a group of Black friends living in New York City—

existed before *Friends* (n.p.). Despite the apparent oblivion it has fallen into, *Living Single* was the first show on American television to revolve around the Black female experience. Following four twenty-year-old Black women living in Brooklyn, the series centers around their dating experiences and their careers while it explores Black female friendship.

In an article that celebrates the 25th anniversary of *Living Single*, Hannah Giorgis (2018) remarks that Yvette Lee Bowser was encouraged to produce the sitcom after she realized that most stories on TV only "catered" and "embraced" White people and, principally, White men. Hence, Bowser was encouraged to switch the focus to the Black experience while finding a place of her own in the industry (n.p.). For instance, Black feminist author Roxanne Gay writes her appreciation of *Living Single* in *Bad Feminist* (2014) because, she argues, it allowed Black women "to recognize themselves" in the narrative and setting (60). This not only highlights the aforementioned racial divide on TV and the social racism accepted in American popular culture but also the intersectional discrimination Black women have historically endured and has been accompanied by the silencing of their lives and experiences in popular media. According to Giorgis (2018), *Living Single* has been the blueprint of the worldwide popular sitcom *Friends* (1999–2007) as well as many other productions, including the more recent show distributed by HBO *Insecure* (2016–2021). And yet, despite its significant impact on the industry, *Living Single* is still unknown to many, lacking the credit it deserves.

Representation of marginalized groups in popular culture has not evolved much from how it seemed to work in the 1990s. Most shows are created and produced by primarily White teams and feature predominantly White casts, while actors from minority groups are frequently relegated to supporting and tertiary roles. That is the case of Charlie (Aisha Tyler), the only Black character with more protagonism in *Friends* because of her relationship with Ross (David Lawrence Schwimmer), and in *And Just Like That...*, Lisa (Nicole Ari Parker) substitutes Samantha (Kim Cattrall), one of four original (White) protagonists of *Sex and the City*. Therefore, the workings of the entertainment industry are clear: twenty-first-century shows still favor White supremacy and the representation of Whiteness, while the narratives about "the Other" are secondary, irrelevant, and not central to the (White) American experience. The lack of representation is even more noticeable when it comes to Black women. In her monograph *Bad Feminist*, Roxane Gay (2014) expands widely on this matter and touches upon this topic in several of the essays in the collection. Foremost, Gay criticizes "[the] general erasure or ignorance of race" in popular culture (5) and expresses her tiredness of the focalization of popular culture of the White experience, demanding a change: "We need more. We need pop culture that demonstrates not only the ways people are different but also the ways we are very much alike" (253). Apart, in the essay "Beyond the Struggle Narrative," Gay alleges that "slave and struggle narratives . . . are not enough anymore" when talking about the Black

community (231–32), and, in "Feel Me," Gay dreams about popular culture that shows Black people succeeding in careers that are not stereotypical, for instance, sports or music (6).

This article analyses the first season of Tracy Oliver's comedy series *Harlem* (2021) through the lens of Black Feminism to examine its Black feminist essence. Aiming to fulfill Gay's expectations and hopes in the possibility to develop adequate representation, at the same time it pays tribute to *Living Single* with a touch of *Sex and the City*, *Harlem* articulates Black female representation and incites insight into the lack of Black representation in current popular shows, highlighting the workings of American society and its racial idiosyncrasies.

1. *Harlem*: A Place of Their Own in the City of Dreams

Harlem is an Amazon Prime Video original production created and directed by Tracy Oliver and released on December 3, 2021. According to Ryan Fleming, (2022) "Tracy Oliver created *Harlem* based on her own life experiences, because she wanted more stories of Black friendship out there" (n.p.), which resonates with Bowser's motivation. *Harlem* follows four Black best friends, their careers, lovers, and adventures. The show is a fictional portrait of Black women's lives in New York in the twenty-first century, fighting for their professional and personal goals. As the slogan of the official trailer states: it is their time, their moment, and their city.

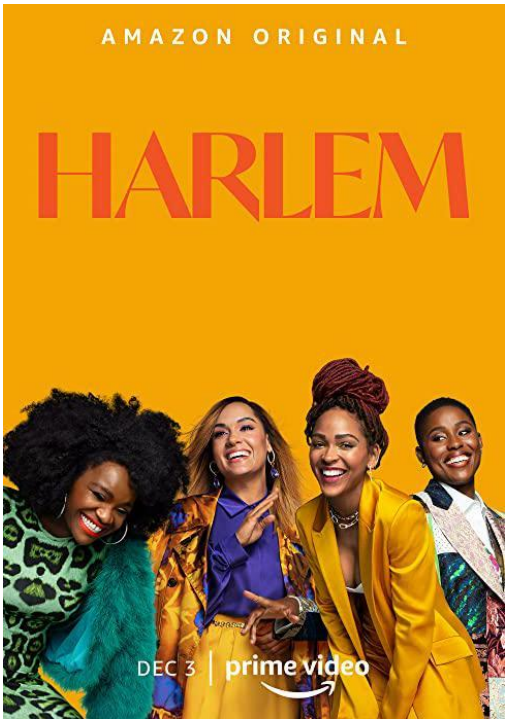

Figure 1 Official poster featuring the protagonists, from left to right: Angie, Quinn, Camille, and Tye.

Camille Parks (Meagan Good) is the main protagonist in *Harlem*. She holds a Ph.D. in anthropology and works as an adjunct professor at Columbia, aiming to achieve an associate professor position. Besides her professional preoccupations, to make her life more complicated she is still in love with her ex-fiancé, despite having broken the engagement to pursue her academic career in New York. Angie Wilson (Shoniqua Shandi) plays the role of the extrovert friend who openly expresses her sexuality through her relationships with Black men. She wants to pursue a career as a singer and achieve stardom, but her attempts are thwarted by her struggles to find and maintain a stable job. Their queer and overachieving workaholic friend is Tye Reynolds (Jerrie Johnson), the triumphant CEO of a dating app created for queer people of color. Her storyline begins with a complicated relationship with a White woman and provides an intriguing insight into interracial relationships, as she feels as though she is "betraying" Black women for it. The fourth friend of the group who dreams of living *la vie en rose* is Quinn Joseph (Grace Byers), an entrepreneur who relies on her family's money to sustain her boutique and who will start a relationship with a professional male stripper. Although *Harlem* pays tribute to *Living Single* playing with its formula and following its main structure, indeed it seems to parallel the famous girlfriend-comedy plot and setting (NYC) of *Sex and the City*, solving the lack of representation of the former while rooting its narrative in the Black neighborhood of Harlem and showing that the Black experience has always been a key part in New York City. Thus—considering a certain parallelism between Star's and Oliver's characters—*Harlem* shows Black women could also be the protagonists of *Sex and the City*, moving beyond the traditional and much-exploited struggle narrative that Gay mentions. However, the series still exposes how their lives are shaped by the intersection of their race and gender.

The reminiscence of *Sex and The City* is, however, problematic. Despite the show's authenticity in following the explorations of these four thirty-something best friends and including characters distinctive of female Black culture, *Harlem* neglects lower-class Black women and circumscribes its own intersectional activism to middle- and upper-class contexts. Angie is the only friend in the group facing economic problems and yet her presence is not enough to complete the intersectional equation developed by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and which is a central pillar of Black Feminism. Angie enjoys a better quality of life by living at Quinn's apartment for free, which allows her to continue pursuing her dream life even without a stable job. And yet, despite this shortcoming, *Harlem* proves to be effective in making true two of Gay's wishes: showing Black women detached from traditional slave and struggle narratives—in terms of exploiting compelling tragic personal stories related to slavery and similar contexts—and portraying Black women developing in diverse career fields as entrepreneurs, academics, and chief executive officers, not limited to subordinate labor or stereotyped careers

because of their race. Black women have historically endured hardship, suffering, and struggle because of the socioeconomic status they hold in society, positioned at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy pyramid (hooks [1981] 2015a, 78). Still to this day, Black women experience overwhelming racial and gendered conflicts (Jerkins 2018; McMillan Cottom 2019; Kendall 2020; Hamad 2020; Schuller 2021) which include, among many others, microaggressions, detrimental stereotypes, or so-called "White women's tears," as this article discusses in the following section. Then, as an audiovisual narrative, *Harlem* puts these racial sensitivities in the spotlight.

Harlem's approach to these issues may be misperceived, especially by a White audience. For instance, in *The Guardian's* "Harlem Review" (2021), Adrian Horton writes that "[*Harlem*] sometimes feels stumped by what to do beyond calling out its representational politics" (n.p.). Horton continued criticizing Oliver's production with the following words: "But with characters whose bits wear thin, punchlines that frequently boil down to horniness and explanations of racist dynamics that feel pulled from an Instagram slideshow, Harlem often tests the limits of representation as justification." I disagree with Horton's reading of *Harlem*. It is much more than "just" representation. The shows that revolve around the White experience, such as *Sex and the City*, do not fall under the same kind of scrutiny. White characters are rarely examined in racial terms despite Whiteness. Thus, *Harlem* is about comedy, entertainment, and, foremost, Black female empowerment. This does not mean the show is cinematically perfect, yet its mastery lies in the fact that it carries a socially committed message in its pocket. *Harlem* addresses struggle as one side of the Black experience without making it its core, unveiling real-life racial dynamics.

As I argue in this article, *Harlem* is soaked with Black feminist thought because, despite its short run, the show's length was long enough to address specific issues, such as racial epithets, gentrification, the politics of Black women's hair, medical experimentations of Black people, "White women's tears," the "strong Black woman" and the mammy stereotypes; the series even plays with intertextual references to Black culture by featuring Jordan Peele's masterpiece in a fictional new format, *Get Out: The Musical.* Representation is intrinsically political and how the subject is projected onto the screen not only reflects but also influences its audience and the real world. Regarding Black women's misrepresentation, Moya Bailey and Trudy coined the term "misogynoir" to address the joint forces of misogyny and racism, which not only takes their life experiences as irrelevant but also devalues and silences them (Gassam Asare 2020). As Moya Bayley posits (2018), misogynoir notes "both an historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture" (762). Indeed, *Harlem* works against misogynoir and aims to reverse Black women's marginalization from mainstream popular culture's audiovisual narratives by giving them a voice

through fiction and making their experience the core, giving them a narrative of their own, albeit partial.

Apart from engaging with the Black female experience, *Harlem* addresses multiple issues that characterize the Black community. For instance, the show exposes police brutality and implicitly criticizes it in a scene in which Camille passes by a graffiti wall with a clear political message which might go unnoticed in the rush of watching the episodes:

> You don't have to answer any questions from police. When they approach, say, "Am I being detained, or am I free to go?" If they detain you, stay silent [and] demand a lawyer. A frisk is only a pat down. If police try to do more than that, say loudly, "I do not consent to this search." (fig. 2)

In the article "Can A Mural Save Your Life?" (2016) for *BuzzFeed News*, Emily Raboteau notes this mural can be found in Harlem, in "upper Manhattan, 138th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard." The power of these words goes beyond the fictional realm as they undoubtedly refer to the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality. Apart from showing an actual spot in Harlem, these words have the power of being engraved in one's memory through the screen while waiting for the series to start. Hence, if ever a Black viewer should find himself or herself a victim in a situation of police brutality, these instructional words could save their life.

Figure 2 Full view of the mural used in the show's opening for season 1. Artist: Sophia Dawson (2013).

Harlem also addresses the problem of gentrification when Camille uses her social media presence to criticize the new bistro that is going to be inaugurated soon in Harlem. As

Kelly Kreth (2021) notes in *Brick Underground*, gentrification in the show connects with the careers of the protagonists as "[t]he story lines weave NYC and real estate issues," and who concludes the comedy "offers a very stylistic and modern look at a unique neighborhood" (n.p.). Besides, *Harlem* finds a way to discuss racial epithets when Quinn and Camille meet at a yoga class. There, they complain about their love lives and criticize Black men using the N-word as part of their African American vernacular speech. The White yoga instructor warns them that racial epithets are not allowed in that space and Camille explains to her they can use the N-word because they are Black. Despite Camille's attempt to educate her on their right to use the N-word, the White yoga instructor asks them to leave the studio. The irony of this scene is shown through its dynamic between a White woman in power and two Black women: it is the former who reprimands the latter for using the word her own racial community started using four hundred years ago. Incredulous at the situation, Quinn and Camille twerk as they sing the N-word in protest. The dynamics of White supremacy are represented in the yoga class distribution of the attendees. In the first row, there are three White women—who gaze at each other perplexed by the Black women's performance (fig. 3). Meanwhile, three Black women and an Asian woman are in the back row. Ironically, the yoga class arrangement mirrors social structures and demographics in American society: women of color belong to the second row as if they were second-class citizens.

Figure 3 Quinn and Camille twerking in protest, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

2. Of Black Women, Hair, and Identity

Harlem celebrates the (partial) diversity of the Black female experience through its four main protagonists. It portrays a variety of skin complexions, featuring both dark-skinned

and light-skinned Black women, without cataloging them according to White-beauty ideals or falling into colorist attitudes. Also, *Harlem* celebrates Black hairstyles and natural hair, featuring Angie's afro, Camille's box braids, Tye's short natural haircut, and even Quinn's balayaged and straightened hair. This visual message is of utmost importance because, due to White hegemonic beauty standards, Black women's natural hair has been undermined in contrast to blond and straightened hair (hooks [1992] 2015b). While Morgan Jerkins (2018) posits that American society "is still grappling with how to control Black women's bodies and identities through their hair" (42), Ibram X. Kendi (2016) contends that Black hairstyles have long been considered "unprofessional" (421). Reversing this narrative and symbolizing the natural hair movement Jerkins assures is taking place at present (55), in *Harlem* both Camille and Dr. Pruitt—the two women working at Columbia, a White-dominated Ivy League institution—wear box braids and dreadlocks with pride.

In the fourth episode of the first season, "Winter Solstice," *Harlem* further explores the politics of hair for Black women and tackles how hair-related issues are a delicate topic for them. Black women's natural hair is at the center of racist criticism and discrimination both outside and within their own community. Condemned for its unique features in terms of texture, thickness, and natural growth, which contrast with prototypical Caucasian hair, Black women's hair is a double-edged sword as it can be both a source of pride or the factor that prompts the denigration and derision of Black women's worth. Because of this, Russell-Cole et al. (2013) acknowledge hair as "political" for Black women (155). In the episode, Tye is excited about her photoshoot for her desired *Forbes* cover, but after a disastrous experience at the hairdresser's, she has to shave her head the day before. The relevance of this situation is clear, as recent events related to Black women and their hair, such as Chris Rock's "joke" about Jada Pinkett Smith's shaved head, who suffers from alopecia, at the 2022 Oscars Gala by indirectly comparing her to Lieutenant Jordan O'Neil (Demi Moore), the protagonist of *G.I. Jane* (1997) because of her shaved head (Barnes and Sperling 2022, n.p.). The denigration of Black women's natural hair as well as the vulnerability that baldness fosters has encouraged the use of wigs and other forms of fake hair which at the same time have resulted in mockery around Black women's "inability to meet femme beauty standards" (McMillan Cottom 2019, 204). Rock, as a Black man and the producer of the documentary *Good Hair* (2009), should have been aware of the impact of his words and the susceptibility hair represents for Black women, making even more inappropriate his comparison of a Black women's hair in real life to a fictional White female character's. In *Harlem*, the use of wigs is both celebrated and addressed naturally. At the sight of Tye's burnt hair, Angie offers her friend "Trina," her "ever-present [wig] in case of emergency"—who confesses to her friends that she carries it with her "all the time" (*Harlem*, ep. 4, 19:20 – 19:31). Nonetheless, "Trina" neither fits Tye's identity nor her personality. Looking at herself in the mirror wearing Angie's wig,

Tye repeats to herself out loud as a mantra, "I am not my hair. My hair doesn't define me. I am not my hair. My hair doesn't define me" (fig. 4).

Figure 4 Tye wearing "Trina" and repeating her mantra, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

While she is trying to convince herself with the mantra, Anna, Tye's White interviewer and love interest, arrives and both women address Tye's new looks. Showing her vulnerability, Tye takes off the wig and exposes her shaved scalp to Anna, waiting for her reaction and disapproval (fig. 5).

Figure 5 Tye waiting for Anna's reaction, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

That the series shows Tye in this situation, the one friend of the group with seemingly higher self-esteem and better self-image is crucial as it extols the idea that hair for Black women transcends mere appearance: even the most self-assured Black woman could be defeated by an unwanted haircut or hairstyle. However, Anna celebrates Tye's hair and claims: "Fucking flawless. Now I really want that date" (*Harlem*, ep. 4, 30:13 – 30:15). Anna's positive reaction helps Tye to feel confident about her looks, unlike Rock's insensitive comment directed towards Jada Pinkett Smith. *Harlem* provides a reassuring message to those Black women who are struggling because of hegemonic White beauty standards related to hair and their assimilation in the Black community. The misbelief that natural hair is not beautiful affects the Black woman community by harming their self-esteem and self-image and which may drive them to chemically straighten their hair, wear wigs, or feel ashamed of their natural hair texture and shaved scalps in an attempt to fulfill White hair ideals and beauty standards. Hence, with this scene, the goal of *Harlem* is to suggest Black women should free themselves from the overwhelming pressure of respectability and beauty politics around their hair.

3. Killing the Strong Black Woman Trope and Impersonating the Mammy

The seventh episode of *Harlem*, "Strong Black Woman," which was written by Britt Matt and directed by Stacey Muhammad, can be argued to be one of the series' best episodes in the first season in terms of its Black Feminist essence. The episode revolves around one of the many stereotypes about Black women in the United States: that of the strong Black woman, who is "inferior to the pinnacle of womanhood, the weak White woman" (Kendi 2016, 6). As discussed by several Black Feminists (hooks [1989] 2015a; Hill Collins 2000; Jerkins 2018; Cooper 2018; McMillan Cottom 2019; Kendall 2020), like any other stereotype, the "strong Black woman" image is highly detrimental for its dehumanization of Black women. While Camille writes the passage (quoted below) on her computer which she narrates via voiceover, her explanation is accompanied by several images and videos about Black women, including Michelle Obama, Octavia Butler, and Rihanna, among many others:

> No one knows exactly who coined the term "strong Black woman." Or even exactly when the term originated. What we do know is that the trope is uniquely American and has been germane from slavery to the present day. In comparison to White femininity, which is valued for beauty, vulnerability, and maternal softness, Black women have been valued for their labor. Both literally and figuratively. A "strong Black woman" suppresses her emotions, never letting anyone see her sweat. She is ambitious, but still makes time to be supportive, even carrying her mate, her friends, and her family when necessary. Being labeled a "strong Black woman" is a rite of passage. She is resilient, independent, and capable. But what if she isn't? (season 1 ep. 7)

Then, the focus switches to Tye's hospitalization, who passed out in the previous episode because of incapacitating pelvic pain. Tye is misdiagnosed by a White male doctor who diminishes her ovulation and menstrual pain by saying "that is just Aunt Flo being a tough houseguest" (season 1, ep. 7, 02:53 – 02:55)—and who later insinuates Tye went to hospital looking for opioids. What this scene addresses is not just the frequently biased treatment female patients receive in terms of their health issues, but the dehumanizing treatment Black women receive in particular, which exemplifies "gender racism" (Kendi 2016, 6), and connects both with the misbelief that Black people feel less physical pain—known as "racial empathy gap"—and the strong Black woman stereotype (Cooper 2018, 93). The manipulation of Black female bodies in the name of science has historical roots. Following Jerkins's (2018) words, "J. Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecology, experimented on enslaved Black women without their consent and, in his autobiography, praised three slaves' endurance to withstand experiments without any anesthesia because their contributions would help all women" (122). Aware of the history of Western medicine experiments on Black bodies, the fact that Tye postponed seeking medical aid shows that for many Black women, despite the physical pain they might be suffering, dealing with it in silence is less hassle than dealing with the lack of empathy many White doctors treat the Black female body. The next day, when she wakes up in the hospital bed, she confesses the following to Quinn, who is sitting by her the following, referring to the medical experiments performed on African Americans between 1932 and 1972 in Tuskegee: "[t]hey [White doctors] do not treat us anyway. The most they do is experiment like Tuskegee" (ep. 7, 02:37 – 02:40). Then the two friends enumerate other instances of White experimentation, reproductive injustice, and medical exploitation of Black women's bodies.

According to Dorothy Roberts (1997), the exploitation and domination of Black women's bodies during slavery influenced the latter involuntary sterilization of Black people in the name of eugenics: "Whites' domination of slave women's wombs to sustain the system of slavery provided an early model of reproductive control" (61). Reversing the exploitation of Black women's wombs after the abolition of the slave market, considering Black people both unfit and sexually deviant, especially Black women, involuntary sterilization of Black women was enacted to stop their reproduction, which is accurately described by Davis ([1981] 2019) as "a racist form of birth control" (183). The occurrences that Quinn and Tye allude to include the forced sterilization of the Relf Sisters, which is one of the many cases of "compulsory sterilization as a means of eliminating the 'unfit' sector of the population" (194). The friends also mention the so-called "Mississippi Appendectomy," in which hysterectomies were performed on poor Black women without their prior consent (Early 2021, n.p.), and Henrietta Lacks' case, who was diagnosed and died of cervical cancer and whose cells have been used until the present day without her consent for scientific research and experimentation ("The Legacy of Henrietta Lacks"

n.d.; Lang 2022). In this sense, *Harlem* not only denounces these cases but raises awareness about them. If the viewer is not familiarized with them, the show will have succeeded in triggering at least a Google search, prompting further research into these historical occurrences.

Apart from the "strong Black woman trope," *Harlem* also tackles the historical stereotype of the mammy. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) defines the mammy as "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" that takes care of White children (72–73). In *Ain't I a Woman,* bell hooks ([1989] 2015a) explained that "[t]he mammy image was portrayed with affection by Whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal Black womanhood—complete submission to the will of Whites," and pointed out that the mammy trope is still present in contemporary shows, presented as the "[prototype] of acceptable Black womanhood" (119). In the fourth episode, Angie takes advantage of this, as Hill Collins calls it, "controlling image" (72). She visits Quinn at her boutique and asks her friend for the money she needs to join the Actors Union, but Quinn declines as she is struggling to pay the boutique's rent. Then, Jill, a White mother, comes out of one of the changing rooms and complains about her daughter because she could not try on the clothes she wanted: "She is the worst. I am so over it. I am totally, totally lost since my Jamaican nanny quit" (season 1, ep. 4, 14:52 – 14:57). She then confesses to Quinn her neediness for support with her mothering: "I am desperate for help, but she has to be Jamaican. I had a Jamaican nanny when I grew up, and I miss her so much" (15:00 – 15:05). Jill's words imply she has a deep-seated wish to perpetuate the cycle of subordination she learned as a child. She reveals her racial obsession with Black women from a particular ethnonational group as domestic helpers under the delusion that Jamaican women are superior to other Black women because of her alleged bond with a Jamaican nanny when she was a child.

Then, out of a racist preference, those are the only Black women she accepts in her circle. Critical race feminist Taunya Lovell Banks (2003) notes that in the United States "[t]he term 'domestic worker' invokes the historical image of a native-born Black woman, the mammy" (332) and contends that the job titles of "babysitter" and "nanny" justify the low wages childcarers are paid (329). After overhearing the conversation, Angie starts her performance as a Jamaican immigrant looking for a nanny job (fig. 6). Enchanted by her new finding, Jill is willing to hire Angie, who leads the negotiation, asking for the six hundred dollars she needs straightaway. Her performance and cultural appropriation are not correct—as Quinn reprimands her—but, in doing so, she is indeed reversing the narrative. This time, Angie is the one mocking a White woman who is obsessed with having a Black Jamaican "nanny" and yet she cannot differentiate a real Jamaican from an impostor. Once at Jill's house during the interview, Jill tells Angie she reminds her of actress Viola Davis. Once she leaves, Angie changes her accent and apprises Jill's child, Teddy, angered by her mother's microaggression and racist behavior: "Okey. The doll shit is

okay, but your mum's racist bullshit is not. All dark-skinned women do not look the same, and we are not here just to take care of White kids" (28:59 – 29:07). Although she is completely aware of the part she is playing, Angie decides that, for the first time in her life, subordination will be a Black woman's choice rather than an imposition.

Figure 6 Angie pretends to be a Jamaican immigrant, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 4).

At the end of the seventh episode, the four friends reunite and cry around Tye's hospital bed complaining about the rough experiences they each had in the last few days. Camille laments over the fact that Dr. Pruitt does not think she reaches the levels of excellence a Black professor should have at an Ivy league, Quinn complains about her troubled relationship with her mother and her friends see her as the strong friend of the group because she comes from a wealthy family, Tye about her surgery and pain, and Angie about the fact that she has been humiliated, twice, by White women. Repeating how it started and closing the circle, the episode ends with Camille's voice in voiceover addressing the negative impact of the Strong Black woman trope:

> While the "strong Black woman" insignia charades as a compliment, it really pardons the rest of the world of their responsibility to view the Black woman as vulnerable, able to experience pain, capable of weakness, worthy of support, and unconditionally lovable. Until the Black woman is allowed to reject this demand for strength, she will never truly experience her own humanity. (ep. 7, 29:20 – 29:48)

Thus, *Harlem* shows the vulnerability of Black women and their humanity as it aims to surpass this trope and the detriment it represents for Black women's mental and physical well-being. By portraying its four characters suffering and realistically handling their

trauma, the episode invites the viewers to reconsider that despite appearances, the strong Black woman tag should be left in the past.

4. White Women's Tears, Black Women's Blame

In its seventh episode, *Harlem* exposes a phenomenon that despite its innocent appearance it is, in fact, an ultimate mechanism of racist manipulation and White domination that asserts the subordination of people of color, particularly, the subordination of women of color: the so-called White women's tears. Several Black feminists have addressed this tactic of domination and manipulation and Black women's impossibility to "get out" of its claws. On the one hand, British author Reni Eddo-Lodge describes White tears as a phenomenon that is "a really destructive byproduct of anti-racist conversation, in which White ears hear Black voices talk about racism and interpret it as information designed to make them feel like they are a bad person" (in "7: White Women Crying is Racist!" 2018). According to Luvvie Ajayi Jones (2018) when White women cry in a situation that involves a Black woman, or women of color in general, they perform the role of the helpless "damsel in distress" (n.p.). That is because White women's tears behold "transformative power[s]" (Schuller 2021, 68) and they are used to "shift blame and claim victimhood" (Cooper 2018, 173). The explanation behind this phenomenon is that White women's tears represent both the cult of (White) womanhood (Ajayi Jones 2018) and that of "true civilization" (Schuller 2021, 50); thus, leaving Black women unprotected. Following Ajayi Jones, Ruby Hamad (2018) describes the weaponizing of White women's tears as "the trauma caused by the tactic many White women employ to muster sympathy and avoid accountability, by turning the tables and accusing their accuser [Black women/women of color]." Later, in the book *White Tears, Brown Scars* (2020), Hamad further contextualizes this White practice and posits that "the woman of color is left out in the cold, often with no realistic option—particularly if it is a workplace interaction—but to accept blame and apologize" (7). *In Harlem*, Angie once again experiences the workings of White-Black dynamics at her workplace. Apart from her sour impersonation of a traditional mammy, like many other Black women, she also confronts the phenomenon of White tears.

Kate, the actress who plays the not-so-innocent Rose in *Get Out: The Musical*—a fictional musical after Jordan Peele's *Get Out*—uses the words "ghetto" to criticize the marking tape, the set design, and the overall production after tripping down in one of the scene rehearsals. Astonished by the situation and the director's silence, Angie confronts her White colleague in front of the entire cast and asks her what she means by calling everything "ghetto." Kate replies to Angie's inquiry with another question, "Are you calling me a racist?," to which Angie's comeback is, "Depends on how you answer the question" (ep. 7, 09:30 – 10:04). Suddenly, Kate leaves the stage crying in despair, apparently hurt by her Black colleague's indirect accusation. Then, Angie adds triumphantly, "White

girls gonna White" (ep. 7, 10:09) without knowing that her words are going to bring her more pain than liberation. As signaled by Ajayi Jones, Hamad, and Eddo-Lodge, Kate's White tears are victorious, demonstrating how White women's tears trap Black women within a social pattern that uses victimhood to achieve domination. Later in the episode, the director—a Black man—commands Angie to apologize to Kate because, according to his perception of the events, she is the one who made the insensitive comment, and, in consequence, Kate claims to be too upset to rehearse (fig. 7). Ironically, the execution of White tears takes place during one rehearsal of *Get Out: The Musical*, a fictional musical adaptation of Peele's film about the White latent desire for slavery in the United States and the dynamics of White domination and Black subordination. What is more, with his request the director as a Black man fails at defending his community, his working team, and, more particularly, a Black woman who tried to fight against microaggressions.

Figure 7 Kate uses her White tears against Angie, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 7).

When Angie discusses the situation with her friends, Camille hits the spot: they all know well that she must apologize if she wants to keep her job. As Hamad (2020) highlighted, because the incident occurred in the workplace, Angie has no other option but to apologize to the White woman who used her White tears against her. After that, in a scene that looks like a kindergarten setup, Angie is bound to apologize to a now-smiling Kate. Yet a major plot twist occurs when Angie rebels and bursts the following words with anger:

> Fuck you, Kate. Fuck your microaggressions. Fuck your White tears that you use as a weapon to distract from your racism. Fuck the history of White women like you who got people who look like me harmed or killed because you were too weak to admit your own fucking shortcomings. [Faces Mark, the director] Fuck you for being another Black man complicit in some racist bullshit against a Black woman. [Faces Eric, a co-worker] Fuck you for engaging in

> respectability politics, which we all know has never and will never get us to equality. [Turns to another co-worker with her fist up in the air] You cool, sis! [Faces another co-worker] Fuck you for asking me to forgive this shit. [Asks all] Does anybody ask Jewish people to forgive the Nazis? No! Because the Nazis were fucking wrong-ass, vile-ass pieces of shit. [Middle fingers out] So fuck all y'all! Fuck this bullshit production! I'm out! (ep. 7, 24:35 – 25:38)

But a sudden return to reality confirms that this monologue just took place in Angie's imagination. In the end, Angie apologizes to Kate, who forgives her and hugs her despite Angie's avoidant body language (fig. 7). Proud of the conflict resolution, Mark claims, "this is what *Get Out* was all about" (26:04 – 26:09) as if Peele's film were about the Black community forgiving White people for their atrocities. As Angie wonders, did he even watch it? Indeed *Harlem* does not offer its viewers a solution to end White women's tears—if there is one—but at least it points to it as a real-life everyday experience raising awareness about it and its manipulative nature: White women's tears are an execution of White power that reinforces Black subordination. Nonetheless, *Harlem* offers a memorable speech that should not be forgotten. With Angie´s monologue, the series gives voice from fiction to what many would like to scream and cannot in the real world.

Figure 8 Kate hugs a humiliated Angie after she apologizes to her, *Harlem* (season 1, ep. 7).

5. Conclusion

Harlem aims to transgress the stigmatizing image of Black women in White-dominated pop culture or their erasure from it. It offers new narratives, voices, and realities, and fills in a representational void without forgetting that it is, foremost, comedy. Despite the series' shortcomings in terms of class representation, failing to be fully intersectional itself, *Harlem* brings its audience closer to Black Feminism through its examination of Black women's daily experiences. A viewer acquainted with Black Feminist history and theory will recognize the topics the series touches upon with ease. And, if not, it promotes both

the observation and understanding of the Black female reality. Thus, *Harlem* would become a vehicle of knowledge, reflection, and social change. Apart, its high-class focalization shows that Black women could also be the protagonists of a *Sex and the City* kind of narrative—yet forever haunted by gender racism—therefore, showing what Roxanne Gay manifested in *Bad Feminist* in the essay "When Less is More": how White and people of color are different and yet very much alike. On a concluding note, if a White viewer or reviewer assumes *Harlem* holds no value as a popular culture product, their stance is likely connected to White fragility having felt attacked by the social accuracy and racial sensitivities revealed in the series. The discomfort and defensiveness the subject might experience watching the episodes prevent them from appreciating *Harlem*'s essence: effective popular culture entertainment centered on the Black female reality in twenty-first-century America. And for those who enjoyed the first season, *Harlem* has returned in 2023 with a second season composed of eight new episodes that promise to continue being as bold and daring as the ones examined in this paper.

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DISABILITY AND COMEDY: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES ONSCREEN

Sara Martínez-Guillén

ABSTRACT

Characters with disabilities or any type of impairment have been present in film productions since the early stages of cinema. However, they seldom become main characters in mainstream media and in particular in comedy films, as their body doesn't belong to the acceptable norm. Comedy has been known as a tool to challenge the system and yet it seems scarcely used to represent disabilities, drama being the preferred choice for narratives revolving around disabled protagonists. This article focuses on two films in which comedy and drama are combined to tell stories centred, indeed, on people with a disability (*Come as You Are* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, both released in 2019). Using different humour strategies such as incongruity and superiority, their main characters successfully challenge society, its conventions and its stereotypes—with incongruity mechanisms the films deal with what is considered "normal" and with superiority mechanisms they challenge power relations. The analysis will show how comedy is a genre capable to give its disabled characters the possibility to express themselves for an audience that is also being represented on screen—whether it is disabled viewers who can identify with the protagonists or abled ones who see their behaviours challenged onscreen.

Keywords: disability studies, humour studies, film studies, stereotypes, incongruity.

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Over the years, plenty of films whose main focus has been characters with disabilities have been produced, from the early stages of cinema, for instance the film *Freaks* (1932), to more recent productions as the winner of the best feature film award in the 2022 Oscar ceremonies, *Coda* (2021). The presence of the disabled body in mainstream cinema is undeniable and the diversity characterising this group can offer has also been portrayed, spanning from physical disabilities to cognitive ones. To this, the depiction of mental health issues can also be added, which has been brought to the attention of many filmmakers due to the growing awareness shown in Western society in recent years. Hence, the representation of an array of disabilities has been present throughout the history of cinema.

However, it can be argued that the presence of disabled bodies in film representation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has mostly been circumscribed

to fleeting moments and rarely delved into. Likewise, the public presence of actors with disabilities has been scarce and their roles have been invisibilised. For example, when Zack Gottsagen—the main star of the film *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019)—appeared on the stage at the Oscars ceremony in 2020, it was the first time that an actor with Down Syndrome officially participated in the event. Although he was there to simply introduce an award and was not nominated for one himself, he was received with a standing ovation and gave visibility to disabled people in the entertainment industry.

At the same time, while audience members can find many examples of the disabled body disseminated on screen, few of them centre their narratives on disabled protagonists and even less storylines go beyond overly dramatic tones and struggle stereotypes. In this paper I analyse two films, both described as dramedies (a blend of comedy and drama usually with a happy ending), arguing that the combination of these two macrogenres gives the films room to create different associations with disabilities and more nuanced representations—thus allowing the narrative to challenge and problematise expectations and stereotypes that have become commonplace in mainstream US culture.

The examined films were both released in 2019 and both include characters with some type of disability as their protagonists: *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (*TPBF* henceforth) and *Comes as You Are* (*CAYA*). The first one follows Zak (Zack Gottsagen), an orphan with Down Syndrome, whom the healthcare system has confined in a retirement house. To follow his dream of becoming a professional wrestler, he manages to escape with the help of his roommate. While being chased by Eleanor, a worker in the retirement house (Dakota Johnson), Zak meets fisherman Tyler (Shia LaBeouf) who is also on the run and helps him reach his destination: Salt Water Redneck's school, a wrestling institution that has been closed for some time. Still, the three characters find a way for Zak to wrestle, becoming a family in the process. Conversely, *Come as You Are* tells the story of three disabled friends who go on a road trip to a brothel in Canada to lose their virginity. The film follows visually impaired Mo (Ravi Patel), Harry (Hayden Szeto), who has a non-specific degenerative illness and needs a wheelchair, tetraplegic Scotty (Grant Rosenmeyer), and their driver Sam (Gabourey Sidibe). As they decide to flee without informing their families, the group goes to extreme lengths to avoid being traced. However, and to their surprise, when their plan is discovered their parents do not oppose it, thus allowing them to reach their destination.

On the topic of disability and film, it is important to take into account the perspective through which the movies are told. Films can, for example, rely on a constructionist approach that sees "disability as a social process in which no inherent meanings attach to physical differences other than one assigned by a community" (Davis 1995, 504). In other words, people with any impairment that skews from the "norm" are labelled as "disabled" by society because their bodies do not belong to what the community has established as the standard or "normal" body. The films examined challenge the

establishment of the socially constructed normal body, they do so through the perspective of disabled characters and the development of their narrative, starting from the premises of their plots. In *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, Zak has no place in society because he has no known relatives that could take care of him and he has Down Syndrome, hence he is not allowed to live independently. Even though he is a self-sufficient adult, he is permanently incapacitated by the system. In *Come as You Are*, the three friends have to go on a journey to experience their sexuality, as the notion of disability often neglects the possibility of a functioning sex life, as well as the existence of sexual needs.

1. Humour Theories

Besides highlighting their constructionist approach, to understand how these films and their main sequences work their use of humour has to be analysed as well. Comedic events can be explained through three main theories related to the notions of superiority, incongruity and relief. Furthermore, it is fundamental to understand that "there are three available positions in a joking exchange—teller, audience and butt" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 8). This means that a subject can be the one telling the joke, listening to it or the object of humour, and according to Helen Davis and Sarah Ilott "more than one position can be adopted by the same person in a given exchange" (8).

The relevance of the positions in a joking exchange is observed in superiority theory. John Morreal defines this theory as the one that sees "laughter as expressing our feelings of superiority, over someone else or over a former state of ourselves" (2005, 65). Davis and Ilott focus on a more negative aspect by seeing "laughter as aggressive and deriving from a sense of superiority in the self in comparison with the inferiority of those forming the butt of the joke" (2018, 7). Hence, two branching categories of superiority can be distinguished. On the one hand, in "aggressive superiority . . . the target can clearly be identified: a so-called butt of the joke" (Vandaele 2002, 239), that is to say, the direct object of mockery. On the other hand, "affirmative superiority" in turn is divided into "circumstantial superiority, humor solving and institutionalized humor" as they all "affirm rather than destroy" (Vandaele 2002, 241). This type of humour can be defined by power relations and thus points at the superiority a social community may have over another (able bodies against disabled bodies), but it can also "denote moral superiority by laughing at sexist, racist, or homophobes" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 8).

Another important theory regarding humour is related to incongruity, which can be defined as the mechanism that "sees laughter as arising from the connection of something that fails to match up to people's expectations, according to how they have been conditioned to experience the world" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 9). This kind of joke interprets a situation as humorous when "there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy" (Morreal 2005, 66). While in most situations a simple contradiction, an unexpected one-liner, may make us laugh, there are other instances when Incongruity Theory

alone cannot explain humour. To explain this, Jeroen Vandaele (2002) gives the example of stutter, which in itself is not amusing but this speech disorder can be turned into a joke by considering the theory of superiority as a trigger of humour (228).

Finally, the last approach is relief theory which became popular thanks to Sigmund Freud's work, and it is "based on the idea that laughter releases a form of nervous energy" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 10). Freud distinguished "innocent" jokes from "tendentious" ones (Freud 1962, 91–92). The latter is the one that breaks the restrictions from oneself and the conventional boundaries that society is setting (Davis and Ilott 2018, 10). As Davis and Ilott highlight, Freud also examined how humour could function as a "rebellion against social structures" (10), which could also mean destroying stereotypes. It is through this theory that the ultimate goal of the comedy of these films can be understood because it can be used to rebel against stereotypes and the normalisation of the body.

2. Humour and Disability

Humour can thus be used to tackle taboos in society regarding minorities and the body and these two films do not miss the chance of using humour as a tool to challenge stereotypes. The first two theories mentioned above (incongruity and superiority) are important because they help explain how comedy is used to challenge what has been defined as the "normal" body. It is important to note that the idea of a normal or healthy body has been challenged by the development of the field of Disability Studies. It is worth mentioning in this sense Rosemarie Garland Thomson's book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disabilities in American Culture and Literature* (1997), in which she coins the term "normate"; and Lennard J. Davis's book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deformity and the Body* (1995) which introduces the term "normalcy."

By considering humour as a taboo-breaker, the first clue explaining why incongruity theory is important is found: the protagonists of the films analysed represent a type of body which is not normalised. In her book, Alison Wilde (2018) states that she tends to "lean towards a preference for incongruity-based explanations, in the belief that we need to illuminate how people have been misrecognised, as a prerequisite for representational change" (33). So, tackling taboos through comedy can be a good device to break or at least challenge stereotypes. The most evident characteristic of these narratives is the fact that their protagonists are all disabled characters. As Wilde argues, usually "supporting roles are where many disabled characters are to be found" (2018, 20). Hence, simply by having a story centred on characters with impairments is per se breaking the norm, as they are protagonists expressing their needs and their articulated personality, whose identity escapes the stereotyped moulds that disabled secondary characters usually fall into.

However, analysing the films only through the perspective of incongruity would be incomplete. I would argue that including the other two theories give a more detailed and

deep analysis of the power comedy can have. Especially by focusing on superiority theory, it can be observed how humour is not only a weapon for the films but also for the characters they represent. As mentioned above, a "moral superiority" stance (Davis and Ilott 2018) is used to laugh at those who usually assume to be superior. Hence, superiority in humour can also come from the member of a minority. It is, however, less common to see because in order for this to happen there needs to be a shift in power relations. Usually, the member of a minority is placed in an inferior position within the group and thus has more chances of becoming the butt of the joke—but sometimes the tables can be turned. Films like the ones analysed, which are developed from the perspective of disabled characters, allow for the power relation to change slightly and so create comedy leveraging different configurations of superiority. This means that the abled bodies are expected to become the butt of the jokes as, in this recentred narrative, the disabled ones are in a dominant position of superiority.

Moreover, for many audience members, this type of humor "can seem odd and disturbing" because western society "equates disability with personal tragedy" (Bingham and Green 2016, 6). The equation of disability with tragedy leads viewers to find it inconceivable to create humour with impairments, and as such to ignore the possible power comedy can entail for this group. When describing the humour of a stand-up comedian who has a disability, Shawn Chandler Bingham and Sara E. Green (2016) argue that "his set is a mirror and a measuring stick, provoking not only laughter but also thought and discomfort" (2). This ultimately leads the viewers to reconsider their "preconceived notions of what disability is and is not" (Bingham and Green 2016, 2). Hence, the use of humour can be twofold: entertainment and eye-opening. For a group, like the disabled, belonging to a minority, humour can become a weapon. By presenting a relaxed, seemingly naïve, setting comedy "provides tension relief, ammunition for attack or acceptance into a group, and a way to challenge and unveil social norms" (Bringham and Green 2016, 16). Similarly, after interviewing stand-up comedians, Sharon Lockyer (2015) argues that their comedy had secondary functions "related to the different ways in which disability can be affirmed through comedy via increasing understanding and educating audiences about disability" (1404). Hence, humour can serve non-disabled audiences to learn that "the problem is not the impairment *per se*, but the attitudes and structures that render the impairment disabling" (Reid et al. 2006, 630)

Furthermore, Rebecca Mallet (2010) argues that "mainstream disability comedy is the product, the symptom, and the cause of negative and discriminatory attitudes, with only certain sort of comedic utterances from certain sorts of comedic authors being deemed acceptable" (paragraph 10). Therefore, two different types of humour in regard to disability can be identified. On the one hand, Tom Coogan (2013) distinguished between "disablist humour" and "crip humour." The former can be defined as the "faux transgressive humour" while the latter as the "humour that expresses and helps

constitute group solidarity and values" (Coogan 2013, 8). I believe that these two films are using crip humour to support the visibility of disabled people. Although it may not be clear if the protagonists' actions are heroic or still tragic, the films are using humour to increase the awareness of disability rights and improve the representation of the reality of disability. Nevertheless, as Janine Natalya Clark (2022) comments "whether humour is constructed as offensive will often depend on many different factors, including an individual's particular circumstances, the context in which comments are made and the intent behind them" (1544).

However, it is important to note that the line between humour and offence can be very thin, and sometimes what one considers funny others can regard as offensive (a disparity existing even among people belonging to the same social or cultural group). As Michael Biling (2005) argues "it is necessary to understand the context in which a joke is told and not just determine its meaning in the abstract" and it is important to understand it as "a more general ideological or political context" (32). One such context can be national or cultural which "plays a part in what is *marked* as humorous, whether it is received as such or not" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 15). There are, however, more limited context because "there is a difference between a joke between friends, and the utterances of a famous comedian on a weekly panel show" (Davis and Ilott 2018, 16). This brought the need to differentiate between comedy and humour. While humour "infiltrates every area of social life and interaction, even rearing its head in situations where it is not normally regarded as appropriate," comedy is a "more formal staging in club venues, broadcasting or film" (Lockyer and Pickering 2005, 3). What is more, this division, as Davis and Ilott state quoting Hans Robert Jauss (2000), "'horizon of expectations': audiences will expect to find cause for laughter in the way the world and its inhabitants are represented" (6). Specifically, *TPBF* and *CAYA* showcase two different ways in which to represent disabled characters in comedy not as the butt of the joke. This is accomplished through the creation of crip humour thanks to a shift in power relations.

The films analysed in this paper showcase forms of crip humour where the use of humour serves the filmmakers to challenge the norms in Western society. The use of incongruity mechanisms is used to criticise some stereotypes usually associated with disabled people, mainly incapability and, in the specific case of *CAYA*, sexlessness. Power relations are opposed using superiority mechanisms. And, lastly, *CAYA* is the only one with some comedy associated with relief theory and here it can observed how it is used to express frustration and possibly anger of Scotty. Through the analysis of some scenes and sequences in the films, I try to demonstrate how these films find a way to use humour as a positive aspect for disabled characters.

3. The Power to Make Rules: *The Peanut Butter Falcon*

The opening scene in *TPBF* shows Zak's unhappiness and the wish to live his life outside of the retirement house. His plan consists of convincing an elderly woman to create a distraction so that he can run to the main exit and escape. Even though they put all their efforts into carrying out the plan, Zak is caught seconds after he crosses the door. Their facial expressions and body language—as they are clearly trying not to look suspicious—suggest that the sequence could be related to a prison escape, the only difference being that the characters involved are a disabled young man and an elderly lady at a retirement home. The comedic effect is thus accomplished by having unexpected people recreate a kind of scene that usually would belong to an action prison-escape film with athletic, non-disabled, young characters. In this scene, the plan is represented with a simple drawing made by Zak (fig. 1) and the payment for his accomplice is just some pudding. The seriousness of their expressions while making sure that nobody can see them, is in stark contrast with the way the unfolding of the plan is represented. In order to avoid speaking, he draws a sketch to explain what he needs from the elderly woman and what her compensation would be. Showing this drawing only adds to the incongruity embodied by the scene and helps to make the opening scene of the film funnier. The drawing, however, seems to be made by a child and connects with the idea of Zak being permanently seen as a child.

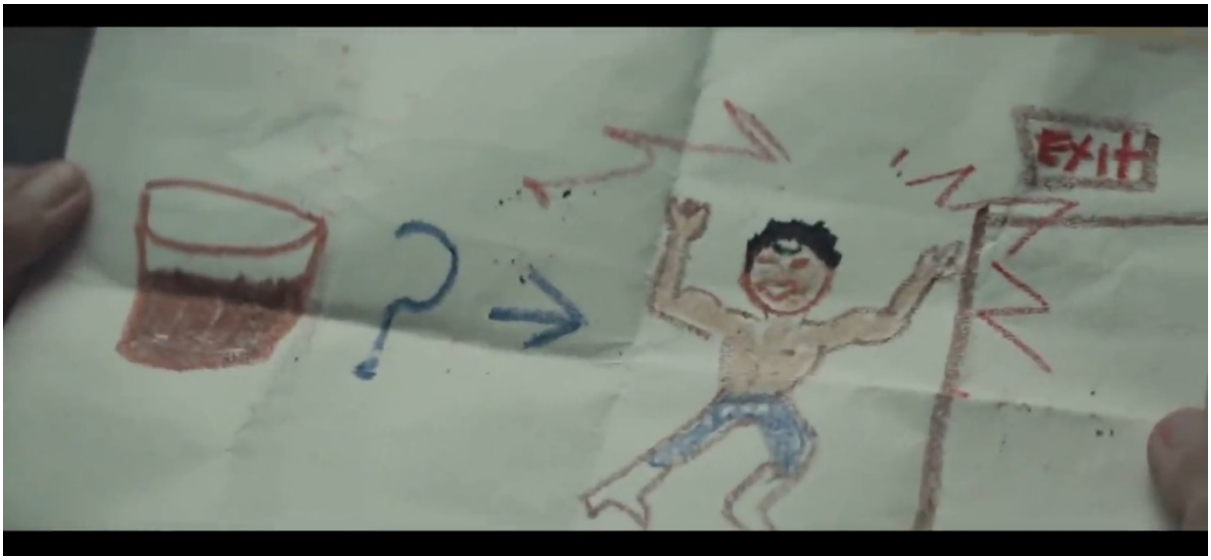

Figure 1 Zak's drawing, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019.

Throughout the narrative, Zak goes through a process of growth. The first half of the film shows how Zak is considered unable to do certain things that in reality he can carry out by himself. Along the journey, he shows (both to himself and the people around him) that he is much more dependable than the healthcare system made him be. Zak escapes the

retirement house by sliding through the bars of the window but for that, he needs to take his clothes off to favour the sliding, as if he was being born again. Zak finds himself walking around wearing only his white underwear which resembles a diaper. Due to the social censure of nakedness, Zak walking around in his underwear may create a feeling of awkwardness in the audience which leads to comedy. Moreover, as Lockyer (2015) asserts, this humour can have the ultimate goal of making the American audience think of the current situation of people with Down Syndrome in the United States. His nakedness could be considered a representation of the lack of protection the care system has to offer for people with Down Syndrome or other disabilities. Whether intentionally or not, the progress from going naked to being fully clothed parallels the protagonist's process of growth. Zak goes from being treated like a dependent child to being a dependable adult, which is only allowed once he escapes the retirement house to follow his own path/dreams.

In addition, his relationship with Tyler and Eleanor is a fundamental factor in this process. While Eleanor believes that the best place for Zak is the retirement house where he can be taken care of, Tyler considers that Zak has to be free to live every experience he wishes to try and hence helps him reach his destination. The differing attitudes lead Eleanor and Tyler to engage in several arguments regarding how they should treat Zak. Following this infantilising representation of Zak, Eleanor and Tyler seem to behave like his parents assuming and making decisions on what is "best for him." Zak is allowed to show his independence because Tyler opposes Eleanor's views. However, both characters seem to treat Zak as a child—incapable of deciding anything relevant on his own—by not including him in these discussions. A good example of this dynamic is when, while on a raft, Tyler and Eleanor tell Zak to practise holding his breath underwater so that meanwhile they can talk about him, giving him no chance to participate in the conversation (fig. 2).

In this sequence, Zak continues to be portrayed as a dependent child whose parents, Tyler and Eleanor, seem to be the ones who know better. The seriousness of the scene is interrupted by Zak who takes his head out of the water with a fish that he catches. Aside from the comedy created by the unexpected interruption, having Zak fishing with his mouth offers some tension relief for the audience. After giving the audience two different positions in the debate over the protagonist, the film presents them with some comedic exchange to lighten the tone. At the same time, by having Zak interrupting the argument the film puts him to the centre of the narrative again, as the audience focuses their attention on him and not on Tyler or Eleanor. Whilst representing one more step of the process of growth for Zak—in which he can prove his dependability—it is also a process of learning for Tyler and Eleanor, who ultimately create a bond with Zak based on respect. Similarly, the film takes the viewers through a similar journey of understanding as they are introduced to Zak's perspective.

Figure 2 Tyler and Eleanor talking while Zak has his head under water, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019.

While incongruity mechanisms in *TPBF* are used to challenge the inabilities—or, rather, the stereotypes and assumptions—usually associated with disabled people, superiority mechanisms are used to challenge power relations. After agreeing to help Zak reach his destination, Tyler informs him that there are two rules he has to follow: to avoid slowing his own journey down and that he is in charge and leads the way. Zak immediately accepts these two rules, knowing that Tyler is going to help him reach his destination. However, when Tyler starts walking Zak waits a few seconds before following him, which frustrates Tyler because he has to stop and wait for him. When asked again what rule number one was, Zak responds "Party." Considering how easily the rules were accepted by Zak, the audience expects to hear a repetition of the first rule which would assert their positions: Tyler as the one in charge and Zak as the naïve companion who follows suit. Conversely, what Zak accomplishes with this simple word is to challenge who is in charge. By "stealing" the role of rule maker from Tyler and thus challenging his power, Zak turns their power positions on their head. Zak is stealing the rules from Tyler, thus not letting him take charge of the journey. Although the answer seems childish, he is in fact challenging Tyler's power over him. And he is most successful here, Tyler being one of the few characters that treats him as an equal on most occasions from the start. Although the butt of the joke is Tyler in this exchange, Zak doesn't retain a great superiority over him as Tyler is frustrated and keeps thinking that Zak should not slow him down.

4. Neglected Needs: *Come as You Are*

As in *TPBF*, the adult characters in *CAYA* are also trying to run away from home. Nonetheless, for Matt, Scotty and Mo their escape is temporary as they intend to lose their virginity and return home. Similar to Zak's escape, the characters in this film also elaborate

a plan, which makes them behave as sort of secret agents as they only have the chance to talk about it when their parents are not around. One of these moments is the sequence in which they go to their rehabilitation centre. In one sequence, Matt and Scotty meet at the entrance door of the centre where they have discuss details of their plan. In this shot it can be seen how they give each other a quick update in front of the rehabilitation centre. In order to avoid being suspicious, they stay next to each other and avoid eye contact while using sentences like "leave no trace" [00:20:20] (fig. 3). They also need the help of Matt's sister to buy some things they need or Scotty needs Mo to help him pack his luggage and Scotty is very keen on naming their escape plan "operation copulation [00:22:53]. The only difference between this film and any other involving a secret escape or plot, and hence what creates incongruity, is that the ones plotting it are disabled characters.

Figure 3 Matt and Scotty secretly talking about their plans, *Come as You Are*, 2019.

Aside from the escape plan, the film presents some more incongruous situations opposing the expectations that Western society has created about disabled people. The first and the most obvious stereotype tackled in this film is that disabled people as sexless or asexual. The wish to express their sexual desire for these characters becomes itself a sign of rebellion because American society does not consider sex as a necessity for disabled individuals. Hence, their families do not see the need to engage with that aspect of their lives. Moreover, being the mastermind behind the trip, Scotty is introduced as the character with more sexual desire and the most outspoken one about it. Therefore, watching porn is the first thing he does when he finds himself in a motel room without any supervision. Visually impaired Mo, however, can't see what is going on in the video, and although he is not so outspoken about his sexual needs, his curiosity is piqued.

Consequently, Scotty begins to describe to Mo what the porn actors are doing on screen. Due to the stereotype that imagines disabled people as sexless, having Scotty and Mo watch porn creates per se an incongruous situation for the audience. On top of that, to have Scotty describe it to Mo makes the sequence even more incongruous.

A few minutes later, the characters realise that they have been traced and thus need to hide from their parents, but as their driver is absent, they have no alternative to escape than driving the van themselves. Here the audience witnesses how the protagonists struggle and use their disabled bodies to find a way to drive a car that is not built for drivers with any kind of impairment. Matt and Scotty become the eyes and Mo the hands and legs, all of them working together to become one body and manage to drive. This sequence is meant to be comical because it creates a completely unexpected situation, paired with the unspoken understanding that someone with disabilities can't and is not supposed to drive a vehicle. The frame construction of the shot of the three in the van, Mo being unsure but Scotty and Matt trying to ensure him that everything is going to be all right is possibly another reason why this scene is comical (fig. 4). Their failure to arrive at their destination is expected, but their goal was escaping, and they are more than successful in achieving their escape. It is interesting to realise that most of the unexpected moments follow the contrast between reality—characterised by ingenuity and diverse capabilities—and a mainstream belief of what a capable body is and what it should look like.

As Wilde (2018) argues, the stereotypes and narrative tropes usually associated with disabilities can be acknowledged through incongruity and only by analysing them and becoming aware of them might there be any change. Comedy in this case, although it may look insignificant, is a powerful weapon to criticise the norms and beliefs in Western society.

Figure 4 Matt, Mo and Scotty driving the van, *Come as You Are*, 2019.

After driving the van to a ditch next to the road, Mo, Scotty and Matt are found by a confused police officer. Being the police officer the embodiment of authority, the audience would expect him to be the one in control of the situation. In this specific case, however, the police officer finds himself overpowered by the three disabled characters. The stereotypes embedded in his perception of disabled individuals lead him to not fully understand the situation he faces, as he does not fully understand how three disabled people were capable of driving a van. Mo, Scotty and Matt take advantage of his confusion and snatch the position of power from him by using sarcasm. The three protagonists are consciously lying to him, aware that he does not know how to talk to them as peers and opposing them would put him in an awkward situation. It is this uneasiness that makes Scotty smile and gives wings to his superiority as can be seen in his facial expression (fig. 5).

Being in this position the three characters find their confidence and correct the officer regarding the terms he uses to define them. Scotty corrects his use of "handicapped gentlemen" because he should use "persons with disabilities." Mo corrects his use of "blind person" by saying "Excuse me, it's visually impaired" [00:46:26]. The number of corrections leaves the police officer even more confused and he seems to seek their approval when he calls a tow truck for their van. Aside from showing the importance of inclusive language, the film chooses to have the police officer represent the ignorance of most abled bodies by having him be the butt of the joke. The choice of the authoritative figure as the object of comedy is relevant as it shows how stereotypes and ignorance are embedded in almost every strand of society. Still, the most relevant feature of this scene is that the comedy is being created by the disabled characters who feel powerful enough to mess with the police officer.

Figure 5 Scotty, Mo and Matt talking to the police officer, *Come as You Are*, 2019.

The police officer comes across as even more ignorant when he states that "my cousin's brother-in-law is Down Syndrome, so I know" [00:47:36]. On the one hand, this scene exposes the commonly applied logic fallacy—possibly shared by members of the audience—undergirding the assumption that because one knows of a person with disabilities (in no way related to them) they can understand the experience that all persons with disabilities including these three characters are living. Hence, the film is using both the police officer and the audience itself as the butt of the joke. On the other hand, such a misguided conviction on the fictional character's part lends more power to the three protagonists, because he clearly did not even consider that he had to be corrected. As much as the police officer tries to regain power by appearing as someone who "knows" about disabilities, he only exposes his inferior position in terms of knowledge, inclusivity, and respect.

The protagonists find themselves surrounded by people's ignorance, those who pretend to understand what their lives are like, but they still do not feel like their needs are taken into consideration. Hence, their need to escape their parents' homes to visit a brothel in Canada to satisfy their sexual needs, which are completely ignored by everyone around them. By analysing humour through relief theory, the frustration felt by the characters due to their situation can be highlighted. At the same time, by considering relief mechanisms, the audience might observe more examples of power relations shifts or stereotypes criticisms.

I argue that these mechanisms are mostly used through the character of Scotty, who shows his frustration in life with sarcastic comments. His main objective on this trip to Canada is to prove that he can be independent and that he can carry out more tasks without the constant help of his mother. As he is a tetraplegic, he needs constant help from a caretaker, whether it is to eat his meals or to get out of bed. In his specific case the caretaker is his mother, who seldom gives him privacy. Not only does he want to lose his virginity, but he also wants to gain some independence. Given the tone of the film, it is no wonder that he transforms that frustration into sarcasm. Hence, some of his comments can be understood to be a release of his feelings, inner fears, or insecurities. By using some undertones of aggressiveness in his humour he gains power over the people he unleashes sarcasm onto. For instance, Scotty is unable to move most parts of his body and, when he meets Matt, he notices his athletic body and that his chair is not the right size for him. He resentfully names him "Biceps" and makes fun of his wheelchair. This somehow annoys Matt, but not enough to call him out. It does, however, show that Scotty is taking something that would make Matt "more able" than him and turns it into an object of laughter. A similar example could be observed in the police officer conversation (explained above), where Scotty is purposely trying to make him feel uncomfortable. By having other characters feel uncomfortable he gains some power over them and reduces his own feeling of non-belonging. In a conversation between these two characters, Scotty

apologises to Matt by expressing how spending time with him and Mo has made him feel included [01:14:30]. Hence the frustration the character feels as—no matter what he did—he did not feel like he could belong anywhere. Throughout the trip, he grows to understand that the anger or frustration he might experience possibly hinders him from enjoying his life to the fullest. That is why towards the end of the film this humour mechanism is less present. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how Scotty's attitude may lead the audience to keep thinking about the real situation of disabled people in the United States. At times, those sarcastic comments or looks might be directed at both the character on the screen and the viewers. It is no longer about making the audience slightly smile or about allowing them to laugh, it is more about the reality of the situation these characters go through. However, it is important that while he is using his sarcasm in conversations, he is also trying to gain the upper hand (again a great example is the conversation with the police officer), and in that sense, it is impossible to not consider the type of humour intrinsic to superiority mechanisms.

5. Disability Humour in Context

It is quite clear that the audience is receiving permission to find humour in what they are watching, but the question that one should be posing is: who is giving this permission? And in the case of these films, context is extremely relevant and connected to the different layers that configure these two narratives. On the one hand, the social context is set by the film. That is, the characters on screen represent the roles in the joking exchange and the situation they find themselves in is their specific social context. In that sense, if the disabled character is the one creating the humour, It could be understood that permission is given by that character. However, focusing on the "party" dialogue in *TPBF*, I would argue that the audience *is* laughing at Zak's reaction, not so much laughing *with* him. One could also say that Zak is willingly messing with Tyler, in which case the butt of the joke could be Tyler and not Zak. In this case, is quite difficult to determine who is the butt of the joke from the audience's perspective and so it is to determine who is giving permission to the viewers to laugh. That is why the socio-cultural context where the film has been produced needs to be considered. In the United States there have been several social movements asking for a wider range of disability representation in films or series. These two films respond to that request and present some disabled characters challenging the way the healthcare system and US society in general have been managing their disability and everyday existence. The question that really interests this study to fully understand if the films are successful in creating crip humour, is whose permission should the analysis focus on: the one coming from the characters or the one coming from the creative team? As Coogan said "is it possible for a non-disabled person with a disability sensibility to utilize crip humour?" (2013, 8).

When analysing the different approaches to humour in the films, it is not difficult to realise that the films are trying to break taboos and the stereotypes associated with disabled bodies. Because of this, I argue that the films analysed create crip humour. However, it is also relevant to consider different aspects that would make one reconsider this argument. To begin with, as I have mentioned above, the representation of Zak as a child in need of education can lead to not perceiving any shift in power between Tyler and him, as his answer might be considered childish and powerless. This is an important issue because, from my point of view, it is through this shift that these characters gain some power to create the sort of comedy that suits them or that represents them. However, according to the directors of this film, the line "Party!" was an improvisation by the actor himself (Cooper 2019), which could change the interpretation of the scene. It is no longer a decision made by a writer, but rather of a disabled actor who thought that a specific word was perfect for the moment and was also given the freedom to play his character in whichever way he thought fit. Therefore, one could argue that even though the directors and the rest of the cast were able-bodied, Gottsagen's voice was relevant in the characterisation of Zak. Similarly, although the cast was non-disabled actors, *CAYA* was based on Asta Philpot's real-life story, which was also the subject of a documentary and a Belgian film that ultimately led to the production of this American film. When he went on holiday to Spain with his parents, Philpot discovered a brothel where he lost his virginity; it was after this experience that he felt the need to make a documentary, "because there are so many barriers and taboos not only surrounding disability but surrounding pretty much every aspect of life that people are just so uncomfortable talking about" (Myers 2020). *CAYA* was successful in reproducing Philpot's intentions to break stereotypes and taboos and it chose to do it through comedy. The most important aspect these two films share is that one way or another, both of them include the voice of a person with disabilities. Nevertheless, *CAYA* missed the chance of hiring disabled actors which could have given more power to the humour used in the narrative.

In conclusion, humour can be a powerful weapon to tell stories of disabled people. It is not a matter of becoming the hero of their own story but, rather, of showing abled bodied people their own ignorance. A good way—and a possibly easy way, considering the reach of popular culture products such as films—to make people listen to you is when you use a comedic tone, everything becomes less serious but more real. I argue that it is through the use of humour, following the three theories that the films are capable of challenging what has been socially and culturally normalised regarding people with disabilities. Furthermore, the most important feature highlighted by the films is the possibility of changing the power relations and hence giving power to the not normalised body. In order to do that, the films have to create crip humour, so as to not be offensive or insulting toward their own protagonists. The representation provided by these two films in the humour might have been mostly written and scripted by non-disabled people but with the

intention to listen and give voice to disabled people. Without their voices and their stories, films about disabilities would be incomplete. *Come as You Are* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon* are two important examples of disabilities in film because they don't just prove that these stories need to be told in the genre of drama, but they also show how humour can be more than laughter but a weapon to fight against taboos and stereotypes.

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BLOODLETTING: SEDUCTIVE MONSTROSITY AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN WAKING AND DREAMING IN *BLOODBORNE*

John Marc Wilson Borrell

ABSTRACT

FromSoftware, a Japanese game developer, displays perhaps their most gothic inspired creation in *Bloodborne* (2015). Hidetaka Miyazaki, the director of the game, though drawing from several other key authors in the field, primarily pays homage to themes and concepts present in H. P. Lovecraft's relatively niche oeuvre. The American gothic tradition thematically underscores various significant characteristics of the game, not only through the pervasive use of Lovecraftian imagery, but by incorporating the sense that the land itself is cursed, with hidden secrets and occult histories residing just below the surface. The gameplay mechanics in a FromSoftware title are intimately ligated to the lore, world building, ambiance, and the narrative structure—a structure known for being relatively loose and nonlinear. In *Bloodborne*, the player-character controls an avatar referred to as a "hunter" during their sojourn in the oneiric, perverse world called Yharnam. The various inhabits of Yharnam range from beastly in nature to unfathomable to the human mind, though they share the commonality of once being human prior to receiving blood ministration. This blood came from Eldritch Great Ones and was once hailed as a panacea before the terrifying side effects manifested. This article explores the gothic connection between seduction, monstrosity, and the dynamics of waking and dreaming in FromSoftware's *Bloodborne*.

Keywords: videogames, monstrosity, FromSoftware, seduction, dream, waking and dreaming.

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Traditionally, monsters were a reviled thing, yet currently monsters are handled with a more nuanced approach, rendering them as something to be understood on their own terms rather than through fear, repulsion, or an anthropomorphic lens. In a modernized sense of monstrosity, one may be inspired to become sympathetic, even empathetic, to garish nightmares presented in contemporary media. The American gothic tradition arguably pioneered the conceit that monsters which appear resolutely outside of the human experience may yet relate to humanity as they often embody abstract, philosophical concepts found in existential nihilism. In particular, Lovecraft's contribution to the American gothic, notably his formulation of Eldritch horrors, rely on and reuse concepts such as existential dread, fear of extinction, and chronophobia amongst a multitude of

other anxieties. Additionally, many have expanded upon H.P. Lovecraft's framework, turning these seemingly incomprehensible Eldritch horrors into more relatable concerns or unjust social practices. Lessening the othering of the monstrous frequently leads to the revelation that humans are the "real" monsters.

However, a type of schism remains in formulations of the monstrous in the contemporary American gothic as some monsters retain unrelatable characteristics, such as Stephen King's Pennywise the Clown in *It* (1986), while others appear created to inspire sympathy, like the enigmatic ghost in the film *Gothika* (2003). The familiarity of contemporary monsters, which is arguably the type currently more *en vogue*, is partly subverted in FromSoftware's iconic video game *Bloodborne* (2015), as it has examples that belong to both sides of the aforementioned schism. The player inhabits a post-cataclysmic world where the monstrous is simultaneously relatable and unrelatable as it draws inspiration from Lovecraftian and similar works. This complicates the blurred lines between what constitutes a monster and what passes for human. *Bloodborne*, keeping in line with various gothic tropes and elements, presents a confluence of monstrosity, replete with its at times seductive allure. Additionally, the game world allows the player to enter impossible physical realms, such as altered states of consciousness, namely nightmares, or modalities of experience. In particular, this article argues that the game is concerned with exploring aspects of waking and dreaming in relation to monstrosity and seduction.

1. The Monstrous World of *Bloodborne*

In obscuring the narrative, FromSoftware allows for dreamscapes, nightmares, and consciousness to converge, exploring anxieties and bugbears that are no longer relegated to their primary strata of the mind. The monsters of xenophobia, racism, and othering appear just as readily as cosmic horrors, existential threats, and nihilistic demotivation. These incarnations, embodiments, or representations (however the observer best sees fit) appear as "enemy" creatures. Though as noted by a former hunter Djura found in the buried remains of Old Yharnam, the beasts were once human. Therefore, while the motives of the Eldritch Great Ones are perhaps more unrelatable, what they represent can be related to very human concerns. Regardless of appearing more beastly or extraterrestrial in nature, these foes are integral aspects of the human experience: they are an extension of the psyche.

FromSoftware, a Japanese company that often takes inspiration from Western media in their games, establishes a fragmented form of mythopoesis where the narrative is obscured through broken dialogue interactions from scattered non-player characters (NPCs), in addition to item descriptions that hint at events that have already transpired. If the player wants to understand aspects of the narrative instead of enjoying *Bloodborne* strictly for its gameplay, then it is incumbent upon the player to piece together this seemingly disparate information to begin to understand some of the more major plot points.

However, FromSoftware also omits a substantial amount of narrative information, allowing for the subject to fill in the gaps of the plot with their own "head canon." This makes their games interesting for debate and discussion, but rather difficult for concrete analysis, especially in an academic sense where precision is key. In "The Cryptographic Narrative in Video Games: The Player as Detective" (2021), Ana Paklons and An-Sofie Tratsaert assert, "This concept of the cryptographic narrative has been adopted by some indie horror games . . . The idea behind this type of narrative in the gaming experience is that it leads to a hidden story which is not evident in the narrative first suggested to the player, thus creating a mystery to be solved" (170–71). Though *Bloodborne* is not an indie game, it is cryptographic as there are numerous hidden narrative threads throughout the game; some of these threads are merely hinted and are not fleshed out by design, leaving the mystery to be purposefully unsolvable by the player.

This sense of an untold, buried history is another key aspect that *Bloodborne* has in common with numerous pieces of American gothic media. *Bloodborne's* ideologies are difficult to narrow down as the cryptic nature of the narrative allows the player to insert a degree of their own understandings into the narrative. The player draws their own conclusions as if the game were paradoxically both an exercise in the school of new criticism, prizing formal analysis of what is solely presented, fragmented as it is, as well as its opposing theoretical framework, reader-response theory. There is an interesting form of remediation at play in *Bloodborne* as it is a Japanese game set in a carnivalesque, steampunk world that mirrors or is mimetic of Victorian England in a multitude of ways. Yet the American gothic tradition thematically underscores various significant characteristics of the game, not only through the pervasive use of Lovecraftian imagery, but by incorporating the sense that the land itself is cursed, with hidden secrets and occult histories residing just below the surface. This transnational approach assists in making the game more relatable on a global scale; within the context of the American gothic, it is interesting to see an adaption of Lovecraftian lore used in foreign media that clearly pays homage to an integral and innovative aspect of the American gothic. While other inspirations are readily noted, it is Lovecraft that predominates as the chief source of inspiration.

The foreboding nature of the game is also mimetic to horror cinema and television, where the narrative gets progressively tenser, and the central character is placed in a more precarious position the closer they get to the "truth" of what is occurring. The surreal quality of *Bloodborne* with its preoccupation with dreamscapes, altered consciousness, and various strata of the mind further muddles a logical approach to the narrative. Much like in Lovecraftian writings where madness is symptomatic of greater knowledge, the incoherence of *Bloodborne* arguably places it in a more subjective web of meaning.

In his article "From Content to Context: Videogames as Designed Experience" (2006), Kurt Squire claims, "Players' understandings are developed through cycles of

performance within the gameworlds, which instantiates particular theories of the world (ideological worlds). Players develop new identities both through game play and through gaming communities in which these identities are enacted" (19). The player adopts the persona of a hunter that was once fully human yet becomes something slightly different after receiving blood mistration from the so-called Healing Church for an undisclosed malady. Blood ministration comes with peculiar side-effects such as transforming a human subject into an aggressive, monstrous beast that ultimately loses their sense of humanity.

The nature of cosmic horror in *Bloodborne*, especially its relatability on a transnational scale given its existential-nihilistic sentiments, is furthered by the bloodborne plague wrought from blood ministration that affects humanity by altering their status as a human. The process converts them into grotesque monstrosities. The hunter is tasked with dispatching these altered humans; the irony being that the hunter is a close relation—a precursor to this grotesque form of monstrosity. Maintaining a more human visage arguably allows the player to feel a closer affinity to their character, their stand-in that acts out monstrous tendencies.

Therefore, the hunter occupies a liminal space between humanity and the monstrous—a more relatable form of monstrosity than the Eldritch Great Ones whose blood is used in the blood ministration. Furthermore, aside from the Eldritch Great Ones themselves and the nearly extinct race of Pthumerians (who may or may not have been human), the vast majority of the enemies of the hunter in *Bloodborne* are former humans. The Celestials, for instance, are humans experimented on by high-ranking members of the Church to transcend humanity, in the hopes of creating a new Eldritch Great One. There are also mutated crows, rats, and canines that have been altered from their original, natural state due to their close proximity to humans, which may have led to accidental ingestion of mixed blood.

Bloodborne highlights a dynamic relationship between knowledge and the power of blood. Bygernwerth embodies both of these principles as it is mostly comprised of a university full of scholars seeking to move beyond human knowledge into a posthuman state. Through their research of Eldritch blood discovered in the tombs of the Pthumerians, leading to the origins of the Healing Church, these scholars ultimately altered their status as human. Additionally, it is heavily implied that the Pthumerian civilization ended after experimentation with said blood went awry, yet the Healing Church would not exist without the discovery of this blood since blood ministration is the cornerstone of that institution. From this, factions were established, represented by hunters dressed in either white or black.

The hunters dressed in white belong to the Choir, the highest order of the Church, and they rely more on innovations begotten from research and "hunter tools" (the equivalent of spells that have Eldritch properties). The members of the Choir are highly

educated and are often trusted to perform blood ministration, whereas the black garbed hunters tend to use more common weapons since they favor going on hunts to eradicate beasts. There is, of course, an irony to this since the fears of contagion and violent death are both represented by these factions, yet both were allegedly created for the betterment of society.

However, this is an instance of attempting to fix one problem by creating another. While traditional diseases may no longer be a pressing concern, infection from the plague supplants this fear. Mutation and death have become more pervasive. The few surviving humans fear infection from the blood plague or being torn asunder by rampaging beasts. Those remaining stay quarantined in their homes unless directed by the player-hunter to a place of relative safety, as non-infected humans do not have the capability of leaving on their own. It is telling that the other hunters do not assist in evacuations, despite being created as a social service.

The blood plague is derived from using the blood of the Great Ones in the hopes of creating panacea. Yet it is experimenting with the unknown that causes a cataclysmic event—an event the player does not experience first-hand as they are only subject to the world in ruin. While Susan Tyburski is discussing gothic cinema in their article, "A Gothic Apocalypse: Encountering the Monstrous in American Cinema" (2013), the claims are readily applicable to video games. Tyburski states that "in *The Last Winter*, an even more mysterious force causes humans to descend into madness as their environment becomes increasingly more hostile. Despite their individual incarnations, in all of these films the threat to humans is not limited to a single monster but to an all-encompassing monstrous environment" (148).

Bloodborne's world, Yharnam, also causes a blurring of sanity and insanity, demonstrating elements of gothic horror; it highlights the monsters lurking within the darker recesses of the collective human psyche that exist in dynamic relation to their environment. This also follows closely Tyburski's central argument concerning eco-horror since the natural environment has been disrupted and transformed into a more hostile, dangerous, and polluted world. The game sets Yharnam as a hellscape that the player transcends or succumbs to by either surviving the hunt, evolving into an Eldritch Great One, or failing to complete their quest.

Furthermore, the underlying causality for the blood plague is a closely guarded secret from all but the members of the Choir. It is implied that the Choir relies on misinformation to create contempt for outsiders, shifting the blame to them for the grotesque results of the Choir's treatments. This establishes knowledge and censorship as a means of power, assisting in driving the current of xenophobia since outsiders, much like the average Yharnamite, are not trusted to know the machinations of the Church, how society collapsed, or the origins of blood ministration. The insular Yharnamites have a sense of

mistrust placed on outsiders, which is exacerbated by the fear of contamination by the plague (see Fig. 1).

Paranoia likely is a common symptom of the plague, which furthers this disdain towards foreigners. Eileen the Crow is an outsider twice over as she is tasked with eliminating hunters that succumb to their "blood lust" and is the only character with a Scottish accent. This too places it within the tradition of Lovecraftian fiction and the American gothic as xenophobia and the hidden, "true" drivers of particular societies are prevalent themes in those works as well. Blood lust and xenophobia are recurring themes that will be further discussed. The fears in *Bloodborne*, exaggerated as they are, mirror some more recent fears of contracting a global epidemic, most notably COVID-19 and the mandatory quarantines.

2. Seductive Monstrosity

Bloodborne also ascribes to yet another gothic tradition: there are no *born* monsters; they are expressions of humanity. Jeffrey Cohen (1996) proposes that

> The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture . . . Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself. (4)

Humanity, therefore, falls under the seductive influence of its own dark reflection, leaving representation of the self and its difficulty in asserting a "true" referent in its wake. Yet the motives of the Eldritch Great Ones are unknowable; they are thus part of the more unrelatable, less sympathetic tradition of the monstrous. The incorporation of Eldritch Great Ones in *Bloodborne* is an integral part of the narrative and gameplay that serves as the catalyst for the dystopic game world, as it is the blood of these Eldritch horrors that disrupts virtually every conceivable facet of this society.

Bloodborne resembles FromSoftware's flagship series *Dark Souls* (2011–2018), yet it is set apart from *Dark Souls* on a gameplay level, by focusing more on a type of controlled yet frenetic playstyle that prizes aggressiveness rather than methodical combat; viciousness becomes an asset to the hunter who increasingly becomes more monstrous. The hunter is not some noble knight set to slay a malicious dragon or a Belmont tasked to put Dracula to rest for a century: the hunter is in the process of becoming a monster. The presence of Father Gascoigne, an early game boss who turns into a beastly monster, gives supporting evidence to what Eileen the Crow admonishes against: overindulgence in the hunt will rapidly progress the symptoms of beasthood until the hunter becomes "blood drunk." The result of which includes losing their humanity by becoming a beast. Gascoigne, along with other hunters that transform into hideous abominations, become

signifiers or distorted portents, representing the consequences of zealously dispatching enemies.

In a sense the hunter is not only destroying the inhabitants of Yharnam, but the human player as well, given that becoming a monstrous hunter that revels in the destruction of their fellow inhuman inhabitants is satisfying for the competent player. By adopting aggressive playstyles, the player interacts with the game on psychological and physical levels. This is not particular to *Bloodborne*, yet its alleged difficulty requires players to learn the most efficient manner of slaying the various beasts and Great Ones, lest they do not progress further in the game. That is, of course, if the player responds to the game in the manner the developers intended.

Bloodborne's emphasis on dispatching the various residents of Yharnam in a bestial fashion creates a seductive quality for the player (fig. 1). The hunter remains *mostly* human until one of the endings of the game is achieved—where they ascend to become an infant Great One—yet they are undeniably something other than human, despite various signs and signifiers of humanity. Perhaps that is not quite accurate in *Bloodborne*; perhaps these monstrous qualities that the hunter possesses, seductive as they are, formulate an expression of innate, deep desires of the human psyche. Ideally, the player is meant to cast away their fears in entering this gothic world with the aim of embracing primal violence: a space dominated and relegated to what may be conceived as the id. The id is, after all, the seat of wanton desire and pleasure.

Figure 1 Yharnamites assembled for their ritualistic hunt for "monsters," *Bloodborne* (2015).

The Gothic possesses a long history that continues to evolve in regards to seduction, replete with alluring qualities. A multitude of narratives depict protagonists that are often inexplicably drawn towards their own peril or ruin, ensnaring the audience by casting a similar type of spell of attraction. *Bloodborne* likewise draws in the player yet makes their presence feel out of place, an unwelcomed foreign addition that cannot assimilate into the various regions comprising Yharnam. Seduction, in this context, is rather difficult, if not impossible to represent, as seduction comprises an eradication of the boundaries between the Self and Other as noted in Baudrillard's text *Seduction* (1979).

Squire's earlier assertion that players acquire new identities through video games may be further understood as a drive towards the seductive, which is, debatably, a stronger force than the commonplace power fantasies in modern media. Baudrillard asserts, "Seduction cannot possibly be represented, because in seduction the distance between the real and its double, and the distortion between the Same and the Other is abolished. Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer 'other;' it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond" (1990, 67). Yet there is a degree of madness associated with this seduction; the revelation that Narcissus is pathological is all too apparent to the observer, though obscured from the principal subject. As the realities of the horrors in *Bloodborne* are revealed, a greater degree of the irrational and absurd must be accepted to maintain its narratological engagement with its player.

In narratives, the concept of a panacea is a rather seductive one—not just for those suffering from thanatophobia—begetting a state free from virological, bacterial, fungal. . .etc. attack. "Freeing" the body of these concerns has not only been a preoccupation in medicine, but for literature as well. Yet it is in literature that such promises come at the expense of a Faustian arrangement. Established medical communities do not purport to own a panacea; it is in narratives where these things are imagined in tandem with the ramifications they present. Be it immortality, unforeseen somatic side-effects, psychological corruption, or a costly trade, narratives generally envision that panaceas do not come cheap. While it is certainly seductive to be free of ailments, *Bloodborne* falls within the gothic tradition of urging caution as it defies the natural order (fig. 2).

Importantly, blood ministration does more than cure pathologies prior to transformation since it grants the user a feeling of power and euphoria. The monsters often seek out and recreationally abuse this Eldritch blood. Furthermore, they become far stronger, instilling a lust for more power that is sated by consuming ever growing quantities of this blood. There are cravings for more blood, which before the monstrous side effects are fully realized and noted, was often freely given to patients, expediting the spread and intensity of the blood plague. The cost of this failed panacea is quite clear: it comes at the expense of one's humanity in favor of succumbing to desire and the alleviation of primal, instinctual fears.

Figure 2 A statue on a lift depicting experimentation, possibly an early form of blood ministration. Below the operating table, a scourge beast—resembling a werewolf—emerges, *Bloodborne* (2015)

Savagery may not just be an intrinsic part of *Bloodborne*, but also part of the seductive influence of our darker desires, our simultaneous denial of and return to monstrosity. After all, monstrosity, given the previous premise, can *only* exist within civilized realms. Under this assumption, monstrosity is a turn from the social or civilized, regardless of the various guises and manifestations monstrosity may take. Yet the civilized must exist as a baseline to establish the monstrous; breaking the normative, at least in fantasy or ideation, is frequently viewed as a pleasurable, seductive act. Stefanous Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsberg (2008) reason that, "We must reserve the qualification of 'monster' for organic beings. There are no mineral monsters. There are no mechanical monsters" (135). The organic has the capacity to feel pleasure, pain, anxiety, and comfort, relegating the monstrous to be inherently and dynamically ligated with emotion, biology, and cognition. While contemporary gothic representations do create spaces that are uncanny, particularly impossible realms as seen in works such as *House of Leaves* (2000), these things are not necessarily monstrous as they lack an embedded host to signify the monstrous.

Often times, as in the case of *Bloodborne*, the allurement of being monstrous comes from the shirking of established laws whilst giving into the impulses of the id. Savagery and monstrosity have an indelible link with human impulses that underscore a tendency towards the anti-social. It is notable that the denizens of *Bloodborne* follow predictable, ritualized patterns when they are unaware of the hunter's presence. Once they become aware of the player, they instantly become hostile, as if the hunter's mere presence is

enough to galvanize these former humans, which is another form of patterned, scripted behavior. While there are ludic and mechanical reasons for this, it also displays the frenzied and volatile nature of this brand of monstrosity. Thus, the physical representation of monstrosity becomes a secondary visual signifier to the more primal impulses residing in the deeper recesses of consciousness. It is through a meticulous process of enculturation and cohabitation that these impulses become stymied yet not fully removed from the subject.

However, as the game takes place after a catastrophe, the moment of potential salvation, the hope for recovery, has long since been forgotten in the amnesic fog of recurring behavioral patterns in a brutal, primal society. These humans-turned-monsters acting in anomic ways may serve to illustrate the desire to act in a more anti-social manner, or it may be more closely related to constructions of the monstrous as more "brainless," akin to zombies or remnants (fig. 3). Regardless of the reasoning, the monstrous in *Bloodborne* is one of primal violence propagated by instinctual aggression. It is pleasurable to give in to one's urges or to "turn the mind off" and do as one pleases. There is a sense of losing oneself for the sake of desire.

Figure 3 Inhabitants of the Fishing Hamle in ritualized prostration, *Bloodborne* (2015)

Patterns, which may be a product of action without heavily relying on cognition, comprise much of the mechanical interworking of the game, though this may also a consequence of narrative design. This denotes a paradox between the ritualized and the seductive impulses of the monstrous. *Bloodborne* eliminates, or at least reduces, the schism

between the seductive, monstrous impulses of our instinctual self with the controlled, cooperative self. Removing this dichotomy establishes a logical explanation of how monstrosity may become a societal normative if it is allowed to become unfettered through the death of ordered society.

3. Waking and Dreaming

The interplay between society, culture, consciousness, subconscious, and the unconscious come to the forefront in *Bloodborne*. In that nebulous realm of dreams is potentially where meaning is further broken down and fragmented and where, paradoxically, greater insights into the interworking of *Bloodborne*'s narrative are found. Irina Paperno, in her chapter "Dreams of Terror: Interpretations" (2009), proposes a theoretical framework when discussing dreams and their relation to narrative: "In a word, dreaming is an analogy of fiction, or literature. As one scholar put it, dreaming is the 'ur-form of all fiction.' Yet (he continues) 'a dream is fundamentally unlike a fiction, structurally and affectively, in that it is a lived experience as well as a narrative'" (162). *Bloodborne*'s narrative is difficult to sequentially arrange, as if its telling resembles the foggy moments of a dreamer attempting to recall their recent dream as it slips away under the pervasive influence of rational logic. The nightmare realms in *Bloodborne* will be pursuantly analyzed within the context of adding to the overall narrative and as a type of lived experience for the player (fig. 4).

Yharnam, despite being a digital environment, is not purely mimetic of a physical setting. Mirroring early models of psychoanalysis that arrange the complexities of the mind, consciousness and unconsciousness, in various intermingling strata that possess a dynamic relay between various layers, Yharnam allows the player to enter distorted versions of the past referred to as Nightmares. Interlaid amongst these strata is the liminal realm of dreams. Derrida muses, "The metaphor of the *stratum* (Schict) has two implications. On the one hand, meaning is founded on something other than itself. . . On the other hand, meaning constitutes a stratum whose unity can be rigorously delimited" (1979, 159). Derrida's assertion that the metaphor of the stratum may be flawed, despite some pragmatic uses, is applicable in attempting to understand the constituent nightmare layers of Yharnam, given their abstract nature. Yharnam is a place that resides in non-space as much as it does the material, replete with liminal spaces that fill this synthetic world. It is difficult to establish outside referents for some aspects of the respective stratum, causing, as Derrida suggests, a failure of the structure of a proper stratum correlating to the nebulous layers of Yharnam.

Figure 4 The oneiric realm of the Hunter's Nightmare, *Bloodborne* (2015).

There are various areas that comprise Yharnam in a material sense if discussed as a physical, rather than digital, location. Yharnam is built over the ruins of Old Yharnam and encompasses the eponymous town, Cathedral Ward, and corresponding areas. Close to this are Charnel Lane, Forbidden Woods, the College of Byrgenwerth, and Yahar'gul. The nightmare realms are distorted versions of the past that do not exist in the same way that Yharnam does as a geographical location in the game. They are more in line with states of consciousness. A Yharnamite cannot simply enter nightmare realms without acquiring particular items or traversing plague infested areas—a trial or ritual of sorts must be performed to gain access. These additional layers are Nightmare Frontier, which may be entered through the school of Mensis or by using a tonsil stone, the Nightmare of Mensis, accessed through progressing the game, and the Hunter's Nightmare, which requires an item called the Eye of a Blood-Drunk Hunter to enter. If the Hunter's Nightmare is viewed as a singular location with a couple of connecting parts, it comprises a more horrific and grotesque version of Cathedral Ward, the Research Hall, and the Fishing Hamlet. This is the most notable stratum of Yharnam, forming the Downloadable Content (DLC), "The Old Hunters."

The first section of this DLC is a stark contrast to the Hunter's Dream, which is the hub area of the game. In *Bloodborne*, a prevalent thematic element is that of finding purpose within the dynamics of waking and dreaming, as noted by the Doll's recurring phrase, "May you find your worth in the waking world" (*Bloodborne*). It is quite intriguing that it is in waking, rather than being vulnerable during repose, that the hunter is

presented with the greatest risk of harm to their person. Furthermore, the hunter is able to traverse to a distorted past where memories, regret, and nightmares reside in a tangible manner. The hunter does not simply battle so-called ghosts representative of various subconscious fears or anxieties in these nightmare realms. These spaces are beholden to the same in-game physics as the rest of Yharnam.

The liminal realm between waking and dreaming has long been a preoccupation of the gothic. Judith Halberstam (1995) states, "Gothic. . . is the breakdown of genre and the crisis occasioned to 'tell,' meaning both the inability to narrate and to categorize. Gothic, I argue, marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse" (23). This inability to properly articulate can readily be expanded into conversing about dreams due to the lack of coherence, cohesion, and chronology of dreams. The "inability to narrate" is not only part of the aforementioned fragmented mythopoesis of FromSoftware, but also alludes to the difficulty in properly communicating and expressing dreams.

In his chapter, "Dreaming in Layers: Lovecraftian Storyworlds in Interactive Media" (2021), Eoin Murray asserts:

> The Nightmares and Dreams within *Bloodborne* craft deeper meanings for the player to explore, from enemy encounters to the structure of the space around them. The farthest reaches of the game screen and environment hint towards a deeper connection between these Dream and Nightmare locations where the true madness of *Bloodborne's* storyworld, Yharnam, resides. (225)

These nightmare locations become of special interest as they are emblematic of a breakdown in reason and sanity, furthering a sense of madness and monstrosity. The nightmare represents that which is hidden from history, culture, and the myths the hunters propagate about themselves. The nightmare is a closer verisimilitude of the truth of Yharnam than the typical areas the player encounters. It is in these spaces that the gothic tradition of buried secrets arises anew through unconventional means, as *Bloodborne* subverts its already unorthodox narrative by having the player call into question the reality of the world they are experiencing.

The fears expressed in *Bloodborne* function symbolically since the subtext does allude to the deep-rooted fear of the unknown, primarily manifested through the fear of infection, the Other (xenophobia), and scotophobia (numerous enemies lurk out of sight or in the dark), amongst various other concerns. As in numerous gothic works, there is a profound correlation between fears and trauma. In "Beyond the Walls of *Bloodborne*: Gothic Tropes and Lovecraftian Games" (2019), Vítor Casteloes Gama and Marcelo Velloso Garcia argue, "Mental trauma is translated into an element of the mise-en-scène by relating scenery revelations to odd metaphysical events. Changes in perception are linked to physical changes in the game's setting, for instance, the result of making contact with great ones is the access to nightmares" (53). This also supports the appearance of the

amygdalas (massive multi-limbed and eyed creatures) throughout Yharnam since they are hidden from the player from the onset of the game. Once the player reaches the final act or has acquired relatively high insight—a metric that also denotes the amount of forbidden or inhuman knowledge—then the amygdalas are seen.

In medicine, the amygdala is an almond shaped mass of gray matter believed to be the core of a neural system that controls and regulates some emotions, particularly processing fear and threatening stimuli with corresponding reactions. Creatures hidden beyond human perceptions, the veil of "reality," is a conceit directly used in Lovecraftian fiction, but also functions in *Bloodborne* as means of demonstrating that the world of Yharnam is not quite how initially presented: it experiences dynamic changes in its environment in relation to the player's or the hunter's (perhaps both) alleged acquisition of occult knowledge. One of these amygdalas ushers the player into the DLC. These environmental changes, notably the aforementioned distorted version of Cathedral Ward, prime the player to notice that the initial perceptions of the game world may have been erroneous. Entering a living nightmare via an amygdala, conceived in different terms, facing fears in a dream-state, is a means of ascertaining higher "truths" in *Bloodborne*.

The final area of the DLC and arguably the one with the most hidden truths is the Fishing Hamlet. This villa is, with little doubt, highly inspired by Lovecraft's "The Shadow over Innsmouth" (1936). From a narrative perspective, the hunter is enticed to traverse this perilous plane of existence or consciousness (it is rather ill defined), through the seductive allure of uncovering the secrets that the original hunters attempted to bury. Lovecraft writes, "Several non-residents had reported monstrous glimpses from time to time, but between old Zadok's tales and the malformed denizens it was no wonder such illusions were current. None of the non-natives ever stayed out late at night, there being a widespread impression that it was not wise to do so. Besides, the streets were loathsomely dark" (2011, 822). The inhospitality towards the Other in Lovecraft's text stems from a mistrust towards outsiders, illustrating a pervasive sense of xenophobia. This is also the case in *Bloodborne*, yet it was the first hunters, long before the player arrives, that caused the initial transgression.

Much like colonizers, the first hunters conquered the initially passive village after a Great One washed upon their shores. Given that colonialization is an ongoing process, the residents adopted many of the customs of these first hunters. Furthermore, these hunters, who were trained in occult sciences by the Healing Church, experimented on the residents, further mutating the natives of the fishing hamlet that were already affected by the presence of a Great One. This underscores the influence of outsiders on a relatively closed socio-political and ecological environment, causing this area to become an approximation of historical horror arrived at by traversing cultural unconsciousness. The game makes clear that this area is not part of the contemporary Yharnam, but rather an echo of a traumatic past: it is a nightmare space.

The realm of dreams as means of glimpsing "truth" is wooly at best, impossible at worst. Richard Hilbert (2010) uses a hypothetical dream to discuss complications that may arise in analyzing a simple dream where a person is "chased by a dog" (see Fig. 5). The dog in question may represent a variety of disparate things and its appearance in a dream calls into question its signification or meaning as a dog, proposing the question, "What makes it a dog?" (42). The polysemous nature of dreams becomes obfuscating, even potentially manipulating as definitively ascribing a particular interpretation of a dream and its associated dreamscape with singular, comprehensive, concrete, or abstract meanings becomes associated with self-reflexive exercises: the dog in the example *could be* virtually anything, rendering it closer to nothingness or, perhaps, a funhouse mirror for both the dreamer and interpreter. While this multifaceted approach moves dreams more into philosophical and not fully understood scientific realms, it does not necessarily preclude their use, as they comprise part of a visual shorthand that has become quite standardized within gothic and horror media.

Figure 5 The hunter in action, either evading or ambushing scourge beasts, *Bloodborne* (2015).

This shorthand becomes codified in *Bloodborne*'s visual language through not only the monstrous creatures, gothic architecture, and statues (some in Yahar'gul allude to Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings), but as well in the vistas, landscapes, and sky. The color pallet, while seldom bright, presents a nebulous, hazy quality that may be interpreted as fog, further occulting sight, or to the blurred aspects of the represented stratified mind. As noted, these strata do not exist in clearly delineated borders, but in

dynamic flux and conversation with one another. The clouds are also mimetic of this, stretching long and dark, fostering an opaqueness that stifles the clarity of the night sky as if a type of overdrawn cobweb. While the nature of the narrative is murky, this is reiterated and reinforced by the visual metaphors that transcend direct language. Images, pictures, or, in this case, graphics may only be discursively discussed as they are a different medium than the strictly literary; it is an impossibility to fully translate images into literary terms as Roland Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida* (1980). Rather, there is an ongoing relay of remediation in attempting to extrapolate deeper meaning when discussing the visual, pictographic, or ocular as this formulates an altogether separate medium than that of the literary.

Bloodborne has a preoccupation with the visual and, therefore, eyes, which is a recurring theme ligated with insight. Rather than an avenue of acquiring insight, it can also refer to the means of properly engaging and reading the visual codified language that supports and scaffolds the narrative, by paradoxically being mysterious and obtuse. In the Nightmare of Mensis (named after the school of Mensis that was wiped out in their attempt at communing with or potentially calling down an Eldritch Great One), the main antagonist of the area, Micolash, a scholar driven to madness in his attempt to breach the unfathomable nature of the Great Ones, repeats a haunting chant, "Grant us eyes" (*Bloodborne*). Eyes thematically recur throughout *Bloodborne* with some of the monsters possessing nearly an uncountable number of eyes. This denotes a closer proximity to the Great Ones than the monsters that appear to have the typical number of eyes for their respective species. If the player angles the camera in a particular fashion, they can glimpse peculiar eyes inside of the Doll's head; these eyes also have extra eyes on them, supporting the notion that these organs are not intended for relating visual or ocular stimuli, but rather serve a different, preternatural function. Theoretically, these eyes are what animate and bestow a sense of identity to the Doll.

"Grant us eyes" is construed as thematically complex given the expansive nature of the game, yet there is also a simplicity associated with it: grant us the ability to read that which is hidden before our eyes. Rather than a call to greater beings to grant the ability to perceive beyond the electromagnetic spectrum, it becomes a plea to communicate the visual in a more instinctual, primal mode. Generally speaking, this means that visual language does not necessitate a logical, rational discourse, but rather an intuitive understanding. Thus, for *Bloodborne* it may even be a misnomer to refer to visual language as a type of language as it serves more as a means for stimulus to garner a primal response. Simply, the intuitive and instinctual is the providence of the monstrous. And monstrosity defies the rational order, despite the human claim of being a rational creature.

4. Conclusion

Sleep is often associated with a sense of vulnerability; dreams are typically outside of the subject's control, rendering the individual a relatively passive agent in their own mind. Yet it is in the Hunter's Dream where safety, ataraxy, and sereness rule supreme: waking from the dream is when the horror of existence begins.

The Doll's recurring phrase takes on a new meaning once the player puts down their controller; eventually, one must leave the phantasmagorical, oneiric world of Yharnam to face their own monstrous version of reality. Yharnam is not the nightmare: it is an escape where one may experience, even revel, in the monstrous. It is a controlled release of adrenaline on a physiological level, potentially granting an evocative and emotive experience. It is an alternative means of experiencing "reality" codified through visual, auditory, and literary cues, as gothic narratives are often fundamentally concerned with revealing hidden aspects that reside within the fabrics of mainstream cultures.

It is in entering this world, being gradually introduced to the implications of the presented monstrosity, that *Bloodborne* belongs to the gothic's enduring legacy as a purveyor of either the unfathomable or all too human monster. The outsider in these narratives is never fully accepted by the residents, potentially leaving (if they do in fact leave) with more of an unsolved mystery in spite of having a profound truth revealed. Yet the seductive nature of becoming a monster—to rely on instinct, id, or the primal irrational self where a sense of catharsis, potentially euphoria, may be experienced—is a deeply appealing human desire. Briefly removing their societal shackles offers the chance to become that which society fears: an unrestrained version of the ancestral self, residing in the liminal space between the logical and irrational. The player-hunter and the denizens of Yharnam are simply that—unapologetically too human, rife with wonder and mundanity, mystery and tedium, restraint and terror.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces

Edited by Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen (2022)

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Carr, Bryan J. and Meta G. Carstarphen, eds. 2022. *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces.* Columbus: The Ohio State University Press. New Suns: Race, Gender, And Sexuality in the Speculative. viii+214 pp. $119.95 hc/$36.95 pbk and eBook.

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Since Henry Jenkins's (2006) effective analysis of the components of transmedia storytelling, scholars continue to build on his work. Marvel Comics, and the Marvel brand in general, is one such site for scholars to further develop and understand transmedia entertainment. Indeed, Stan Lee, the face of Marvel from the 1960s through to his death in 2018, always envisioned superheroes flying out of comics pages and onto large and small screens (Howe 2012). In Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen's *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces*, the contributing authors each take one of Marvel's superheroines and consider her appearances across comics, live action and animated films, television, video games and, in the occasional chapter, as a cosplay character. According to the editors, the goal of this volume is "to ask what Marvel's superheroines can teach us about our culture (popular and otherwise) and how these teachings reflect the real, lived experiences of women" (10). This is pressing for the editors and contributors given that the Marvel "ecosystem encourag[es] fans to follow their favorite characters and stories from one media to another" (5).

With this transmedia thesis in mind, most contributing authors nevertheless skip a detailed analysis of the concept of transmedia storytelling—chapters 6 and 11 engage with Jenkins's peer-reviewed scholarship while chapters 1 and 8 cite the student handout on transmedia storytelling available on his blog (Jenkins 2007). To start with the book's subtitle, *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces* does not advance

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theories of transmedia storytelling and aesthetics, recalling Jenkins's observation in 2006 that "we do not yet have very good aesthetic criteria for evaluating works that play themselves out across multiple media" (Jenkins 2006, 96–97). The volume could have attempted, however brief, to resolve this issue in the field. The authors instead turn to other theoretical frameworks, sometimes upwards of seven in a chapter, to investigate a transmedia superheroine.

The book is composed of four parts and thirteen chapters. Part 1 provides introductory analyses. To start with, Carr and Carstarphen explore the significance of superheroes in our culture and what these heroic myths mean to consumers and fans. The authors then define and redefine transmedia—the most sustained discussion in the book—and explain how Marvel's transmedia ecosystem works. In their overview of the book, Carr and Carstarphen refer backwards to their preceding remarks, an odd addition that they could have omitted. Carr's following chapter provides a historical overview of Marvel's relationship with its female fans and its reluctance to sell to them. In the concluding chapter of Part 1, Carstarphen develops the idea of "trans/linear feminism" (28), or the choice that female readers make to read Marvel superheroines in a distinctive way from male readers. He claims that the narratives of superheroines are emblematic of a larger narrative about the lived experiences of real women. The first part, then, succinctly introduces the central themes that will be discussed throughout the book.

In Part 2, the authors bring feminist theories to read Marvel superheroines. In chapter four, J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner trace the complex—and lengthy—history and evolution of Captain Marvel as a feminist icon. Through textual analyses that read a bit like plot summaries, they argue that the character of Captain Marvel is a site of constructed feminism, ever-changing to fit the feminist needs of the moment. Captain Marvel is explored again in chapter thirteen, where Annika Hagley observes how the character is presented as an individual with trauma in the 2019 film *Captain Marvel*.

Back in chapter five, Kathleen M. Turner-Ledgerwood uses standpoint theory to read Agent Carter as a transgenerational and transmedia feminist. Similar to the previous chapter, much space is devoted to tracing the history of the character. Chapter six, then, problematizes the costume of the superheroine as a form of gendered control. Amanda K. Kehrberg uses Judith Butler's theory of gendered performativity to identify Jessica Jones's rejection of the superhero costume as a rejection of the performance of both her gender as well as her superhero identity. Kehrberg's contribution is the standout chapter: it has a sustained discussion of a particular aspect of superhero identity and cleverly applies theory to focus on Jones's costume. In summary, although the above authors' engagement with feminist theories seems cursory at best, this section of the book does a decent job of tracing the feminist evolution of the superheroines.

As often happens with edited collections, some chapters could be slotted into other sections. MaryAnne A. Rhett's study of Islamic feminism and Ms. Marvel is better suited

to Part 2 on feminism instead of Part 3 on "otherness [and] the body." This would also eliminate the division of superheroines in the book by race—Parts 2 and 4 focus on white heroines while Part 3 focuses on superheroines of colour. As a historian, Rhett uses their strengths to locate the character's feminism "on the edges of Kamala Khan's narrative" (109). Rather than thinking alongside one of the waves of Western feminism, Rhett reads *Ms. Marvel* author G. Willow Wilson's conversion to Islam to situate Kamala within the long history of Islamic feminism, particularly in Egypt. Rhett provides close analyses of the comics to determine how history informs Kamala's Pakistani American Muslim feminist identity.

The other chapters of Part 3 are less successful. Rachel Grant assesses representations of Shuri, sister of T'Challa/Black Panther, in Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther* (2018), Nnedi Okorafor's comic series *Shuri* (2018–2019), a couple of online news publications, and five tweets. Grant mobilizes in broad strokes feminist theory, intersectional theory, postcolonial theory, Afrofuturism, discourse analysis, and "technocultural analysis" (95), and all-too-brief explanations of these frameworks take up half the chapter, a pattern we note throughout the volume. Grant employs textual analyses of the film and comics and concludes that a few Twitter users like Shuri because she is a role model for girls, and/or has an anticolonial bent, and/or just like the character because she is "badass" (99). Next, in a baffling contribution, Stephanie L. Sanders considers Misty Knight, a police officer and later crimefighter with a bionic arm. While Sanders provides some googled remarks about the character and her origins, the focus is a story about Knight's stint as a diversity officer at New York Universe-City College of Liberal Arts (NY-UCLA). I believe Sanders conceived this story as a thought experiment, but this is unclear. Sanders first devotes time to under-developing Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "spiritual activism," then reads her fan fiction through this theory.

Part 4 does not have a strong through line among the chapters but has some of the most consistent examinations of transmedia characters. Julie A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus examine Black Widow through two lenses. First, they assess how Black Widow conforms and deviates from Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's notion of the American monomyth. As the authors note, her outsider status—an important part of this monomyth—is emphasized by a moral compass different from superhero colleagues, the acquisition of her powers through training rather than luck or technology and, in some versions of Black Widow, she stands apart from humans because she had also taken the Russian supersoldier serum. These differences from male heroes does not alter Widow's sexualization, even in the G-Rated animated series *The Super Hero Squad Show*. Next, Mildred F. Perreault and Gregory P. Perreault inform readers in three separate sections about Potts's background in the MCU and the second half of the chapter provides a detailed list of Potts's transmedia appearances. The sections serve as quick summaries of where and how Potts fits into the plot of the media under discussion with few if any

arguments rooted in four or more theoretical frameworks that are detailed in the first half. The authors find that the character "often aligns with the story progression and cultural norms expected in the Marvel Universe" (167). CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's contribution follows a similar transmedia analysis with Squirrel Girl, devoting much space to listing where one could find the character and how she fits into those stories as reflection of "corporate feminism" (187): Squirrel Girl inspires but does not empower.

The editors and most of the contributors of *Gendered Defenders* are professors of communication studies and media studies but the chapters' lack of interest in scholarship from comics, film, and television studies limits what this volume can accomplish for transmedia studies. There are a few novel insights into superheroines, but the short length of the contributions—between 12 and 18 pages, including several pages worth of citations—, the chapters' often sloppy structure, the authors' poor summaries of theory, and their repetitions of points, plots, and quotations did not produce deep and sustained analyses. The scholarly style of the book is a barrier to this work and the volume may have been better with the general audiences' approach employed in *[Superhero] and Philosophy* books published by Wiley and Open Court.

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