Re:Search

The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at the University of Illinois

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

ARTICLES

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EDITORS' NOTE

There are many people we would like to thank for all the work they have poured into the third edition of *Re:Search,* the Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at the University of Illinois. In addition to the students who have contributed to our vision of an undergraduate-produced, peer-reviewed academic journal, we especially thank members of the University of Illinois faculty for their continued support.

Thank you to the faculty mentors who have guided our authors for the past three years; our dedicated faculty advisor, Lori Humphrey Newcomb, whose relentless enthusiasm kept us on task and available to many students; our graduate student advisor, Brandon Jones, who offered incredible contributions to our copyediting process; and our English and Digital Humanities Librarian, Harriett Green, who stepped up again this year to lead workshops on research and writing strategies. Additionally, we give special thanks to the Office of Undergraduate Research, which dutifully encourages and foregrounds scholarship within the undergraduate student body, as well as to Dylan Burns, who helped expand use of the Open Journals System in our triple-blind peer review process.

Thank you to the team in the English Advising Office, including Anna Ivy, Kristine McCoskey, and Kirstin Wilcox, for broadcasting opportunities to participate in the journal to current and prospective students; Director of Undergraduate Studies, Dale Bauer, for making space for *Re:Search* and its authors in the Undergraduate Research Symposium; and Head of the English Department, Michael Rothberg, whose thoughts are included in this year's journal in the Note from the Department Head. From the beginning, you have shown us the collaborative impulse needed to present undergraduate research in the humanities to increasingly wider audiences.

We are in the process of building up an impressive collection of works searchable on Google Scholar, the University Library Catalog, and IDEALS (Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship). Our authors have explored and discovered connections across a number of texts—some of which have been extensively studied, others of which have only recently come into scholarly consideration—in order to rigorously engage with current critical conversations. They have put forth insightful work that they and their faculty mentors should take pride in. We are thrilled to present a selection of works that showcase the potential in English and related departments.

On a final note, we would like to thank Nick Millman and the 2014 Executive Board for getting this project off the ground. Thank you for laying the foundations to establish a platform where undergraduate research in the humanities may be read and appreciated by both students and faculty, and celebrated jointly on print and digital platforms. We look forward to seeing the kinds of work that students at Illinois continually and inventively accomplish, with increasingly interdisciplinary results.

Melisa Puthenmadom and Ana V. Fleming
Co-Editors in Chief

LETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT HEAD

I am thrilled to have another opportunity to welcome you to *Re:Search: The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at the University of Illinois*. This is my third year as head of the Department of English and this is *Re:Search*'s third year, too. But while I'll be finishing out my term as department head this summer, I am fully confident that *Re:Search* will continue to flourish in the years to come. Making it to the third year is a real achievement and I salute all who have made this new issue possible.

As in previous years, you will find a diverse selection of works that demonstrate the many fruitful directions of contemporary literary and cultural studies. For the first time, I'm fairly certain, the journal is publishing an essay on a novel originally written in Slovenian! Krupa Patel's essay concerns Vladimir Bartol's 1938 Slovenian novel *Alamut*, which is read alongside Plato's Republic.

Comparative approaches can also be found in Melissa Deneufbourg's essay on Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft and in James Koh's analysis of the 2013 film *Interstellar* along with space exploration narratives. Meanwhile, Amarin Young reads Maxine Hong Kingston in relation to feminist theory and Evan Duncan addresses performance and subjectivity in the work of James Baldwin. As department head—and as someone with a PhD in comparative literature—I am very pleased to see the historical, cultural, and linguistic range of literary, cinematic, and philosophical texts tackled here by the talented critics in *Re:Search*.

Re:Search is, of course, more than just a collection of strong essays by undergraduate scholars. It is the product of the hard work and editorial vision of its staff. We in the English department support this journal because it represents an opportunity for students to circulate their work to a broader public than just their professors and one or two close friends; but we also support it because it allows students to develop skills that they will take with them after graduation: editorial skills, communication skills, team-work skills.

Working on a journal will certainly help prepare you for graduate school and for a career in higher education; it also helps you develop the kinds of capabilities that will serve you well in any profession you decide to pursue. In the last couple of years, I have seen more and more voices in the media touting the kinds of training and opportunities that education in the humanities provides: student-run journals like *Re:Search* are a great example of what is possible.

It hasn't been an easy year in Illinois. A budget standoff at the state level has led to budget cuts for the university. But we in the English department are committed to maintaining our strong offerings for undergraduates and we will continue to support *Re:Search* and other endeavors that give our ambitious students the opportunities they deserve to engage in original research and to share their work with a broader public. *Re:Search* is public higher education in action.

Michael Rothberg
Professor and Head of the Department of English

AIMS & SCOPE

Re:Search: The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at Illinois is an undergraduate produced, peer-reviewed open-access online journal designed to annually publish works exclusively by undergraduate students. We seek to create a place for undergraduate students to showcase and publish literary criticism within a greater academic discourse while nurturing a collaborative community between faculty, administration, and undergraduate students. All published work is by Illinois students; students from any discipline may submit to *Re:Search* as long as the submissions are in accordance with our vision of the journal as a site of critical analysis. We encourage undergraduate students to submit literary, media, or cultural criticism. We accept revisions of papers written previously for a class, current or completed honors theses, and even projects conceived outside the classroom. The most important criterion for acceptance is that the author offers fresh, new critical analysis of a text, film or other work. We welcome an analysis of texts from any period or language, given that modern English translation is provided for any material quoted within the submission. Although theory is not the journal's primary topic, we encourage submissions that refer to, reflect on, and engage with theory to provide richer and more nuanced analyses. Our audience includes university students, instructors, administration, alumni, and prospective students.

Re:Search is unique among journals of its type in supporting students throughout the research and publication process by working closely with the Illinois English Department, the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR), the English Student Council (ESC), and the Scholarly Commons in the University Library. The process includes faculty mentorship, in which students work side-by-side with a faculty advisor throughout the writing process. The OUR and ESC will offer opportunities to share work-in-progress and train students in the Open Journal Systems online platform to participate in the peer-review and copy editing processes, and the Library will provide a fully-indexed platform for completed articles. This journal fosters collaboration between faculty, administration, and undergraduate students, and we hope for this to flourish as a long-lasting joint project.

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In Pursuit of Virtue:
A Vindication of Reason and Sensibility in Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft

Melissa Deneufbourg, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen holds a distinguished role in modern society as a heritage author, whose novels depict proper ladies with excellent manners. While critics have often characterized Austen's works as conservative, others have more recently established the connection between Austen's novels, specifically her first published work *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and Mary Wollstonecraft's radical treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). However, previous analyses have failed to place reason and sensibility at the center of Wollstonecraft's influence on Austen's writing. In this essay, I argue that *Sense and Sensibility* builds on Wollstonecraft's criticism of women's under-education, which informs and guides her radical critique of sensibility. A close examination of Wollstonecraft helps the reader to see that both Wollstonecraft and Austen contend that reason and sensibility are essential in constituting women's agency and distinguishing themselves as virtuous individuals.

KEYWORDS

Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Reason, Sensibility, Virtue, Women's Education, Agency

Jane Austen holds a distinguished role in modern society as a heritage author whose novels depict proper ladies with excellent manners. In her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen positions two female heroines, the Dashwood sisters, at the center of her narrative. Elinor Dashwood is a nineteen-year-old woman characterized by her extremely good manners, who serves as a model for her younger sister Marianne Dashwood, a seventeen-year-old girl overrun by her subscription to the cult of sensibility. Marianne matures over the course of her narrative, becoming 'sensible' like her sister, and ultimately marries a man who by no means conforms to her former ideal of a romantic hero. *Sense and Sensibility* is oftentimes described as Austen's most conservative work because it is interpreted as 'disciplining' Marianne Dashwood—teaching her to conform to society's values and propriety, and to give up her own sensibility.

The charge of conservatism was forwarded prominently by Marilyn Butler in her 1975 book, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Butler argues, "The crucial actions of her [Austen's] novels is in itself expressive of the conservative side of an active war of ideas" (Butler 294). This "war of ideas" is the eighteenth century ideological clash between the Jacobins and Anti-Jacobins in Great Britain. Jacobin novels were written by eighteenth century British radicals who supported the ideals of the French revolution, especially its individualism. In reaction to the Jacobins, the Anti-Jacobin novelists created satires of Jacobin novels and asserted the power of community over the individual. Butler contends that Austen is the same kind of Anti-Jacobin, participating in conservative satire against sensibility. Jane Austen's works belong to "a movement of that defines itself in opposition to revolution," which maintains conservative ideals (Butler 123).[1]

Few critics have challenged Butler's characterization, with the notable exceptions of Claudia L. Johnson, Margaret Kirkham, and, more recently, Peter Knox-Shaw and Hina Nazar. Knox-Shaw and Nazar, in response to Butler's assertion that Austen is an Anti-Jacobin committed conservative, argue that the politics of the novel are instead derived from Enlightenment ideals (Knox-Shaw 5). Kirkham and Johnson further distinguish Austen apart from conservative ideologies, drawing important comparisons between Austen and radical women

authors of the 1790s. Johnson argues, "Progressive women novelists urge a rationality, usefulness, and fortitude…For them, cultural injunctions about female manners are subjected to radical social criticism. They attack education practices promoting women's self-immolating enslavement to their own passions" (Johnson 67-68). Kirkham draws a specific comparison between the works of Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, arguing that "Austen's…viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" (Kirkham xi). These rebuttals of Butler's depiction of Austen's conservatism identify crucial gaps in Butler's argument. However, these analyses fail to place reason and sensibility at the center of Wollstonecraft's influence on Austen's writing. The common opposition of "reason" and "sensibility" in Wollstonecraft and "sense" and "sensibility" in Austen is representative of the chief way in which the radical Wollstonecraft influenced Austen.

When Austen's work is considered in the context of Mary Wollstonecraft's pioneering feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her critique of sensibility does not seem conservative. In this essay, I argue that *Sense and Sensibility* builds on Wollstonecraft's criticism of female education, which informs and guides her radical critique of sensibility. The feminine experiences documented in Austen's novels of social pursuits and marriages closely resemble the educational experiences of socialization that Wollstonecraft describes. Wollstonecraft and Austen craft critiques of sensibility in which female education is scrutinized and found to foster sensibility in women without cultivating their sense or reason. Neither Wollstonecraft nor Austen suggest that sensibility is valueless in their extreme assessments. Both see the cooperation of head and heart as crucial to female agency and argue that it is important for women to promote a personal balance of reason and sensibility, not just attending to one or the other as the more essential faculty. The writings of these authors provide not a vindication of reason over sensibility, but a vindication of reason and then sensibility. A close examination of Wollstonecraft

helps the reader to see that both Wollstonecraft and Austen contend that reason and sensibility are essential in constituting women's agency and distinguishing themselves as virtuous individuals.

Wollstonecraft's Critique in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft criticizes the eighteenth century main model of education that women receive which only cultivates their sensibilities without attending to reason. Women, she argues, have been deprived of the right to be virtuous people by being educated to foster only their emotions. Enlightenment men are expected to pursue higher forms of education and develop their reason, which they then use to write, vote, hold office, and participate in the public sphere. However, women are not legally able to participate in those social roles and thus are not educated to attain the same level of reason (Wollstonecraft).

Wollstonecraft finds females to be the same as males "in all the most important aspects…possessing the same souls, the same mental capacities, and thus the same human rights" (Mellor 141). These rights make it "morally requisite" that women's education undergoes reforms and that women are allowed to pursue greater intellectual enrichment (Nazar 83). As Barbara Taylor observes, Wollstonecraft's program of education asks women to "abandon false femininity for the 'practical virtues' of rationality, independence, self-reliance" (Taylor 141). This, Wollstonecraft argues, can only be successfully achieved through the exercise of reason in balance with sensibility.

Wollstonecraft defines sensibility as "quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy," and an "exquisitely polished instinct" (Wollstonecraft 133). [2] Wollstonecraft disputes female education that encourages women to become fine ladies, to read nothing serious, and to spend time only contemplating how to secure a husband. This education develops only sensibility and leaves no room for reason. When overcome by sensibility, women become "prey to their senses…and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (*VRW* 130). In this way, women are bound to act on their "faculties of perception or sensation" instead of

their faculties of reason and intellect ("sense, n"). When women are thus affected by sensibility, "their understandings are neglected" and women are unable to cultivate their faculties and form reasonable thoughts (*VRW* 130). Reason is set against sensibility in Wollstonecraft's treatise as, "the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth" (*VRW* 122). Wollstonecraft indicates the importance of reason as it relates to virtue and independence. She argues that reason is essential to virtue and autonomy because both require careful meditation on one's actions and motives. Strength of mind is measured by "the degree to which it [the mind] can *independently* reach its own conclusions through the force of thinking and observation" (Sapiro 55). Wollstonecraft contends, "Virtue can be built on no other foundation" than "female understanding" (*VRW* 124).

The overemphasis on sensibility is used to perpetuate a system of subordination, one that keeps women in a persistent "state of childhood" and prevents them from social advancement or attainment of the same virtues as men (*VRW* 131). Wollstonecraft says, "This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others" (*VRW* 131). In the current social and political system governed by Enlightenment ideals, only "negative virtues" are expected from women (if any at all), namely "patience, docility good-humour, and flexibility" (*VRW* 138). Wollstonecraft claims that these types of virtues are "incompatible with any exertion or intellect" and prevent women from reaching their true potential as rational, moral human beings. Wollstonecraft contends that, "if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as employment of life, an understanding to improve" (*VRW* 133).

According to Wollstonecraft, not only does an education in sensibility alone reinforce women's dependence on men but it also, potentially, damages their psychic and physical health. Sensibility makes women victims of themselves if they lose self-control and it makes them victims of men as well. She argues that:

> Civilized women are, therefore, so weakened by false refinement…Ever restless and anxious, their over exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome…to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering…A distinction should be made between inflaming and strengthening them [passions]. The passions thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue? —Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly! (*VRW* 131)

Overindulgence of sensibility weakens women, making them victims to themselves and to men, as it only provides them with the superficial means of exciting emotion and feeling. Wollstonecraft's efforts to overturn this idea would provide women with greater personal autonomy and allow them to become more rational, independent beings. This cult of sensibility, the eighteenth century social conventions which promote exaggerated expressions of emotion, "inflames" the senses, and the "madness and folly" that women exhibit makes them victims to their "passions," emotions, and senses. Additionally, men have used this argument of madness to continually subjugate women. Wollstonecraft observes that, "Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vice" (*VRW* 84). Wollstonecraft argues that the victimization of women can be avoided, however, by "strengthening" the passions through the cultivation of judgment in conjunction with sensibility.

While Wollstonecraft's critique of sensibility is thoroughgoing, it does not imply that sensibility has no value in women's lives. She is critical of the ways in which education promotes sensibility in women, but does not disavow the importance of both reason and sensibility to female virtue and agency. She does not call for women to abandon all traces of sensibility, but to use their understanding to protect against flighty and thoughtless emotions. Indeed, for Wollstonecraft, the strongest passions require a blending of sense and sensibility. As she puts it, "it is not against strong, persevering passions; but romantic wavering feelings that I wish to guard the female heart by exercising the understanding" (*VRW* 146). The use of reason can strengthen and give force to the

affections: "the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation" (*VRW* 136). Catriona Mackenzie argues for a similar claim, noting that for Wollstonecraft, "in a well-balanced, virtuous character, reason and sensibility should mutually strengthen and support each other rather than either dominating the other" (Mackenzie 44).

Wollstonecraft's argument that both reason and sensibility are important to female virtue is developed through her discussion of the two most significant feminine vocations of eighteenth-century, middle-class women: marriage and motherhood. Wollstonecraft criticizes men who have considered women to be something "other than human creatures" and chosen to make them "alluring mistresses [rather] than affectionate wives and rational mothers" (*VRW* 71). Virginia Sapiro argues that Wollstonecraft "worried that in a world not governed by reason most parents were not equipped to teach their children reason, therefore good habits of mind" (Sapiro 67). The importance assigned to reason in the feminine roles of "affectionate wife" and "rational mother" cannot be fully realized until women are given the opportunity to enhance their faculties. Wollstonecraft argues that, "in the regulation of a family, in the education of children, understanding…is particularly required: strength both of body and mind" (*VRW* 134). Additionally, she contends that that if a woman is not "prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue" (*VRW* 66). This ascribes crucial influence to women in the management of a family and upbringing of children, and Wollstonecraft notes that those women "whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or the natural selfishness of sensibility expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family" (*VRW* 137). Both reason and sensibility are requisite female attributes in women's social roles as wives and mothers.

The reflections that Wollstonecraft provides on marriage also communicate the importance of both reason and sensibility in the lives of women. This balance of faculties is crucial for women to have a happy marriage. Wollstonecraft claims that a successful and fulfilling marriage is not based simply on love or lust, but on companionship. She says, "Friendship or indifference

inevitably succeeds love" (*VRW* 96). She contends that if women are unable to use their powers of reason in marriage, they are unable to build a strong foundation of friendship upon which a lasting marriage can be established. She indicates that, "the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will…become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband" (*VRW* 95). Lust and passion will fade, and when it does only those couples that have developed a warm and deep friendship first will enjoy the greater pleasures of marriage. Wollstonecraft maintains that, "When the husband ceases to be a lover—and the time will inevitably come, her desire of pleasing will then grow languid, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place to jealousy or vanity" (*VRW* 93). The cult of sensibility, which female education encouraged women to promote, creates marriages based on lust, love, and fondness, which are "poor substitutes for friendship" (*VRW* 95). Wollstonecraft's affirmation of the happy marriage confirms that both reason and sensibility have an essential role if one hopes to maintain a supportive union based on not just lust and passions alone, but on sincere love and friendship as well.

While Wollstonecraft foregrounds women's traditional roles as wives and mothers, she is also interested in women's ability to be self-governing agents. This, too, requires a combination of sense and sensibility. Wollstonecraft contends that she "does not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves" (*VRW* 133). Furthermore, she argues that women cannot obtain virtue until "they are, in some degree, independent of men" (*VRW* 221). This divergent view distinguishes Wollstonecraft as a radical writer of her time. She concedes that "reason is the proper work of the head, sensibility is the proper work of the heart" and women need a balance of both qualities to become well-rounded, virtuous individuals (Sapiro 65). She argues that, "the most perfect education…is such an exercise of the understanding as it is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart" (*VRW* 86). The ladylike Austen, whose novels often feature female heroines who focus solely on marriage and propriety, in reality crafts complex characters who reveal that she shares Wollstonecraft's beliefs.

Both Wollstonecraft and Austen believe that women reach their highest potential when they are allowed to become rational individuals, strengthening both their head and heart. Women need both of these qualities, reason and sensibility, to acquire virtue and achieve their highest potential.

Austen's Critique in *Sense and Sensibility*

Austen and Wollstonecraft bear many similarities when closely examined. Wollstonecraft's "affectionate wife" and "rational mother," closely parallels Marianne Dashwood's final position as a woman with a "new attachment, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village." (*SS* 288). Instead of continuing to act on the whims of her emotions and sensibility, "instead of falling sacrifice to an irresistible passions," she learns to relieve the tension between her sense and sensibility (*SS* 288). Like Wollstonecraft advocates in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Marianne does not abandon all sensibility, but moderates it in conjunction with rational thought to become a virtuous woman, wife, and eventual mother. Wollstonecraft and Austen demonstrate through different means not the value of one attribute over the other, but the importance of developing both reason and sensibility in moderation to assert female agency and realize personal autonomy previously unavailable to women. If women are proven to be just as mentally capable as men, and equally esteemed in the eyes of God as human beings, then it is morally requisite that they be educated and able to attain both reason and sensibility to become virtuous human beings.

Like Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Austen's novels are centrally concerned with education in the broad sense of upbringing and socialization. They often portray bildungsroman, a process of growing up or gaining greater emotional and moral maturity in a young female protagonist of marriageable age. Of all of Austen's novels, however, *Sense and Sensibility* reflects Wollstonecraft's first published work most closely through its central themes of reason (or sense) and sensibility. Originally drafted as an epistolary novel titled *Elinor and Marianne*, Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility* in the midst

of the revolutionary controversy of the 1790s, when many British conservatives mocked the radicals' interest in sensibility. However, the association of radicalism and a belief in sensibility established by Marilyn Butler is inaccurate. Radicals did not value only sensibility; in fact, most, like Wollstonecraft, argued for the importance of *rational* agency.

When introducing Marianne, the Austen's narrator says, "She was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was…every thing but prudent" (Austen 6).[3] This would initially lead the reader to believe that Marianne is the antithesis of her sister Elinor, and represents only sensibility in the novel. Although in continuing her characterization of Marianne, Austen goes on to counteract that assumption, as the narrator states that, "Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's" (*SS* 6). Johnson claims, "A close examination of Elinor and Marianne does not permit us to conclude that they represent antithetical modes of behavior…But the differences between them are nevertheless significant" (Johnson 64). Austen asserts that Marianne has both reason and sensibility, but suggests that she cultivates one at the expense of the other.

Marianne's initial encounters with Willoughby are indicative of the problems with her sensibility. When she first meets him, she immediately falls in love without even knowing him. While Marianne is walking through the country she trips and falls, and is then literally swept off her feet and carried away by a handsome, mysterious stranger—Willoughby. Marianne is led by her sensibility, unchecked by reason, to believe in love at first sight, and this unfounded attachment, which she makes so suddenly, continues to plague her throughout the novel. When recounting the incident that creates the circumstance for Marianne and Willoughby's meeting, the narrator says:

> His manly beauty and more than common gracefulness were instantly the themes of general admiration, and…his gallantry raised against Marianne…Marianne herself had seen less of his person than the rest…But she had seen enough of him to join in the admiration of all the others, and with an energy which always adorned her praise. His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story. (*SS* 33)

The narrator accounts for the "gallantry" of Willoughby's actions in this moment, and how it aligns with Marianne's ideas of a romantic, heroic figure. Her deficient powers of reason do not lead her to question these feelings and assumptions, even though she has seen less of him than anyone else. Her love is fueled by "energy," not true acquaintance or rational thought. This immediate and unsubstantiated attachment that she forms to Willoughby so early on only causes her pain as the narrative continues.

Marianne and Willoughby later find time to converse in more detail, when they meet at dinner at Barton Park. Marianne is so consumed and enthralled by her sensibilities in this moment, however, that she is unable to identify their incompatible traits. When speaking with Willoughby, she finds that their tastes in music, dance, and books are "strikingly alike," however the narrator notes that Willoughby "acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm" (*SS* 36). Marianne is so affected by her sensibilities and baseless love for Willoughby that she does not bother to question Willoughby's answers. Instead of realizing that he is simply agreeing with her to please her, Marianne is too easily carried away and led to believe that the two are such a well-matched pair that after one conversation they are as familiar with each other as one is with a "long-established acquaintance" (*SS* 36).

Marianne becomes a victim of herself by cause of the intense emotions, love, and attachment she feels and internalizes towards Willoughby. Marianne's senses are so entirely inflamed that these feelings consume her entirely and make her incapable of any other employment. When waiting in London, Marianne is anxious to see Willoughby and cannot sit still because her senses become aroused and demand her full attention. Marianne's "spirits still continued very high, but there was a flutter in them…and this agitation increased as the evening drew on. She could scarcely eat any dinner, and when they afterwards returned to the drawing room, seemed anxiously listening to the sound of every carriage" (*SS* 120). Marianne is so absorbed by her senses that she abandons rational behavior and neglects all other events happening around her.

Similarly, Marianne becomes a victim to sensibility when Willoughby suddenly leaves Barton Park for London and the physical reactions to her overwhelming sadness prevent her from doing anything productive. After the loss of Willoughby, Marianne "was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough!" (*SS* 63). Marianne makes herself victim to her sensibilities and is thoughtless about the pain she is inflicting on others as she becomes physically ill from the overindulgence of her passions. Marianne makes herself sick once again in Cleveland after returning from London with a "heart swelling with emotion" (*SS* 228). Completely preoccupied by her "invaluable misery" and "tears of agony," she "resolves to spend almost every hour of every day…in the indulgence of such solitary rambles" (*SS* 229). However, her solitary walks reveal her thoughtless actions informed by passion instead of reason, which make her ill once again. After walking through long, wet grasses on the grounds, with the "great imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and stockings," Marianne catches "a cold so violent" that it "forced itself by increasing ailments, on the concern of every body, and the notice of herself" (*SS* 231). This severe illness, caused by neglect and indulgence of her misery and sorrow, is representative of the "mixture of madness and folly" that ensues when women's "passions are thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed" (*VRW* 131). Austen's narrator in *Sense and Sensibility* loves Marianne in some ways, but does not refrain from highlighting her subscription to the fad of cultivating sensibility.

Marianne learns to utilize a combination of sense and sensibility by the end of the novel, developing both capabilities as a result of her experiences and the reformed education she receives. She does begin the narrative possessing both sense and sensibility, but she subscribes to the trend of cultivating sensibility alone. She is misled into thinking that sensibility alone constitutes agency because it resists conformity to societally accepted ideas about propriety. Marianne begins the novel as an unreasonable and distraught individual. In one of her most

illuminating emotional outbursts, she laments to Elinor after being chastised for her dramatic response to Willoughby's rejection. Marianne responds to Elinor saying, "I cannot, I cannot…leave me, leave me, if I distress you; leave me, hate me, forget me! but do not torture me so. Oh! how easy for those who have no sorrow of their own to talk of exertion! Happy, happy Elinor, *you* cannot have an idea of what I suffer" (*SS* 138). This outburst is again representative of the dangers of sensibility that Wollstonecraft warns against.

Austen argues that this overindulgence results not from a natural feminine characteristic, but from misinformation and faulty education. When Marianne experiences an outburst and cannot remain composed, it is not only because it is not "beyond the reach of Marianne," but mostly because, "it was beyond her wish" (*SS* 131). The narrator admits early on that, "She was without any desire of command over herself" (*SS* 63). What occurs over the course of the novel, then, is not an abandonment of sensibility, but an education reform that convinces Marianne that the link between reason and propriety is not contradictory. As Marianne and Willoughby continue to become acquainted, Marianne makes her affections for him openly clear. Elinor suggests to Marianne that she should be more discreet about her feelings, as they are not wholly proper for a woman who has only just met a man (and is not yet engaged to him). Elinor insists that "the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety," and that an open show of such affections will only expose Marianne to "some very impertinent remarks" (*SS* 52). The narrator explains Marianne's motives for this refusal to conceal her sentiments, saying:

> [Elinor] did venture to suggest the propriety of some self-command to Marianne. But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserved; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to commonplace and mistaken notions. (*SS* 41)

Marianne does not employ restraint because she is unable to do so, or has been instructed otherwise, but rather feels that the "restraint of sentiments" is akin to

enforced control and "subjection of reason." This type of restraint submits to an ideology based on societal ideas of propriety that she finds to be unfounded and she is unwilling to submit to them. Johnson argues that, "Marianne advocates self-expression unhampered by conventional restraints…Far from basing her actions on impulsive, purely subjective feelings, Marianne employs a rational argument to justify her behavior, one that illuminates the essential arbitrariness of established standards" (Johnson 60).

Susan Morgan also identifies this initial misconception in Marianne's logic. She argues, "Not only does Marianne want to trust feelings as the guides to truth and goodness, she does this by collapsing the distinction between feeling and expression, thus making expression spontaneous and inevitable. The world becomes a simpler place if there is a direct correspondence between our emotions and their expressions in words and actions" (Morgan 120-121). Marianne's refusal to submit to established codes of convention of propriety is an attempt to maintain the simplicity of a life in which one can say and so precisely what they feel without repercussions. The contrast between Marianne's obvious outbursts and her more subtle hints at the convictions that drive them emphasizes the complexity of her character and prevents the reader from completely discrediting her as a woman overrun by sensibility and in need of reform. Marianne acknowledges her transformation near the end of the novel, as she joins her older sister Elinor as a female embodiment of both sense and sensibility in cooperation. She says, "I have not a doubt of it…and I have nothing to regret—nothing but my own folly" (*SS* 267). Marianne is represented not as a frivolous lady ruled by emotion, but as an intelligent young woman whose intelligence is obscured by her subscription to the fad of sensibility.

Marianne's transformation at the end of the novel proves troubling for some critics. Butler and others take Marianne's "extraordinary fate" as a clear example of Austen's committed conservatism. The narrator says, "She [Marianne] was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims" (*SS* 288). Critics see Marianne's fate as a rebirth into a new self, after her sensibilities and subsequent illnesses almost kill

her. However, I argue that Marianne is not reborn into sense alone, but into both sense and sensibility. She does not completely abandon her former self, but brings a piece of her sensational tendencies into her new roles as a wife and future mother. Even though Austen concludes Marianne's education somewhat abruptly, with a reformed Marianne who vows that her "feelings shall be governed and…temper improved," the reader is left not with a heroine who has grown out of sensibility into sense, but who has instead learned to combine and utilize both in cooperation (*SS* 263).

In spite of Marianne's role as a warning against the dangers of cultivating sensibility alone, Austen is not opposing Elinor's sense to Marianne's sensibility. Elinor possesses *both* sense and sensibility herself, and in combining both qualities she is a representative figure of the type of female education that Wollstonecraft advocates. Knox-Shaw, who provides a rebuttal of Butler's preeminent assertion that Austen is a political conservative, identifies the ways in which Elinor and Marianne combine the traits of reason and sensibility instead of possessing one or the other in isolation. He observes,

> "We hear almost as much of Elinor's self-command as we do of Marianne's sensibility. But the plot works in such a way as to complicate and test these attributes. Each sister is…both an agent and a spectator of the other, and for each of them, the special endowment is complemented by its contrary, so that Marianne is 'sensible' as well as amiable, and Elinor has 'good heart' in addition to her sense" (Knox-Shaw 146).

Both characters work to balance both traits, which reveals that strength of head and heart are equally important to Austen (and Wollstonecraft). The narrator indicates at the start of the novel that, "Elinor…possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment" (*SS* 5-6). However, she also "had an excellent heart; —her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them" (*SS* 6). Austen begins by avoiding a strict alignment of Elinor with sense, also commenting on the strengths of her "affections" and "feelings" which are often properly governed. It is clear that Elinor *does* feel and is affected by her own sensibilities just as Marianne is, but

her proportionally balanced reason in comparison with Marianne's sometimes obscures this fact.

Elinor exposes both her sense and sensibility after learning of Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele. Reeling from this news, Elinor experiences a variety of emotions, including "resentment" and "indignation" among others (*SS* 103). She begins to question everything she had once assumed about Edward. She muses, "Had Edward been intentionally deceiving her? Had he feigned a regard for her which he did not feel? Was his engagement to Lucy an engagement of the heart?" (*SS* 103). This display of doubt and feeling exhibits Elinor's possession of sensibility. However, her ability to stop these feelings in their tracks and redirect them also illustrates the power of her personal sense. She says, "No; whatever it might once have been, she could not believe it such at present. His affection was all her own. She could not be deceived in that…What a softener of the heart was this persuasion!" (*SS* 103). Elinor's acknowledgement of her feelings in this moment, then her quick reining in of those feelings before they get the best of her, illuminates both her reason and sensibility.

Elinor's possession of both sense and sensibility sets her apart as a representative female character, modeled after Wollstonecraft's ideas in *Vindication*. After Elinor learns that Edward is no longer engaged to Lucy Steele but is free to marry her, she "could sit no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease" (*SS* 273). In this episode the rational Elinor is gone for a moment and, overcome by emotion, she has to flee the room because she cannot control her sensibilities with her sense. Elinor possesses both sense and sensibility in this moment because, while her sensibilities are uncontrolled and run wild, she does have enough sense to leave the room and not betray what she feels to everyone present at the party. She finds that, "in spite of herself," in spite of her best sense of reason, "she had always admitted a hope" that Edward would return (*SS* 270).

When Elinor speaks with Willoughby, her emotions oftentimes get the best of her. When first speaking with him, Marianne is completely enthralled and

jumps into a conversation with him. Elinor, however, "was robbed of all presence of mind by such an address, and was unable to say a word" (*SS* 131). Elinor is so shocked and taken aback by his manner that she is unable to continue to carry a conversation, to compensate for her feelings with her sense, as she normally does. Indeed, when speaking to Willoughby again after his return, and after the havoc that he has wreaked on the life of her sister Marianne, "her voice, in spite of herself, betrayed her compassionate emotion" (*SS* 249). While speaking with Willoughby, "Elinor's heart, which had undergone many changes in the course of this extraordinary conversation, was now softened again; —yet she felt it her duty to check such ideas in her companion as the last" (*SS* 246). Elinor exhibits both her sense and sensibility in these moments, in which she is overcome by emotions that she realizes should not rule her, but struggles to maintain personal autonomy by employing the use of her reason and keeping her emotions in check and under control. If she does become "prey to her senses," she maintains an equal share of reason to offset its ill effect (*VRW* 130). Elinor also explicitly denies any accusation that she does not feel. After Marianne discovers that Elinor has kept information from her for months, she defends herself and identifies her own feelings. She says:

> You do not suppose that I have ever felt much. —For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature; knowing that it would make you and my mother most unhappy…If you can think me capable of ever feeling—surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now*. (*SS* 198)

Marianne, who previously criticizes her sister for not feeling at all, comes to realize through this confession that Elinor does indeed bear strong feelings. Unlike Marianne, though, Elinor is able to conceal or control them in the interests of protecting others.

Through Elinor's character and Marianne's character transformation as she follows in the steps of her older sister, Austen, like Wollstonecraft, contends that sensibility is not completely unimportant. Elinor's self-control in restraining her emotions is one indication of the importance of acquiring both characteristics

in equilibrium. For example, Elinor often conceals her feelings in order to promote the well being of others; these are not indications that she does not feel at all. When Edward leaves, she does not make an outward exhibition of her emotions, not seeking to "augment and fix her sorrow by seeking silence, solitude, and idleness," as her sister Marianne "judiciously" decides to do (*SS* 78). Instead, she:

> busily employed herself the whole day, neither sought nor avoided the mention of his [Edward's] name, appeared to interest herself almost as much as ever in the general concern of the family, and if, by this conduct, she did not lessen her own grief, it was at least prevented from unnecessary increase. (*SS* 79)

Elinor's methods for coping with her sorrow demonstrate that one has to think rationally to be sensitive to the feelings of others (in this case, her mother and sisters). Elinor obviously suffers a great deal when Edward leaves Morton and she is still emotional in this moment, but uses reason to process those emotions in a way that gives her increased power over her personal being and enables her to be caring toward others. Elinor's kindness to Mrs. Jennings is another example of her ability to use both reason and sensibility for the good of others. Although Mrs. Jennings is nosy and constantly inserting herself into affairs that do not concern her, she is kind to both Elinor and Marianne and Elinor seeks to return that kindness. When they are riding together, "Elinor took immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could; and Mrs. Jennings on her side treated them both with all possible kindness" (*SS* 119). These moments in which Elinor puts aside her own feelings for those of others exemplify the connections between Austen and Wollstonecraft. Austen upholds Wollstonecraft's affirmation that good will and love require thought, and thought in this case is mediated through a balance of reason and sensibility.

While critics are quick to clearly delineate Elinor as the rational or "sensible" character and Marianne as the female protagonist plagued by her "sensibilities," this dichotomy of the title should not be taken as a divisive

distinction, but rather indicative of "a kind of progression or education" (ApRoberts 355). This type of education is similar to the education that Wollstonecraft demands for women. Wollstonecraft's focus on virtue, acquired through a balance of reason and sensibility, is not lost on Austen, in whose work virtue emerges as "a fount of decency," rooted in, "the ability to feel, first for ourselves, and then, with good hope, for others" (ApRoberts 364). This self-knowledge and empathy is essential to become a virtuous individual, wife, and mother. The sister faculties of sense and sensibility are mutually dependent in the Dashwood sisters who aim to become more virtuous, self-governing women.

This close examination of both Wollstonecraft and Austen reveals a new view of Austen that is not often considered. While most critics "unequivocally align Austen's work with conservative critiques of the culture of sensibility," I argue that Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is a radical work that appeals to ideas first established by Wollstonecraft in 1792 (James-Cavan 16). The comparison between Wollstonecraft and Austen opens up a new view of Austen entirely, as an eighteenth century woman who is not solely focused on marriage and propriety but also on female education. Recent studies of Austen, which "concentrate on the co-ordinating conjunction, the 'and,' of the title," prove that "the concepts have more to join them than to separate them" (James-Cavan 17). Nazar similarly argues, "Austen sounds remarkably like Wollstonecraft in her depiction, through Marianne Dashwood's story, of the damage women inflict upon themselves by cultivating sensibility alone" (Nazar 127). Considering reason (or sense) and sensibility as complementary terms for reformed female education aimed at virtue establishes Austen as a feminist thinker in her own right.

NOTES

[1] Critics agreeing with Butler include Tuite, Sedgwick, and Mudrick.

[2] All subsequent references to Wollstonecraft will be noted with a parenthetical citation with the abbreviated title of her work (*VRW*) in place of her name.

[3] All subsequent references to Austen will be noted with a parenthetical citation with the abbreviated title of her work (*SS*) in place of her name.

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Re:Search

James Baldwin and the Performance of (Something Other Than) Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

"James Baldwin and the Performance of (Something Other Than Subjectivity)" is primarily focused on the intersection of two primary sources, James Baldwin's novel *Another Country,* and Horace Ové's film *Baldwin's Nigger*. It is concerned with the performance of subjectivity, and argues that normative subjectivity is racialized, sexualized, and gendered, predicated on (self) possessive individualism and the regulation of materiality and difference. Rufus Scott, a black jazz drummer and the main character of Baldwin's novel, is unable to survive because the imposition of normative subjectivity is too much to bear, and it interdicts his ability to imagine alternative modes of life. However, prior to his death, Rufus offers an utterance that bears alternative potential in its refusal of the terms of normative subjectivity. This essay focuses on the ways in which that potentiality is taken up by the film as Baldwin and his interlocutors, in thinking through the need to collectively construct a different world, perform something other than subjectivity.

KEYWORDS

James Baldwin, Subjectivity, Blackness, Performance, Possession

Never learned to swim
Can't catch the rhythm of the stroke
Why should I hold my breath
Feeling that I might choke…
With the rhythm it takes to dance to what
We have to live through
You can dance underwater and not get wet

— Parliament*, "Aqua Boogie (A Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)"*

James Baldwin is concerned with love and futurity, with the possibility of creating a new world with others. Two examples of this, in particular, are given in his 1962 novel *Another Country* and Horace Ové's film *Baldwin's Nigger*. The first part of the novel is primarily concerned with Rufus Scott, a black jazz drummer who is continually dealing with the internal and external effects of racism and white supremacy, giving him destructive tendencies and eventually resulting in his suicide. In the film, recorded in London circa 1969, Baldwin and the comedian Dick Gregory make clear the position of colonized people, specifically black people in the world, and the struggle for self-determination that takes place at this time. David Leeming, relaying Baldwin's comments on *Another Country*, says that in the novel "love is refused at one's peril" and that "humans are not sinful by nature unless they ignore the call of love, which is to say, of life itself" (200). Thus, Baldwin's novel can be seen as warning and a way of thinking through how different modes of being with each other construct love as generative and necessary, not limited to its romantic conceptions. *Baldwin's Nigger* indirectly elaborates and extends the arguments present in *Another County*, and implicit in both is a critical reconsideration of subjectivity itself. These works deal with the ontological question of whether or not black people are able to enter into the world of subjectivity and how the terms of that subjectivity exclude certain people. Further still, Baldwin calls on us to ask whether an inability to achieve normative subjectivity is a general condition, so that the world as we know it, and in its distinction from the earth, is not all there is. Insofar as subjectivity is a certain way of positioning oneself in relation to others, this is also a question of performance. Both the novel and the film, through the

performativity and performance of Baldwin's words, consider the material traces of the flesh and the body that are repressed through the self-concern of the subject. Baldwin challenges normative notions of subjectivity and reveals the dangerous and corrosive character of (self) possessive and individuated subject-hood, as well as exploring a world borne out of this positionality in relation to the other. By way of this revelation, Baldwin provides an opening through which alternative ways of being with each other can be conceived.

I hope to arrive here through a reading of the first book in *Another Country,* beginning with a recessive moment couched in the text that is brief yet crucial. Rufus, after wandering through the streets of New York—hungry, homeless, and alone—is offered a meal and subsequently solicited for sex by a white male stranger who recognizes his desperation. In response to his proposition, Rufus says, "I don't have a thing to give you" (Baldwin 44). The "thing," which we might think of as Rufus himself, is the referent here, but this deceptively simple response raises a host of questions. What does it mean to be a thing, or to think of oneself, or be thought of, as a thing? Baldwin seems to question the parameters of possessive selfhood and what it means, therefore, to possess things and objects, to possess others, and to possess a self. Operative here is the enduring legacy of slavery given in what Saidiya Hartman describes as the "longstanding and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage," that she argues "made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self," that is, notions of the self as an owner (115). She goes on to think through what she calls a "burdened individuality" that characterizes life after emancipation, which can be described as the "paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity, procreation, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed" (117). For Hartman, the paradoxical and burdened individuality she describes is the result of a nascent "transformation of black subjectivity," which gives life for black people a particular kind of precariousness (117). In her estimation, this life is precarious not merely because

of the prior categorization of blacks as non-human and as property, but precisely because they were brought "into the fold" and given access to a liberal (self) possessive individualism which served to intensify "the responsibilities and afflictions of the newly emancipated" (117).

I am interested in this paradox of subjectivity—wherein the self is thought of as both liberated agent and property, discrete and individuated—and the responsibility, through regulation, to maintain the subject as the proper manifestation of personhood. Fred Moten argues that, in one sense, "subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects"; however, on the other side of that formulation, "it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses" (*In the Break* 1). Through the course of his exchange with the man, Rufus struggles with the sense that he does not, and cannot, own himself, let alone anything else. However, he desperately tries, claiming after being touched by the man that he doesn't "want no more hands on me, no more, no more," suggesting resistance to being held, insofar as being held compromises the integrity of a supposedly discrete and volitional self (Baldwin 43).

In light of this response, I argue that the man's proposition, in one sense, marks an attempted entrance into an alternative marketplace where Rufus's body is the commodity for sale, as his property with his assumed consent. In another sense, this proposition is also an interpellation, a call to enter into the system of relations that describes (inter-) subjectivity. At issue here is the power differential that exists between the man and Rufus. For Rufus, being abject and penniless at this point, survival makes propositions like this a life or death situation. Also at issue is the historical precedent of the black body figured as a commodified object and the baggage this encounter carries. The desire to be a volitional subject burdens Rufus with a responsibility to uphold and maintain his self as subject, individuated and alone and in possession of himself and his objects. However, this responsibility takes a material toll on his body, in the flesh, and self-preservation makes the preservation of life untenable. Following this, the recessive moment in which Rufus remarks, "I don't have a thing to give you," can be seen as a chance.

Rufus's utterance constitutes a non-answer to that call, disturbing the ground upon which the man's address is possible and shedding light on the potential for another mode of life. "I don't have a thing to give you" detaches a normative notion of the self—as property given in liberal individualism and subjectivity—from life, and Rufus's remark brings the precariousness of this mode of personhood into relief.

The man's proposition and the failure of his address, instantiated by Rufus's utterance, can be considered on terms which Judith Butler lays out in her book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, where she writes:

> The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one's will and standing by it, stamping one's name upon one's will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. That is we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. (130)

In this sense, we can see the constitutive power of language given in our addressability. Rufus's very existence is thrown into question by the terms on which their exchange is initiated, terms which are not his own. The intensity of the threat to the stability of his own self in this moment is so great that he comes close to blacking out while merely conversing with the man and knowing where this conversation will lead. It is so great that it induces nausea, and the food he is eating at the bar is "threatening to come up" (Baldwin 43). In the midst of the man's advances, Rufus says, "I'm not the boy you want, mister" (44). The exchange proceeds: "'How do you mean, you're not the boy I want?' the man tried to laugh. 'Shouldn't I be the judge of that?'" (44). The man's response is an

attempt to assert the presence of his own will, and for Rufus, this response is "the demand that comes from elsewhere" bringing him into existence, as defined within the parameters of subjectivity and the structure of address as Butler outlines it (130).

For this white man, the question of Rufus's position as subject/object is not up to Rufus, and here, one is reminded of Hortense Spillers' claim to "describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth" (65). The man has an investment in Rufus as an object. On one hand, this investment is material in that he has literally spent money on food in order to obtain Rufus for an implicitly sexual encounter. On the other hand, the man is invested in himself as subject in relation to Rufus as object. Insofar as Rufus can be identified linguistically, like Spillers, through a myriad of names/identities/signifiers, Rufus's self is not his own. Again, like Spillers, Rufus as object is necessary for the white man's conception of himself, because, as Frantz Fanon argues, "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (90). What is occurring, then, in the man's uneasy laughter and disbelief following Rufus's refusal? Rufus's claim to not "have a thing to give" constitutes a rupture in the man's conception of self as well. But rather than attempting to exert his own will in contradistinction to that of the man, Rufus withdraws, recessively refusing to enter into that relationality, throwing it into disarray.

In Rufus's everyday performances in his world, the imposition of subjectivity manifests itself as a desire for that impossible ideal, a desire for that relationality that he refuses. Rufus lingers in a space between subjectivity and a life always already outside of that, which is non-existence in his estimation. The effects of this doubled state are destructive, leading Rufus to severely mistreat the people with whom he associates, women in particular. Shortly after meeting each other, Rufus and Leona, a poor white woman from the south, initiate a sexual encounter while attending a party hosted by friends of Rufus. He is verbally and physically coercive; he pulls "her to him as roughly as he could" and shortly thereafter "he forced her beneath him and he entered her" (Baldwin 20-21).

However, while he tries to assert his superiority, "her tongue burned his neck and his chest" and "she moved beneath him" (21). Further, she "carried him, as the sea will carry a boat: with a slow, rocking and rising and falling motion, barely suggestive of the violence of the deep" (21). Leona's materiality disturbs Rufus, whose brutality in the interest of holding Leona as his object is to no avail, and it holds and carries him rather than the other way around. His exploitation of Leona's vulnerability highlights his own, and points to the impossibility of complete control, in the same way that a boat is limited in its ability to protect its passengers from the vast expanse of the sea. In this encounter, he teeters between the violent exertion of a presumed right to possess and feelings of "tenderness for Leona, which he had not expected to feel" (21).

In order to achieve subjectivity, Rufus feels he must refuse that tenderness for Leona, but she exerts a dispossessive force akin to that which Moten describes in his formulation regarding the subject/object relation (*In the Break* 1). "Each labored to reach a harbor" is simultaneously a chance for collective being and a struggle for power in which "there could be no rest until this motion became unbearably accelerated by the power that was rising in them both" (Baldwin 21). However, the line between these positions is unclear and becomes more smeared as the two become further entangled. Baldwin emphasizes the continual blurring movement of their bodies in this scene by suspending the use of commas in his description of their haptic and fleshly entanglement.[1] Thus, the text engages in a kind of performance of its own, blurring verbs as Rufus and Leona blur the distinction between subject and object. However, this struggle is not even-handed. This encounter is portrayed through the ecstatic perspective of Rufus, for whom "everything he did he watched himself doing," and this encounter ends violently, described as a beating. Rufus's presence wins out, and it seems as if he is able to temporarily reach subjectivity for himself in relation to Leona, evidenced in how her presence is reduced to a "cry" (22). This suggests male privilege, which is also proposed in the fact that Rufus's perspective and voice are foregrounded throughout this scene. At the same time, Rufus feels the influence of white supremacy through Leona, which manifests in a pressure to conquer her, as

"shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor the lynch mob arriving on wings" (Baldwin 22). However, the specter of retribution for their miscegenation is always already there, implying the incommensurability the oppressions each of them face—oppressions that have mental, emotional, social, and economic effects and can be thought of as what Spillers would call "high crimes against the flesh" (67).

The trace of the flesh becomes foregrounded for Rufus following his exchange in the bar, where his relinquishment of desire for the world of subjectivity leaves him without hope. On Rufus's last night, he takes a train uptown, observing the "many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other" (Baldwin 86). He listens as the train "groaned, lurched, [as] the wheels seemed to scrape the track making a tearing sound…as though protesting its heavier burden, as though protesting the proximity of white buttock to black knee" (86). Rufus laments—despite the physical closeness of the people on the train, and the closeness they might feel if the severed genealogies instantiated by slavery were considered—an intense and debilitating sense of separation. Within the train, people are individuated and alone, and all connections beyond spatio-temporal proximity are nonexistent. Shortly after, as they reach a tunnel, "the train rushed into the blackness with a phallic abandon, into the blackness which opened to receive it, opened, opened, the whole world shook with their coupling" (86).

This scene reproduces, in an augmented fashion, the kind of racialized and gendered violence present in all scenes of interracial and inter-gender interactions in this book. The train wields an implicitly destructive force with "phallic abandon," and blackness itself is represented by the tunnel, sexualized as female and vulnerable in its openness (Baldwin 173). However, in the meeting of the two, blackness can also be seen as maternal, bearing a sense of infinite possibility that is appositional to the sense of consuming destruction that Rufus feels. Rufus understands this, but he also realizes that he is unable to get to a space of possibility alone, and the hustle of people unconcerned with him and with each

other takes a devastating toll on him. Without others and unable to fashion himself into a proper subject, life is impossible for Rufus, and he "knew that he was never going home any more" (86). He eventually gets off the train and heads to the Washington Bridge. Looking at the water before meeting his end, Rufus, unable to bear the weight and pressure of normative subjectivity, notes that "he was black and the water was black" before jumping (87).

If we think through Rufus's leap, taking George Clinton and Parliament's lead, what if blackness, on the outer edge of subjectivity, is not synonymous with death? What is there in claiming blackness and giving up the desire to float above water using "the rhythm of the stroke," that Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk, in his proper refusal to join Starchild in dance, is so committed to? What would it mean to claim that black life and refuse the regulatory, singular, and exclusionary notion of life proffered by the subject, which only leads Rufus to his death? The song begins with an introduction from Sir Nose who promptly declares: "I can't swim, I never could swim, I never will swim" and he desperately petitions against the Parliament crew's attempts to drag him into the water ("Aqua Boogie"). His petitions are accented by birdlike squawks (the cover depicts Sir Nose about to be consumed by a gigantic beaked bird) that register as noise, the improper and unkempt form sound takes. After his introduction, the music crescendos and the Parliament ensemble responds with the lyrics given in the epigraph, and it is revealed that swimming was never the goal. Their desire is to give up "the rhythm of the stroke" because "with the rhythm it takes to dance to what we have to live through, you can dance underwater and not get wet." Their aim is dance and the refusal of the proper stroke of subjectivity, because for them, life is improperly irreducible to that mode. This is a life they live together, and a life which Rufus, precisely because of his isolation, is unable to sustain.

In *Baldwin's Nigger*, Baldwin takes the "stroke" of subjectivity to task, and over the course of the lecture documented in the film, Baldwin thinks through the general relation of black people to the world. What is interesting about Baldwin's lecture is what is given not merely in his language, but also in the

transmission of that language. Moten, in response to J.L. Austin's theories regarding the character of speech acts, offers useful advice on thinking through this:

> I would follow Austin and Cavell, then, in acknowledging the importance of the circumstances of the speech act, but I would also point to the need for a more detailed and expansive engagement with that which we could think about, using Austin's designation, as the accompaniments of the utterance: not only winks, pointings, gestures, frowns, and other such visible markers but tones of horror and, beyond and before that, certain cut augmentations of voice (meaning, a certain look or style or make-up tied to a performance that visualizes, thereby mut(at)ing, sound; interesting, though, to think the effects of sound looking like a black woman) by way of multiple self-accompaniment. (Moten 296)

Moten draws particular attention to the way language is sounded, and the way sound is then visualized or felt, making the deceptively simple argument that there is more to what is said than the words themselves. Approximately 3½ minutes into the film, Baldwin remarks, "whether I like it or not, I am an American. Now…I am not Lyndon Johnson; I am not saying that as, you know…'I am an American!'" Here, gearing up to say "I am an American" a second time, Baldwin grabs his lapels, straightening his back in exaggeration, his head completing a kind of curve toward his back side with his chin and eyebrows raised, eyes squinted. Baldwin's posture, along with his invocation of Lyndon Johnson, mocks the pride normatively associated with such a statement. He does this by embodying a positionality and stance associated with that phrase. He suggests with his stiffness a kind of uneasy need to convey pride, emphasized by his squinted eyes and raised eyebrows, which register, through Baldwin's conveyance, a critical distrust of the other. Simultaneously, this posture is self-questioning, as if the need to vigorously convey pride only reveals a deeper self-doubt.

Baldwin's speech is animated by this dramatization, and his performance of American pride reveals the underside of a certain construction of subjectivity. André Lepecki's analysis of the crawls of William Pope.L is appropriate here in that both "propose a kinetic critique of verticality, of verticality's association with

phallic erectility and its intimate association with the 'brutality of political power, of the means of constraint: police, army, bureaucracy'" (93). In this sense, the rigid verticality of Baldwin's performance shows how normative western subjectivity acts as a standard, its terms understood by everyone in the room, such that Baldwin incurs laughter through his parody of it. However, the laughter and widespread understanding implies the commonness of its imposition. This imposition is manifested as a constraint on the body, given and parodied in Baldwin's stiff posturing, which, when read through Lepecki's analysis of verticality, can also be seen as representative of the regulatory force of the government and suggested in Baldwin's invocation of Lyndon Johnson. The force of this regulation is enacted upon those who do not or cannot fit the (racialized, sexualized, and gendered) bill. Spillers' notion of being "a meeting ground of investments and privations" for the nation comes back to us in normativity's existential investment in the regulation of difference through the imposition of subjectivity (203).

Subsequently, Baldwin gives this formulation on the positionality of black people in this system: "When you try to stand up and look the world in the face, like you had a right to be here. When you do that—without knowing that this is the result of it—you have attacked the entire power structure of the western world…. And by the attempt to walk from here to there, you have begun to frighten the white world" (*Baldwin's Nigger*). For Baldwin, the acts of standing and looking, erecting and envisaging, being vertical and beholding, are markers of proper subjectivity, given in the ability to take an assertive position towards the world. Baldwin argues that the black person's attempt to do this is antagonistic to "the entire power structure of the western world," which, on one hand, suggests the racialization of normative subjectivity that is constitutive of black exclusion (*Baldwin's Nigger*). On the other hand, what is given in this antagonism? In returning to Fanon, by way of André Lepecki's analysis, it can be argued that, if "colonialism has no outside, since there is no society in a relation of exteriority to the process of colonization and the violence of racism, then ontology remains that open sore in philosophy's body" (89). In this sense, Baldwin's claim is that

blackness bears a force that is disruptive of ontology, calling its stability into question. Implicit here is a call for the release of the forms of constraint that the embodiment of the subject requires.

Insofar as blackness can be considered disruptive of the current order, Baldwin moves in another direction and beckons us to follow. During Q & A, a woman calls on Baldwin to predict the future, asking "how do you envisage the black man's personality in, say, fifty years?" Baldwin responds:

> It seems to me that the black personality, then, has a kind of vigor, a kind of vitality, and…a sense of life, something which does not come from here, but comes from much deeper regions. I think the African personality is not so compartmentalized. I think that Europeans, the European personality, in the main—and this implies a very severe judgement of Christianity…if not an indictment— …are terribly worried about the flesh, the senses. I think they live in checks and balances which are really very nearly pathological, and you see them in relief in America, because…I, precisely, am the flesh, which the Christians must mortify. Now, according to me, and what I hope for in the future: the flesh is all you have. If you mortify that, there is no hope for you—everything you find out, you find out through your senses. Everything awful that happens to you and everything marvelous…happens to you in this frame, this tenement, this mortal envelope. Which should be—instead of beating it with chains, and hammering nails through it and hanging it on crosses—it should be, the celebration! Your life, your body. And if that concept comes back into the world, it will come back only through the black people that have been submerged so long; and that will change not only the black personality, but that will change the world. (*Baldwin's Nigger*)

Baldwin argues that Christian morality is racialized, but he also uncovers an abstraction that occurs in the imposition of this particular morality. This uncovering is followed and extended by Spillers, who makes a distinction between the "body" and the "flesh" that is implicit in Baldwin's response (67). For Spillers, the "body" refers to a conception of people as whole and singular beings. This formulation is problematic in Spillers' estimation because it ignores the corporeal material that makes up the body, which is the flesh. She argues that "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization

that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography" (66).

Baldwin also exposes this discourse through his refusal to accept a morality and belief system for which blackness is precisely the sinful "flesh" that Jesus takes on and pays for through death on the cross, a credit that, through the pervasiveness of white supremacy, only accrues to white people in order to make them (w)hole. Blackness is the flesh that must be brutally regulated and destroyed in slavery in a kind of continuation of that holy repression. Thus, Baldwin and Spillers draw attention to what is repressed in normative conceptions of humanity: the flesh, which is material, and therefore *matters*. Insofar as the flesh is the "zero degree of social conceptualization" for Spillers, it is therefore irreducible and must be paid attention to because it represents a chance that it cannot be snuffed out by the imposition of purportedly universal subjectivity and its (w)hole body (345). As Baldwin says, "the flesh is all you have," and, following Spillers, in the flesh there is "wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, 'counted'/'accounted,' or differentiated" (72). Baldwin, then, is interested in those who, in being continually reduced to the flesh, are closest to its potential. He is interested in those who are not, as Moten would say, "poor in world but who are, to be more precise, poor-in-the-world" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 776). He is interested in the flesh that suffers due to the imposition of normative subjectivity and therefore must be loved. He is interested in the flesh that, in its irreducibility, bears the possibility of another country, of another world.

Moten, thinking through the relation between blackness and subjectivity, says, "on the one hand, blackness and ontology are unavailable for each other; on the other hand, blackness must free itself from ontological expectation, must refuse subjection to ontology's sanction against the very idea of black subjectivity" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 749). A refusal of subjection is a refusal of the world, *this* world. Moten shows us that "blackness," named because of its position outside of (white heterosexual male) subjectivity, is what subjectivity responds to. Blackness, in its relegation to that outside, disrupts the logic of an inside that subjectivity hopes to grasp. In this way, blackness is what

reveals the impossibility of that mode of being. Rufus's identification with the blackness of the water could function, in part, as an invocation of the middle passage and the way it was, in a sense, constitutive of slavery as a global institution, and more specifically, constitutive of black people in America. In a sense, Rufus, in his blackness, sees no way to *be* in the world, and so he takes his life. In doing so, Rufus, at the intersection of Moten, Spillers, and Frank Wilderson III, chooses to remain "in the hold" of the ship, and, for him, that space is death.[2] For Moten, Spillers, and Parliament, the hold is where the flesh resides in its "wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*" (Spillers 72). George Clinton and Starchild dance on the mothership—an astral hold, as it were—underwater, together in the flesh, refusing to float. At the same time, they continually fight so that Sir Nose might understand. Baldwin understands. *Another Country* and *Baldwin's Nigger* are works through which Baldwin attempts to make clear the ways in which the imposition of normative subjectivity is a refusal of the flesh, which is also a refusal of life, if life can be understood as the proliferation of difference rather than a universal experience. Getting to *that* world requires an investment in life, which is also to say, in love of blackness in the flesh.

NOTES

[1] For example, “His lips and his teeth touched her ears and her neck and he told her” (Baldwin 21).

[2] See also Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness”: “There are flights of fantasy in the hold of the ship” (743); and “In the hold, blackness and imagination, in and as consent not to be a single being, are (more and less than) one” (752).

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Re:Search

A Fantasy in Sci-Fi's Clothing: *Interstellar* and the Liberation of Magic from Genre

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ABSTRACT

In his film *Interstellar* (2014) Christopher Nolan depicts an outer space filled with black holes, gravitational phenomenon, ghosts, and tesseracts. As the protagonist ventures into space to find a new habitable planet, he encounters incredible scientific challenges, moral dilemmas, and religious questions. Religion and morality are established themes in space films and in science fiction, and the film was largely acknowledged for its attempts to grapple with larger ontological and religious questions. However, the film is often overlooked for its magical elements. *Interstellar* is largely a fantasy film but is also incredibly rich in science fictional tropes and themes. In this essay, I will argue that *Interstellar* can be reduced to neither a fantasy film nor a science fiction one, and that the complex relationship between science and magic are explored in a unique and artistically valuable way.

KEYWORDS

Science Fiction, Fantasy, Interstellar, Christopher Nolan, Magic, Science, Religion, Popular Culture, Film, Space

While it was Christopher Nolan's most financially successful film to date, *Interstellar* (2014) was met with a tepid critical reception that blemished Nolan's otherwise remarkably consistent body of work. The film was by no means a failure. Criticism of *Interstellar* praised the film for its dynamic use of science, and the film sparked a dialogue about religion's place in both science fiction and a scientific worldview. However, critics and audiences alike overwhelmingly felt that for all of its ambitious ideas, the film still fell flat. One reviewer wrote, "Nolan's ambition doesn't match his material this time around, leaving the picture strangely inert as it seeks to dissect the heavens," reflecting an attitude held by many critics who felt the themes of the film were not well enough fleshed out and lacked a lasting impact (Ornford).

The film's controversial resolution is at least partly responsible for this criticism. At the climax of the movie, our protagonist, Coop, heroically jumps into a black hole in the hopes of finding a singularity that would allow NASA scientists on Earth to overcome the limitations of their scientific understanding, and save themselves from environmental apocalypse. Inside the black hole, Coop finds a 'tesseract' which appears as an infinite stream of bookshelves that provide a window into the bedroom of Murphy, Coop's daughter, at different points of her life. Given the thoroughly scientific scope of the rest of the film, the composition of the black hole seems so absurdly sentimental and convenient that it can be read as a Hollywood deus ex machina, rather than a reward for the audience's intellectual investment.

Essentially, the ending disobeys the generic rules of science fiction, which demand that the protagonist use wit, logic, and reason to find a solution that remains cohesive with the previously established empirical rules of the fictional universe (Suvin 7-8; Sobchack 284). Instead, *Interstellar* borrows strategies from another genre: fantasy. Interstellar is as much about magic as it is about science or religion, yet critics generally disregard its magical elements or label them as plot holes. Magic is a fundamental and universal component of the human experience, yet it is trivialized as a subject and restricted to designated "fantasy" texts. This essay will use an anthropological lens to reexamine magic as a fundamental

cultural component, with a defined form and function that exists outside of the literary world. With an understanding of magic as a comprehensible and fundamental part of human knowledge, critics can gain a magical sensitivity that is crucial to understanding *Interstellar*'s contributions towards deconstructing the barriers that separate the science fiction and fantasy genres.

First, it is important to understand what magic is as an anthropologically defined cultural element (Malinowski 38). Magic is so often restricted to the boundaries of fantasy novels and films about witches and wizards that we understand magic solely as a literary phenomenon. As Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the twentieth century's most important anthropologists and writer of *Magic, Science, and Religion* (1954), explains, magic is an important form of social and cultural knowledge, passed down through ritual. Malinowski argues that magic, science, and religion are three distinct subsets of cultural knowledge, which act as a cohesive and dynamic system of social maintenance. It would be wrong to understand his definitions of magic, science, and religion in a colloquial sense, filled with all of the cultural baggage contemporary Western culture imparts onto each system of knowledge. Science does not necessitate the scientific method, magic is not equivalent to the occult, and religion is not always organized and theistic—though each can be these things. Malinowski explains that science, magic, and religion are specifically defined, anthropological phenomena that are present in every single culture at every stage of its being (38). This tripartite system is simply a way to understand three interrelated subsets of cultural knowledge. Each subset is defined by its universal function and each subset is shaped, both in form and degree, by the needs of the individual cultures they are serving.

Malinowski's "science" is defined as physical knowledge that can be used to consistently manipulate the environment to achieve a desired result (39). A toddler has scientific knowledge when her mom teaches her how to walk. The scientific method is unnecessary as long as she can use her knowledge to manipulate her environment. Religion is defined as a system of rules and philosophies that addresses the unknowable questions of life. Religion does not

attempt to manipulate the environment, because the truths it is concerned with—like death, conflict, and failure—are inevitable facets of human life. Rather, religions create meaning beyond the edges of scientific knowledge in order to help people cope with scientific limitations. Religion lays wherever science cannot access. As soon as something is discovered, it becomes science (Hartwell 109). Hence, the top of Mount Olympus is not the home of the Greek Gods anymore, nor do we believe the planets are the Roman gods. After scientific discoveries unveil mysteries, the physical realities that are found therein can maintain their cultural importance as landmarks of the past, but their religious quality is lost. As science pushes us into further reaches of the galaxy, it constrains where religion will move and how it will evolve.

Magic is the third form of cultural knowledge that Malinowski defines, and it is the bridge between the physical world of science and the spiritual world of religion. Magic, he argues, is a natural response to the inevitable inadequacies of spiritual and scientific understanding. Cultures that value scientific understanding tend to devalue magic and mysticism, but magic is still present in all societies. In an anthropological context, it is defined as a ritualized form of optimism that connects individuals to a higher power through a physical medium or action (Malinowski 38). Science can be utilized as a physical power, but inherently cannot fully address the unknowable. Religion can address the unknowable, but cannot change physical circumstances on its own. Magic is a way to physically respond to the unknown (Malinowski 38-41). A prayer taps into the philosophy of science and physically charges it with a hope that larger mystical powers will create changes in the physical world. A lucky pen instills hope that the powers of chance and benevolence will allow a student to do well on a test. People will instinctively ask their computer nicely if it will reboot, knowing well that their pleas have no real effect. Each of these instances of magic is a response to the uncertainty of the real world that science cannot confront, and religion cannot resolve.

Interstellar examines all three subsets of cultural knowledge as an interconnected cultural matrix. However, the criticism surrounding *Interstellar*

generally misunderstands this face of the film. *Interstellar* has been praised for its use of "hard science." It uses up-to-date understandings of environmental threats, biology, physics, astronomy, and relativity to create a compelling adventure story. The astronomical sets like the glowing monolithic black hole, Gargantua, or the glassy and ethereal wormhole are feats of CGI magic. And it has been applauded for its endorsement of NASA's space shuttle program (as well as better public STEM education), which recently suffered major budget cuts to the outcry of many science enthusiasts.

The film has also been noted for its fairly blatant religious themes and motifs. The philosophical and moral conversations in the film are generally accepted as interesting, if not a bit forced (Garber). Science fiction as a genre is typically very good at imagining modified material circumstances and exploring the practical and philosophical implications of them (Hartwell 49). The agrarian, pre-apocalyptic future is incredibly topical as we confront the challenges of the Anthropocene,[1] and just close enough in the future to be plausibly threatening. The potential loss of our planet poses philosophical and religious questions about guilt, responsibility, man's place in the universe, and the possibility of a benevolent creator. And space films are especially equipped to look at the metaphysical aspects of religion because of their themes of frontier and discovery. As Barry Vacker explains, there are two essential philosophical challenges that are repeated in space films. Either humans are confronted with "cosmic nihilism" (dread in the face of realizing that there is no meaning to humanity's existence in the universe) or the "cosmic sublime" (the awe and wonder of a vast universe in which we are physically insignificant) (Vacker 5-6). *Interstellar*'s dialogue directly addresses the possibility of a cold universe, the grandness of its scale, and the relationship between the physical world and human values. However, the focus on science and religion overshadows much of *Interstellar'*s strengths in other departments, like fantasy.

While *Interstellar* is most certainly a bona-fide science fiction film, its sheer number of generic fantasy tropes is too significant to ignore. For one thing, the film emphasizes morality more than scientific wit or ingenuity. According to

David G. Hartwell, author of *Age of Wonders: Exploring the World of Science Fiction,* science fiction typically rewards characters for understanding the rules of their world and responding to them (45). Science fiction protagonists do not always have to solve technical problems. For example, Deckard from *Blade Runner* (1982) is not a scientist or a technician. Rather, he is a cop who succeeds as a science fiction hero because he uses his skills of detection to adapt his understanding of human existence to meet the demands of a changing world. The defining moral value of science fiction is the ability to adapt and react to a new physical world. Coop's daughter, Murphy, is more emblematic of a typical science fiction character. Her defining characteristics are her relationship with her father and her intelligence. She saves the world by receiving her father's message, and enlisting her years of research and study at NASA to decode it. Her active engagement in the narrative involves her ability to utilize the information the narrative presents her with, and the narrative rewards her with emotional closure and respect.

As opposed to science fiction, fantasy tends to reward characters for staying steadfast to their values and beliefs in the face of challenges (Sobchack 294). Fantasy characters are rewarded for staying true to their morals, and exemplifying valor, courage, loyalty, etc. in the face of paradoxes. We only need to look so far as *Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*), *Harry Potter*, or *Star Wars* to see examples of this. The majority of major characters in *Interstellar* are rewarded or punished for their moral or immoral character, respectively. NASA leader, Professor Brand, manipulates Coop into leaving and dies in a guilt-ridden state. Dr. Mann, the first astronaut NASA sends to find a habitable planet, selfishly leaves with the crew's ship, marooning them on an icy planet. He is underprepared to navigate the ship and it explodes, killing him. He is not punished because of his inability to read the ship's manual and master it as a craft—while that is technically true, it is not the point of the narrative. He dies because he betrays the people who rescue him. On the other hand, Coop is rewarded for his moral resilience. He sacrifices everything he has to save his daughter, and even after she loses faith in him and resents him, he still plunges

into Gargantua to save her. He comes out of the black hole having saved humanity and is transported back to a prosperous earth, where he is greeted as a hero and is reunited with his daughter. The narrative rewards Coop's heroism because he is essentially a Jesus figure. While the film may deal with the physical realities of the scientific world, the moral rules of its narrative more closely resemble fantasy.

If science fiction is speculative fictional science, then fantasy is speculative fictional magic. Magic comes up multiple times throughout the film. Magic is most noticeably present in the form of the ghosts that plant the gravitational anomalies leading Coop to NASA, conjure the wormhole allowing NASA to leave the solar system, and create the tesseract in the black hole. They are perceived as powerful, fifth dimensional, benevolent beings that exist beyond human comprehension. However, the context for understanding the narrative purpose of magic in *Interstellar* requires that its magical elements enter into conversation with one of the film's religious aspects. Based on our previously established anthropological understanding, religion provides a foundation for magic. Because magic is the physical bridge between the spiritual and the physical world, the spirit of the narrative universe must be established for magic to have any symbolic or narrative meaning. The universal spirit is illustrated most pointedly in Dr. Brand's much-derided speech about love. I personally rolled my eyes in the theater during Dr. Brand's fairly confusing and seemingly unmotivated speech. One moment she is saying that the universe is cold and uncaring and twenty minutes later she is saying the opposite, and in both cases she delivers her lines in complete earnesty. Despite the contradiction, the speech is still important to the film's establishment of a spiritual world. She states:

> [L]ove isn't something we invented. It's observable, powerful. It has to mean something….Maybe it means something we can't yet understand. Maybe it's some evidence, some artifact of a higher dimension that we can't consciously perceive. I'm drawn across the universe to someone I haven't seen in a decade—who I know is probably dead. Love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't understand it yet. (*Interstellar*)

Love transcends time and space, and Dr. Brand suggests that love is a force that is beyond observation, yet is perhaps a fundamental part of the metaphysical fabric. Love becomes a part of the film's religious conception of the universe. Magic and magical worlds require a pervasive metaphysical energy source to call upon, which religion provides. Love becomes part of the metaphysical fabric of the *Interstellar* universe, but does not replace understandings of science. Gravity, relativity, and astronomy still present major obstacles, but the characters must also consider the possibility of love as a metaphysical truth. Fantasy relies on interconnectedness, associative reasoning, and the reality of the unknowable, which expands the narrative boundaries of possibility and connects all separate subjects through a unified spiritual force—like love. Love becomes disseminated through all of reality and, because the inanimate is suddenly infused with metaphysical meaning, anything symbolic in the film can become more meaningful and powerful (Sobchack 292). This allows the narrative to mobilize magic, further defining the film as a fantasy.

There are multiple magical moments throughout the film that call upon love, along with protection, as a source of power. The benevolent ghosts that create the wormhole and the tesseract are discovered later to be technologically advanced human beings from the future, but they are presented as ghosts for the majority of the film. As Dr. Brand suggests, "Whoever they are, they appear to be looking out for us. That wormhole, lets us travel to other stars. Came along right as we needed it" (*Interstellar*). The ghosts protect humankind in a way that is analogous to a benevolent and loving God. In the context of the film, the fifth dimension that they inhabit is as much of a spiritual plane as it is a scientific fact, and the beings may as well be the Holy Spirit. When they become physically active, by placing wormholes or creating messages out of dust, the characters have no explanation for the events and respond with mysticism, fear, and awe. The watch that Coop gives to Murph is a paradigmatic magical artifact that enlists Coop's love as a power source in three ways. First, it functions as a paradoxically beneficent contagion—a physical, tangible object that was touched by the spirit of

love (Sobchack 293). Second, it symbolically signifies Coop's desire to eventually return home. Third, the watch exists in Murph's bedroom, which is a spiritually rich place because of the bookshelf tesseract—which is itself another magical object. It symbolizes both love and scientific knowledge, the two most important metaphysical energies in the *Interstellar* universe. When magical elements like ghosts or artifacts appear in a conventional fantasy, it signals to the audience that larger, unknowable powers are at work. We do not need to understand how the Ring from *LOTR* operates as a source of evil power: we just need to accept that it does. The same is true with Murphy's watch and bookshelf. Rather than focusing on the improbability of the scene, the audience should take the magical artifacts as an invitation to let go of logical consistency, and accept their inability to comprehend the logic behind the magic. However, most audiences have not understood the magical symbols as such and have been left bewildered when things could no longer be explained by the rules of the empirical world. They have not been able to generically code switch, and therefore use sci-fi rules to try to rationalize fantasy moments.

Why have audiences been unable to understand the magical elements of the film? It would be natural to assume that audiences are simply magically illiterate and cannot naturally spot magic on their own. However, I do not believe this argument is sufficient. If the magical elements like the watch, the ghosts, or the bookshelf were in a film that was marketed as a fantasy, I think audiences would easily be able to understand their narrative function. Thus, I propose two alternative reasons for the misunderstanding of magic in *Interstellar*. First, magic has been historically devalued as a legitimate form of cultural knowledge on par with science and religion—that is, it is stigmatized in the eyes of the audience. Second, generic restrictions do not encourage audiences to read the mixture of science fiction and fantasy in a meaningful way.

The cultural role of magic has a long and oftentimes political history that has gradually led to its devaluation in western culture. Magic was present in the form of a pseudo-scientific natural philosophy, and dates back to the musings of Greek antiquity. Humoralism was a blend of magical and medicinal culture that

explained the role of the four humors—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—in affecting health (Paster 6-14). Its role in medicine extended through medieval times and into the early modern era. As advances in anatomical and medicinal knowledge made strides, the mainstream role of humoralism gradually died. Today, however, practices such as homeopathic medicine or energy crystals, continue traditions of magical medicine in the West. Astronomy and astrology are another example of disciplinary pairings of science and magic, as are chemistry and alchemy. Advancements in science naturally lead to the retirement of magical practice. The Enlightenment was a period of booming scientific understanding, and with it came cultural changes that placed higher value on scientific reasoning. Science has always been useful to humankind, but the Enlightenment socially cemented it as a sign of modernity, western domination, and humanity's emergence from immaturity. As the West furthered its positive valuation of science, magic became associated with the past, and was used as justification to colonize "primitive" people. The Enlightenment, in other words, created a hierarchy of culture that prioritizes science over and against magic. When viewing a science fiction film, which follows this Enlightenment trend, people want explainable answers, and magic answers are unconsciously evaluated with scorn and derision. The magical answers in *Interstellar* may be viewed as a cop out, or cheating—a sentiment that has its roots in the historically-based habit of valuing science over magic. Given the strong scientific context of the film, moving from science to magic in *Interstellar* seems like a degradation of the film's themes rather than an examination of science and magic as equivalent social tools.

Magic also has a political past connected to the Church that has contributed to our cultural expectations about it. Acts like Holy Communion and baptism are magical, as are witchcraft and satanic worship. Because the role of the Roman Catholic Church was so strong and pervasive through Western Europe during the seventeenth century, magic contained political and social power, making it a very political issue for the Roman Catholic Church. The Church declared all "unnatural" magic to be witchcraft and condemnable. The Church naturalized its own forms of magic and any other form of magic was considered

heresy, thereby suppressing and restricting the role of magic (Henry 1-26). Flash forward, and witch hunting reached its height in the early-to-mid seventeenth century. By the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, free thinking circles in England began to articulate skepticism about witchcraft and magic. Although initially met with backlash, eventually the skepticism became mainstream and by the mid eighteenth century magic became less threatening and was termed "superstition" (Bever 1). While magic lived on through organizations like the Church, it was not understood as magic. Magic, as a word, became associated with the fringe of society, regardless of any mainstream practice. When people think about magic, the word signifies images of witches, wizards, and satanic worship. Magic as both a word and a concept has acquired so much negative cultural baggage that magical appearances in fiction may not register with audiences unless they are associated with magical symbolism. The watch and the bookshelf are taken as weird coincidences rather than obvious magical items, in part because they do not fit in with our narrow cultural expectations of acceptable forms of knowledge.

Another reason audiences may not respond well to the magic elements of the film is because of generic restrictions. Everyone knows that fantasy means dragons and science fiction means space ships. But what do we make of a film in which a dragon walks out of a space ship? The *New Statesman* recently published a conversation between Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro about genre tropes that is helpful for understanding this issue. As the two literary luminaries explain, genre serves a purpose to the literature market as a way to label texts and market them to genre fans. People want to know that what they are purchasing is going to meet their expectations. So a science fiction lover may be upset when a sci-fi book does not meet generic standards, as will a fantasy fan. As Gaiman explains:

> That's actually a way to view all literary genres, because there are things that people who like a genre are looking for in their fiction: the things that titillate, the things that satisfy. If it was a cowboy novel, we'd need the fight in the saloon; we'd need the bad guy to come riding into town and the good guy to be waiting for him. (Gaiman and Ishiguro)

This marketing strategy creates an incentive for publishers to ask for books to meet certain generic standards and may cause writers to self-censor. As a result, texts become more referential to a genre as a whole, sometimes at the expense of their story's decontextualized purpose (Gaiman and Ishiguro). As a result of this process, sci-fi and fantasy become more and more aesthetically defined, to the point where fictive science and magic become synonymous with the aesthetic tropes of their respective genres. If you say a film is fantasy, a viewer is going to expect the aesthetic qualities of fantasy: references to a medieval past, dragons, elves, etc. Science fiction's aesthetic is almost the opposite to that of fantasy, including references to a potential future, urban setting, and technology-driven plot. The two genres are so aesthetically delimited, and this delimitation is so influential, that *Interstellar*, which is aesthetically sci-fi, lacks enough obvious aesthetic signifiers of fantasy for the audience to appreciate the way in which the film represents magic as a legitimate form of knowledge making.

Interstellar is not the first film to blend science fiction and fantasy genres, but it is unique in that it decontextualizes magic from its negative cultural and generic baggage, and places it in a conversation of equals with science. We are not meant to understand the plot gaps in a scientific way because they lie in the fantastic realm, which lies beyond our comprehension—and that is the point. The plot gaps are magic not because they involve witches or sorcerers (i.e., purely aesthetic generic markers), but because they demand the viewer to inhabit an unfamiliar mode of understanding. Sometimes, magic is the only way people can comprehend events. It is a Western instinct to say that every problem can be solved, deduced, and reduced to logic. It may be true that scientific principles govern everything. But all humans have an inherently limited ability to understand things, and instead of accepting magic as a useful social tool, westerners have distanced themselves from magic, and thereby alienated themselves from a fundamental mode of cultural knowledge production. When the film asks audience members to examine their inability to comprehend an event instead of examining their own cognitive limitations, the audience members become annoyed at the film for not providing better scientific answers. But

Interstellar is a movie about humility. In the scenes before Coop discovers who the ghosts are, it does not matter that the characters would later turn out to be corrected. Their admittance of them as ghosts was the only logical thing to call them because it was illogical. None of the characters' scientific knowledge could answer their questions about the ghosts, so they turned the ghosts into something superstitious that they could use as a reference point and as a motivator. When the tesseract defies any logical paradigm, Coop accepts his inability to fully comprehend its composition and continues with his mission, keeping focus on his moral values and ultimate goal. In that moment, the scientific progress he cares about so much at the beginning of the film no longer matters. All that matters is his love for Murph. Coop's magical understanding may not be scientifically valid, but it helps him navigate an otherwise incomprehensible world until he has the tools to properly understand it.

Interstellar explores the relationship between western magic, science, and religion. When western thought wants to compartmentalize and rationalize the universe, it is a truly humbling statement to admit that for all our pretense, the only thing really separating magic from science is our own ability to comprehend whatever we are confronted with. Westerners tend to have a superiority complex when it comes to rationalization. Western Enlightenment presents itself as logically infallible; its knowledge makes people capable of conquering anything and transcending the "primitive" magical logic that marked the medieval period. But magical thinking is a universal human quality, so it is worth some serious cultural introspection. Humans are standing at the inflection point of an exponential curve of technological and communicative advancements. As the world gets increasingly more complex, fast-paced, and incomprehensible, we are inevitably going to start to rely on associative thought more, and the role of fantasy in film and fiction is going to increase (Sobchack 291). Understanding magic and its anthropological purpose will help critics understand the meaning behind the fantasy films of the future. Magic is fun as escapism and science is a fun way to test one's brain, but without a broader context that understands both magic and science as fundamental and interrelated sources of human knowledge,

they become gimmicks rather than comments on the human experience. *Interstellar* places magic into a broader context by taking away its cultural, historical, and generic restrictions in order to examine magic's role in confronting the limits of human understanding.

NOTES

[1] The Anthropocene is a proposed epoch that begins when human activity has a significant impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystem (Borenstein).

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Re:Search

Ideology as Political Weapon:
How *Alamut* Challenges the Justice of Plato's *Republic*

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ABSTRACT

I explore Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut*, drawing on its sociopolitical context in 1938 Slovenia, as a cautionary tale about potential unjust consequences of putting into practice Plato's model of a just city-state, as described in the *Republic* (380 BC). I also investigate how key structures of Plato's republic have been applied to ideologically driven European totalitarian states and modern terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, and argue that the injustice of such institutions has its origins in the deception at the core of their guiding creeds. Following the critiques of Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai in "Monster, Terrorist, Fag" (2002), I conclude by addressing how *Alamut,* as a novel that cautions against ideologies, advances particular racial ideologies itself regarding the Middle East's relationship to terrorism. I explore key implications of this understanding of the novel as we consider the inherent dangers of the inescapable tool that is ideology.

KEYWORDS

Ideology, Totalitarianism, Orientalism, Terrorism, Slovenian Fiction

Plato's *Republic* (ca. 380 BC) has long influenced political philosophy with its elaborate account of how a just state should be constructed, expressed through the character of Socrates in characteristic Socratic dialogue form. Vladimir Bartol's Slovenian novel *Alamut* (1938) challenges views advanced in *Republic* as to how leadership ought to operate in the just city-state. Plato has inspired a variety of political structures; this essay will follow the tradition of interpreting *Republic* as totalitarian and will identify structural elements that support this classification. *Alamut* challenges Plato's political model as the most just by showing through allegory how the leader of such a regime, whom Plato calls the philosopher-king, is able to, unchecked by external authorities, construct and enforce an ideology that promotes unjust ends. *Alamut* lends itself to being read as an allegorical portrayal of both Plato's just republic and the ideologically driven totalitarian regimes that overtook World War II-era Europe. In this paper, I contest Plato's claim that knowledge of virtue necessarily compels virtuous behavior of the wise and use *Alamut* to show that such transcendent wisdom can actually empower leaders to construct ideologies that, rather than actually promoting virtue, instead manipulate the masses toward vice in service of the leader's personal agenda. Guided by its historical context, I investigate *Alamut* as a cautionary tale that imagines potential consequences of Plato's *Republic* and also address how his model manifests in terrorist organizations today. My project aims to highlight the power of ideology, both as presented in *Alamut* as well as through *Alamut*, as the novel itself extends certain stereotypes regarding the Middle East's relationship to terrorism.

Historical Context for *Alamut*

Born in Trieste, Austria-Hungary, in 1903,Vladimir Bartol studied everything from philosophy and literature to biology and psychology, all of which figure centrally in *Alamut*. While studying in Paris in his late teens, Bartol found inspiration for his masterpiece from a friend who introduced him to "Old Man of the Mountain," Marco Polo's tale of the fortress of Alamut, which he had encountered on his travels. This account describes a powerful warlord who won

his men's "fanatical loyalty" and used it to spread his power through suicide missions. Bartol spent a decade developing *Alamut,* situating it in an eleventh century Iranian setting so well-researched that nothing about the novel suggests its Slovenian roots except for the language in which it was originally written (Biggins 382).

The political context lurking in the background of *Alamut*'s construction informs not only its reception but also its key themes. Slovenia was annexed by Germany and Italy between 1941 and 1945, and the communist Yugoslavian regime saw the book as threatening for years (Biggins 382). The prevalent Slovenian view that literature could build national unity hindered *Alamut*'s reception because, for reasons that will become clear, the book may be interpreted as a subversive criticism of the existing regime and of conformity of thought (Komel 356). Totalitarian regimes were sprouting up across Europe at the time of *Alamut*'s formation, and Michael Biggins, translator of the English edition of the novel, suggests that we can read it as an allegory of early-1900s European totalitarianism. Biggins observes, "Hasan ibn Sabbah, the hyper-rationalistic leader of the Ismaili sect, becomes a composite portrait of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin" (383). Given Biggins' reading of *Alamut*, I will follow his commentary on the novel as a cautionary tale against the political exploitation of ideologies to oppress the masses.

Plato's Republic and the Fortress of Alamut as Totalitarian States

This concept of a hyper-rationalistic leader ruling a state is also forwarded by Plato. In "Plato's Totalitarianism," C.C.W. Taylor assesses the status of Plato's just state, as described in *Republic,* as totalitarian (280-82). He identifies two key characteristics of totalitarian states: authoritarianism and ideology. Authoritarianism is marked by a lack of significant power on the behalf of ordinary citizens to influence political decisions. Ideology is defined as "a pervasive scheme of values…promoted by institutional means in order to direct all or the most significant aspects of public and private life towards the attainment

of the goals dictated by those values" (Taylor 280). Under these definitions, Taylor concludes that Plato's ideal state is totalitarian. It is authoritarian because all political decisions are in the hands of the philosopher-king and not the citizens. Further, it is ideological: the leaders' knowledge of the "Good" (referring to the Form of the Good in Plato's metaphysics) is the basis for their authority and the source for the state ideology's content. What leaders promote as Good is realized in the state through a tight-knit system of education, politics, and morality, and each citizen is expected to defend and advance this ideology. It should be noted that while Taylor and other scholars regard Plato's *Republic* as solidly totalitarian, it has also been read as everything from democratic to oligarchical. In this paper, I maintain that central elements of Plato's republic may at least plausibly be applied to the construction of a totalitarian state.

Alamut exemplifies the totalitarian model described in *Republic*. It is founded on the unquestioned authority of Hasan, the philosopher-king of Alamut, and on the ideology that he has constructed and integrated into every aspect of his fortress. Ibn Tahir, a fresh and particularly keen feday, or warrior, notices the rigidity with which Alamut is internally organized from early on: "He had already begun to recognize that this new world had its own hard and fast rules, that it was organized and governed from within, from the inside out, and that its structure was consistent, logical, and complete" (Bartol 55). Each class, from the houris to the fedayeen to the dais, is to perform only its assigned role, and none may question the established system or Hasan's intentions behind it. Miriam, one of the houris, or maidens of paradise, also realizes that "Hasan's behavior had been utterly consistent" (196). Each of his beliefs, from his "contempt for everything the masses held sacred and indisputable," to his "ambivalence about all received knowledge," to his "absolute freedom of thought and action," reflect his critical worldview and guide his governance (196). Using the absolute authority he establishes by constructing a false religious ideology, Hasan is able to enforce unjust totalitarian rule and to earn his faithful followers' support for it. To preserve their faith, he, at all costs, maintains the consistency of his ideology, even publicly killing his son and only heir to show that his laws bend for no one.

Given that Alamut is a totalitarian state built on the structure described in *Republic* and that Hasan is its philosopher-king, what can we make of the fact that he does not, as argued by Plato, lead the city in the direction of virtue? Perhaps by revisiting concepts of justice, we may make sense of Hasan's vicious actions in *Alamut.* Karl Popper examines the nature of justice in *Republic* in Chapter 6 of his *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (1945). He observes that when we consider justice, especially those who come from a humanitarian perspective, we often associate it with equal treatment of people—before the law, in courts, and in advantages as well as burdens. This conception of justice as impartiality promotes egalitarianism, the view that all people have equal inherent worth and are deserving of equal treatment. Yet, for Plato, minding one's own business by "keep[ing] one's own station" (i.e. doing the job of one's own class) was considered a virtue (Popper 84). Popper argues that, for Plato, justness is a term applied to "that which is in the interest of the best state," which consists of keeping one's own station insofar as it contributes to the maximal functioning of the whole (89). The obligation of the individual to the state necessitates strict class distinctions, class rule, and prevention of class mobility. In Plato's *Republic*, injustice is conceived of as the "changing or intermeddling within the three classes" (Popper 78). Whereas the modern western tradition typically identifies justice in a lack of privileges among people, Plato identifies it in the strength and stability of the unified state. In Popper's conception of Platonic justice, Alamut is, in fact, a just state, complete with stringently assigned roles meant to advance the goals of the state and a foreboding emphasis on preserving the status quo. Suleiman explains the way of things to ibn Tahir: "That's just how it is and nobody but [Hasan] needs to know why it has to be that way" (48). Everyone must comply and trust that Hasan's dictates are in the best interest of the whole.

The Rise of Totalitarianism in World War II-era Europe

Popper's controversial interpretation of Plato's *Republic* as oppressively totalitarian is grounded in key biographical features of his life, as is the case with Bartol's writing of *Alamut* and even Plato's writing of *Republic.* All three wrote

during turbulent times, responding to the issues at stake in their respective sociopolitical contexts: Popper and Bartol wrote amidst the Second World War in Europe, and Plato wrote in the chaotic aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, which was characterized by political executions, the tyrannical dictatorship of The Thirty, and a bloody civil war. Born in Vienna in 1902, Popper found inspiration for his political philosophy and critique of totalitarianism in the 1938 annexation of Austria (Thornton). He was frustrated by the inability of democracy to combat the rise of fascism in Austria in the decade following 1920 and by the Marxists' warm reception of it, because he saw its potential to collapse capitalism and set the stage for communism (Thornton). Popper revisited Plato—who had, until the late nineteenth century, largely been associated with a fantastic utopian vision lacking any serious political implications—in order to identify dangers of the political structure in Plato's *Republic* (Sasaki 5). Writing in these critical war years, Popper, like several other philosophers, connected Plato's theories directly to the political landscape that put them into practice, the most extreme examples of which are Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Mussolini's Italy. Plato's philosophy takes on new life in the political structures, ideologies, and methods of these dictatorships. The consequences presented in *Alamut* also emerge in these historical examples, suggesting that Plato's model can have real-world implications that are not particularly optimistic.

In Italy, for example, Benito Mussolini forced the king to allow him to establish his own government and became its prime minister on October 29, 1922. In "Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy," Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi offers explanation for how Mussolini's regime obliterated the nation's democratic features and established a dictatorship in 1925 through "tirelessly invented symbols, myths, cults, and rituals" (6). Mussolini presented himself as a heroic, esteemed leader—an image central to the Italian fascist ideology that secured his power. This ideology emphasized the revival of the prodigious Italian state, rooted in its powerful Roman history, and romanticized war as a "potentially regenerative" tool associated with the redemption of its power, and also glorified violence as a necessary tool for the "revolution" that it

claimed would restore the state (Falasca-Zamponi 6-7). The regime united its citizens against outsiders by constructing this ideal of a glorious state; however, "the existence of the state depended on people's faith in it" (Falasca-Zamponi 7). In a speech he gave in 1926 for the Novecento Art exhibit, Mussolini claimed that "in order to give wise laws to a people it is also necessary to be something of an artist" (Falasca-Zamponi 15). Like Hasan, Mussolini treated himself as an artist and the state as art: the masses were passive material for him to mold into his ideal vision. He perceived them as incapable of reason and critical thinking, sentiments echoed in Bartol's construction of Hasan. His power and influence and the desire for more led Mussolini to invade Ethiopia and Greece, to lend support to Spanish Fascists during the Spanish Civil War, and to enforce anti-Semitic legislation.

A similar situation ensued in Germany, where Adolf Hitler, an ally of Mussolini, established rule over the Third Reich in 1933. In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), Hannah Arendt describes how popular support was vital even for totalitarian leaders like Hitler (as well as Stalin) to initially assume power and then to manipulate the public that gave them that power:

> Hitler's rise to power was legal in terms of majority rule and neither he nor Stalin could have maintained the leadership of large populations, survived many interior and exterior crises, and braved the numerous dangers of relentless intra-party struggles if they had not had the confidence of the masses. (306)

Like Mussolini and Plato, Hitler promoted a nationalistic ideology in which the good connoted the good of the state, not of the individual: "The right is equivalent to being good or useful in distinction to its parts" (Arendt 299). Hitler also embraced the power of rhetoric to persuade the people, and those who heard him speak regarded him as one might a "popular preacher with the power of revelation" (Overy 16). He harbored deep contempt for the majority of humankind and spoke of his enemies in destructive, hateful language. He perceived people as pawns and explained his exceptional influence over the crowds by claiming, "The masses are like an animal that obeys its instincts. They do not reach conclusions by reasoning" (Overy 19). Plato also insisted on the

masses' incapacity for autonomous rational capacity, and Bartol's Hasan, too, recognized that "the vast multitudes…don't know [what really is]" and that the best a leader can do is feed them "fairy tales and fabrications" (201). Furthermore, Hitler capitalized on the inclination of people to conform to group opinion in large, emotionally driven crowds: "At a mass meeting, thought is eliminated" (Overy 19). Such conformity, if directed toward an end established by an influential leader, could achieve a great deal for that leader. Hitler recognized and enforced Plato's point in *Republic* that the impressionable masses should be subjugated to a rational leader. This led to the oppression of entire citizen groups through extreme policing by the SS, the suppression of opposition (both civil and political), policies of discrimination toward political enemies and certain demographics, and ethical atrocities including the Holocaust.

Another tyrannical ruler, Joseph Stalin, established a dictatorship in Russia in 1922 and took Plato's conception of the rational leader to the extreme. In an interview with an American journalist, he was insulted when asked what role luck played in his political career because he attributed superstitious belief in gods and devils to "an old Georgian granny" and claimed belief in just one thing: "the power of the human will" (Overy 4). He had a "shrewd, informed, cautious, and organized intelligence," and read and wrote extensively (Overy 9). Stalin, like Hitler and Bartol's Hasan, saw people as tools for achieving his alternative motives and only kept them around so long as they were of value to him; when they stopped being useful, he eliminated them. Distrusting and simultaneously distrustful, he was known to be able to gain the faith of someone he was at the same time plotting against. Stalin was able to kill thousands of his party members and to rule so viciously not because he was sadistic but because he was "a man who used the weapons he understood to achieve the central purpose to which his life had been devoted since he was a teenager" (Overy 13). He shaped his life and actions around a single ideology—that of building and consolidating socialism in one country—and did everything in his power to enforce that ideology. Several millions of victims are estimated to have died as a direct result of his control, notwithstanding those who died from the famines that occurred due to his harsh

policies. Stalin's devotion to a sole ideological aim and his two-faced personality are recreated in Hasan, who devotes his life to maximizing political power through destroying his enemies and is willing to abuse and backstab his most faithful followers to achieve that goal.

Hasan serves as a composite representation of these three European dictators. He has the compelling charisma and acute intelligence, the impenetrable commitment to a purpose and ideology, the contempt for the masses, and a fiercely opportunistic perception of those masses. He also brilliantly exploits followers' faith to serve his own agenda. Hasan is hyper-rationalistic and feeds on the susceptibility of his followers to emotions and propaganda, taking advantage of what he perceives as their inability to think critically and autonomously. It is evident how Bartol could be read as responding to the totalitarian uprising in Europe, especially in his native Italy, and as constructing a novel that shows the traumatic consequences of such absolute political power by someone wise and trusted enough to be able to construct and enforce an authoritarian ideology.

Alamut: Plato's System in Action

We must first evaluate how Plato arrived at his conception of the just state to appreciate what his intentions were and where they could have gone astray. In Books II to IV of *Republic*, Socrates, upon being challenged by Glaucon to explain justice of the soul, verbally constructs a just city to explain this virtue. In this city, we find three classes: the producers, or working class; the auxiliaries, or guardians of the city; and the philosopher-kings, the philosophers who will rule over the other classes. Harmony between these classes, located in the proper balance of power between them, requires the rulers to decide what is best for the city and the producers and guardians to carry out the ruler's dictates unconditionally and unquestioningly. One can already recognize the first signs of threat to the citizens' liberty and rights in a state where they are forbidden from challenging their own class position or the authority of their leader.

The rulers of the just city must be philosopher-kings because only philosophers, Plato emphasizes, are fit for the position. A philosopher is, as the

term suggests, a lover-of- wisdom, one who desires and pursues all kinds of wisdom and is insatiable for an ever-clearer understanding of truth (Plato 150). Plato insists that few qualify as philosophers, but that "members of this small group…have tasted how sweet and blessed a possession philosophy is, and at the same time they've also seen the madness of the majority" (170). They recognize the susceptibility of the masses to appearances and false beliefs, and they break free from the mold and think for themselves. Importantly, they must be both naturally adept to practice philosophy and to lead a city. The masses under their rule, those guided by belief rather than truth, are best suited to "leave philosophy alone and follow their leader" (149). They are not only less capable of thinking for themselves but are actually dissuaded from doing so.

Alamut's Hasan-i Sabbah serves as philosopher-king for the Iranian fortress of Alamut in 1092. Keen to explore the intricacies of the nature of people and the universe since an early age, Hasan dedicated his life to study. A life of intense philosophizing and impactful experiences leads Hasan to arrive at a radical conclusion which he holds onto as the one guiding truth of his life: the truth is unknowable. As Plato figured only a philosopher could, Hasan establishes how he penetrated the delusions, particularly religious ones, fed to the masses and has discovered true wisdom:

> So I divide humanity into two fundamentally different layers: the handful that knows what really is, and the vast multitudes that don't know. The former are called to lead, the latter to be led. The former are like parents, the latter like children. The former know that truth is unattainable, while the latter reach their arms out for it. What else can the former do, but feed them fairy tales and fabrications? What else are those but lies and deceptions? (201)

Hasan understands that the God-fearing doctrines he and his peers were spoon-fed by religious (and so also, at the time, political) authorities from an early age were merely constructions designed to elicit obedience from the masses. The prophets had to feign performing miracles in order to win the public's respect and ultimately to secure their own power. Without that power, and without the supervision of a just God, the masses would have nothing to fear and no way to be

controlled. For order to be maintained, they must be told these lies; it is on deception, Hasan notes that an institution's power rests.

Plato also argues that deception is necessary for the just republic to function optimally. The rulers, he insists, are the only ones justified in executing such deception: "If it is appropriate for anyone to use falsehoods for the good of the city, because of the actions of either enemies or citizens, it is the rulers. But everyone else must keep away from them" (65). Specifically, Plato suggests that the guardians of the city, in order to become fearless, needed to "be told stories" that instill courage (61). He also endorses telling citizens a noble lie—a myth of metals that designates their social positions as God-granted—in order to discourage discord by justifying class distinctions.

Hasan embraces this storytelling maxim at Alamut in a shocking, though ingenious way. His guardian class consists of the fedayeen: Ismaili assassins that he has recruited to Alamut and trained rigorously to fight for the Ismaili sect in holy war against religious dissidents. Hasan manipulates the religion of Islam, to which he knows his soldiers subscribe wholeheartedly, to present himself as the voice of and second-in-command to Allah. As such, he tells the fedayeen he has the power to deliver them to the paradise promised to virtuous believers after death and especially to the martyrs who die for their faith. Hasan anticipates that such a hefty claim would invite doubt from the fedayeen, however, and has planned for that.

Behind the fortress of Alamut, hidden from view from the fedayeen, there lie exotic gardens in which Hasan has placed lush plants, exotic animals, and the most beautiful young women that could be found far and wide. These women, called houris, have been trained in the art of love by a teacher who ensures that they seduce without fail and gives them something to tighten themselves in order to create the illusion of virginity (most of the houris, however, have extensive sex experience as the prized property of prior men). Hasan has a few fedayeen at a time drugged and carried into the gardens to be seduced not only by these attentive women but also by the allure of the picturesque, soothing setting, so that by the time they are re-drugged and carried back to the fortress, they are

convinced of having seen paradise. The fact that the men only enter this space at night and amidst the minimalist, abstinent lifestyle of a feday make the illusion all the more tempting. As we will see, however, not all the fedayeen buy it.

This delusion that Hasan has constructed earns him not only the fedayeen's devotion, as they now believe him to be in contact with God, but also their unfaltering commitment to him in battle. These men, desperate to be reconnected with the pleasures of heaven and assured fully that their sacrifice in battle would not be in vain, are more than willing to die for whatever cause he deems worthy enough to make martyrs of these men. Their body-breaking training as soldiers and the deprivations they endure make them eager to slip back into the peaceful existence of paradise and to be remembered as heroes for it.

The Cave of Ignorance

Beginning in Book VII of *Republic,* Socrates introduces the famous cave allegory that further illuminates the dangers of the kind of deception fundamental to Plato's model, enforced in *Alamut*, and ubiquitous in totalitarian regimes at large. In order to explain the relation of the philosopher-king's knowledge to the masses who are clouded by belief, Socrates likens the life of the masses to an existence confined to the walls of a cave. He has us imagine a group of men who, for their entire lives, have been chained in a fixed position to one wall while perpetually facing the opposite wall. They cannot see behind them, cannot turn to see one another, and cannot see themselves. Behind them is a dividing wall, and behind that wall are puppeteers who cast shadows on the wall that the prisoners can see. These shadows are lit by a fire placed between the prisoners and the puppeteers—a source of light the prisoners are unaware of. The sounds these puppeteers make as they whisper among themselves are believed by the prisoners to come from the shadows, which they believe to be figures in themselves. For these prisoners, "the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts" (187). They live in perpetual ignorance, believing reality to be what is actually just an illusion, a shadow of reality.

Plato conceives of ignorance as a state of delusion that people must emerge from painfully and deliberately in order to seek truth: "Consider then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like if something like this came to pass…he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see things whose shadows he'd seen before" (187). Such a break from accepted reality would be staggering in itself, but the prisoner is still only in the first transition out of appearances. The second step requires being led out of the cave, which has to this point comprised the prisoner's entire universe: "And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of those things now said to be true?" (188). The freed prisoner's eyesight would need to adjust drastically in order to properly see the world outside of the cave; the prisoner would eventually progress from being able to discern shadows, to images of people and things, and finally to things in themselves. At the height of the prisoner's exposure to truth, "He'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself" (188). The sun, the prisoner would recognize, is the source of everything visible. Now, upon returning to the cave after having witnessed these things outside of it, the prisoner would "count himself happy for the change and pity the others" (188). The prisoner would become distant from worldly human affairs, choosing instead to orient the soul to the higher wisdom awaiting outside of the cave. This truth-seeker could better rule a city than "people who fight over shadows," having become equipped to make decisions based on the actual nature of things (192). Hasan is the primary philosopher-king who has seen the light in the novel, but another one soon emerges in his footsteps.

Exit from the Cave

Hasan positions himself as one who has awoken and seen the sun (recognizing the falsity of religion), returned to the cave (the fortress of Alamut), and taken on

leadership of the cave. He sets up a pyramid of power that preserves his absolute rule by carefully dispersing knowledge downward through different branches of control. Should his religious followers discover that Hasan is willing to have his fedayeen kill themselves in the name of the false ideology he has constructed, they will distrust and abandon him. From the start of the novel, he refrains from showing himself to the members of Alamut in order to preserve the illusion of his divinity. He trusts his dais, teachers, and administrators to take care of the fedayeen's training, which is aimed at solidifying the soldiers' commitment to the cause and their preparation to fight to the death for it. The middlemen that execute Hasan's orders are the puppeteers in the cave and the fedayeen are the prisoners.

Hasan may have remained the only one on the fortress grounds to fully understand the ideology guiding Alamut's operations had it not been for an acutely observant feday by the name of ibn Tahir. Ibn Tahir comes to Alamut to join the Ismaili cause and avenge his Ismaili grandfather, and he is received graciously for his association with the brave faith-fighter. Almost immediately upon his arrival, ibn Tahir questions the happenings at this mysterious fortress: "The castle concealed a great mystery, this much he sensed….Would he ever be given the chance to remove the veil from it, to look it in the face?" (149). Unlike his peers, he attempts to navigate the cave; however, when he tries to explain how Alamut's contradictory religious doctrine can be reconciled with what he knows to be true of official Islam doctrine, he is warned to cease his inquiries. The fedayeen explain that Hasan "can forbid or permit whatever he wants" and that they must obey him in any case (35). They have been taught by the middlemen that Hasan can allow what has been forbidden by the Prophet, because "Allah has given him the power to issue commandments and prohibitions" as well as the ability to open the doors to heaven (159). Hasan has legitimized his absolute power by crediting it to God.

When he enters paradise, ibn Tahir insists to the houris that it is all a dream, perhaps a game devised by Hasan. He insists that he will not be fooled and that Hasan's pellets have put him under this spell. He tugs incessantly at his reason to dispel the illusion, reflecting on his feelings to draw himself back to

reality. Though he recognizes that it must be a product of "some incredible skill of [Hasan's]," he soon lets down his guard and becomes receptive to the pleasurable experience (231). He develops feelings for one of the most beautiful girls in the garden, Miriam, and his love for her makes him feel like he is genuinely in paradise; he yearns to remain with her. Ibn Tahir recognizes that, even if this is all a well-devised deception, his feelings, at least, are real and make him want to believe. This is how citizens in a delusive society may be inclined to respond: even if they recognize something amiss, it is often easier to yield to an immediately rewarding falsity than to suffer for the truth.

After the fedayeen are re-drugged and brought back from the garden to Alamut, Hasan tests their faith by asking about their experience. The men insist that he has delivered them to paradise and that they will testify to their peers about his ability to do this and about the bliss they experienced. In the terms of the cave allegory, the men have gone from one cave to another and then returned to the first ready to preach about a reality that was, in fact, another illusion. Hasan is using them as pawns to promote his agenda and to bind more tightly the prisoners' obedience to him. Jokingly, he refers to this stage in his plan as "Awakening" or "Return from paradise," but these are, of course, false stagings (251).

Ibn Tahir feels a wall rise between the fedayeen and himself, because he has been changed by that night. Back at Alamut, he feels deeply melancholic, lacking in something essential, and is desperate to return to his beloved. Hasan's deception has produced the intended effect, as the only way for ibn Tahir to return to the fantasy is through death. Recognizing ibn Tahir as a reliable candidate because of this, Hasan sends him on a suicide mission to kill the grand vizier, an enemy of Hasan. He is to travel to the grand vizier's estate, stab him with a poisoned dagger, and then "commend [himself] to Allah" (281). Hasan promises him heaven, and Miriam in particular, for his feat. Ibn Tahir is to rest assured that this act is in the service of a grander purpose and to execute it without question or challenge.

Ibn Tahir accepts, travels to the grand vizier, and stabs him confidently. Witnesses are dumbfounded; they have never seen such a bold act, such lack of fear for death. They are quick to attribute it to "religious delusion" and "madness" (291). The vizier himself is shocked to see the youth of the boy that murdered him and questions his purpose in the act. Ibn Tahir defends himself using the false Ismaili doctrine, stating that he was executing the orders of a master who had been given power by Allah Himself. Having been closely acquainted with Hasan in the past, the vizier sees that the boy has been duped and exposes him to the deception (i.e., drags him up to the light, despite ibn Tahir's reluctance to believe the truth and forego the old delusions). The truth shocks him, and he must reformulate his reality.

Seeing the Sun

Ibn Tahir learns that he had not, in fact, seen paradise, but instead had seen the gardens left behind from previous kings who had them built behind the old castle for amusement. The vizier also shares with ibn Tahir the actual, undisclosed Ismaili motto: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" (292). Hasan composed this maxim after realizing that the universe is not governed by a just God but is actually meaningless and indifferent to humanity; nothing can be determinately "true" because there is no universal order to serve as a standard for truth. Given the absence of judgment or punishment from a higher entity, humans are free to do anything and "everything is permitted" (168). This leaves clear potential for chaos, however, so people seeking to prevent anarchical disaster or to exploit this understanding in order to gain power can construct ideologies to tame the masses and convince them of higher entities; they control through fear. Interestingly, this maxim is also believed to reflect the last words of the historical Hasan (Burroughs 61). The religious reality presented to ibn Tahir and to his peers is simply a construction of reality, a shadow on the wall manifested by a master puppeteer. The vizier, on his deathbed, sees that "[ibn Tahir] has seen the truth" and frees him to return to Alamut alive to reap revenge on Hasan (296).

Meanwhile at Alamut, Hasan has decided to demonstrate the extent of his power in front of an enemy army by ordering two of the men who have seen paradise, who have craved a return to paradise ever since, to commit public suicide on the spot. Both agree without hesitation. One stabs himself and the other jumps off a tower; even in death, both men appear ecstatic, like men who find salvation in death. This convinces any fedayeen who may have doubted that Hasan "is master over life and death for his subjects" that he can, in fact, send followers to paradise at will (307). The witnessing fedayeen, too, are now willing to follow their peers to paradise.

When ibn Tahir returns to the cave of Alamut, it is not as a prisoner, but as one who has seen through the shadows and identified their source. As Plato predicted, ibn Tahir is shocked by this new reality, which has forced him to abandon the one that previously provided false security. Ibn Tahir agonizes: "How could he have guessed that a religious leader, whose devoted followers all thought he served justice and truth, could be such a vile fraud!" (329). He accuses Hasan to his face of deceiving those who had unwavering faith in him in order to "accomplish [his] criminal goals" (335). This scene informs a critical point of concern in Plato's theory of justice: the citizens must blindly help their leader accomplish his goals, whatever they may be, trusting without question that he understands and actually promotes what is best for the state.

When ibn Tahir confronts Hasan about his ploy, Hasan patiently listens and then proceeds to grant ibn Tahir's final wish to have a burning question answered: "How were you able to come up with such a dirty scheme for us, when we'd pledged ourselves to you body and soul?" (335). The dynamic takes a critical turn as Hasan calmly discloses his perspective on the truth:

> Do you think the overwhelming majority of people care about the truth? Far from it! They want to be left alone, and they want fairy tales to feed their hungry imaginations. But what about justice? They couldn't care less, as long as you meet their personal needs. I didn't want to fool myself anymore. If this is what humankind is like, then exploit its weaknesses to achieve your higher goals, which will benefit them too, even though they don't understand that. (336)

Hasan has made himself into a prophet for the masses to follow, drawing on their gullibility and passion for pleasure to earn their obedience. He emphasizes how a person's subjective paradise provides real pleasure and how, so long as one does not see through its illusory nature, one can die happy, something ibn Tahir understands as he succumbed to the temporary pleasures of paradise despite suspecting their illusory nature. The person whose knowledge prevents succumbing to illusion, contrarily, is denied that pleasure and enters what Hasan knows to be the lonely and empty space of philosophy. Ibn Tahir, having reached transcendent understanding, has now accessed truth: he has left the cave and seen the sun. Hasan frees him to travel and study the world. Plato emphasizes that philosopher-kings must be selected from the best of the auxiliaries; Ibn Tahir has, from the start, outshone his peers in intellect and courage, and it is fitting that he has ascended intellectually to the rank of philosopher.

Ideology in Modern Terrorism

The justice promoted by Plato's state leaves substantial potential for corruption. It can quickly become an excuse for the violation of human rights in the service of ideologies created by leaders whose wisdom enables their manipulative techniques. The consequences of the system Plato advances are increasingly evident in *Alamut* as, one by one, those who have been made players in Hasan's political games fall tragic victims to it. As a consequence of all the deception, two of the houris and two of the fedayeen take their own lives. Ibn Tahir, too, would have died in vain had the truth not been revealed to him in time. Hasan's leadership, rather than promoting virtue and harmony, wrecks human lives to advance the state's/his goals.

The issues at stake, particularly as they affect human lives, transcend *Alamut,* permeating western culture today in its relation to Islamic extremism. In *Trends in Modern International Terrorism*, Boaz Ganor concedes the difficulty of defining terrorism because of the tendency to perceive it as freedom fighting, but generally conceptualizes it as the "deliberate use of violence aimed against

civilians in order to achieve political goals (nationalistic, socioeconomic, ideological, religious, etc.)" (21). In *Alamut*, Hasan outlines such political goals and sends his fedayeen to enforce them through violence.

Modern terrorist organizations, like Alamut and the totalitarian regimes of Europe, direct all of their efforts and resources, up to and including human lives, toward a single ideological agenda. Though there are certainly vast varieties of terrorist organizations at work today with unique methods and missions, I will focus on a particularly ideologically driven one—al-Qaeda, an Islamic extremist group. In his essay "Ideology in Terrorism and Counter Terrorism," Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, explains how al-Qaeda followers perceive the US and Israel as co-conspirators working on a global level to oppress Islam and its followers. They despise American presence in the Arabian Peninsula and blame the US government, people, and foreign policy for the suffering in the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda aims to combat these culprits by consolidating a united Islamic nation that permits force, if necessary. It targets those who do not share its worldview, both Muslims and non-Muslims, and teaches that it is "a religious duty of Muslims around the world to wage jihad on the American land, American citizens, Israel and Jews" (Gunaratna 7).

Their ideology, popularly called jihadism, actually contradicts most Islamic religious teachings (like Hasan's does). However, it maintains strong support because it provides religious justification for terrorism and defends Al-Qaeda as an institution "defend[ing] the dignity and pride of the nation" (Gunaratna 6-7). Adherents' loyalty is further solidified by the belief in martyrdom that drives the mission: "Al-Qaeda's operatives firmly believe that Allah guides and rewards those who sacrifice themselves for a noble cause" (Gunaratna 8). The belief that God will guide and reward those who sacrifice dispels terrorists' doubts or hesitations, as it does for the fedayeen in *Alamut*. It also helps to create a unified collective working toward the same goals by minimizing internal discord:

> The *baiah* or the pledge of allegiance serves as an assurance that those affiliating themselves to the organization are committed to the organization's ideology. By instituting it, the organization is freed from conceptual problems arising from differences in opinion. To a certain degree, through it an acceptable level of uniformity is maintained which contributes to the organization's stability and ease of management and administration. (Gunaratna 8)

Ideology is the critical driving force for al-Qaeda, above publicity, money, and/or fame. The organization's ideology legitimizes its mission and justifies its chosen means to its end. Though Osama Bin Laden, founder of al-Qaeda, is "demonized in the Western media," his followers and fighters see him as a hero who had forsaken his wealthy comforts to live among his poor followers and help them defend their faith (Gunaratna 9). Gunaratna emphasizes that, more so than its tactics, it is al-Qaeda's creed that is most threatening and powerful, and that those waging war on the terrorist organization can only succeed by challenging its very ideology.

How *Alamut* Advances Orientalist Ideologies

At the same time that *Alamut* cautions against ideology as a manipulative tool, it also proliferates certain ideologies itself. We must ask why Bartol, who was writing in Slovenia in the 1900s, chose to set his novel in eleventh century Iran. The obvious answer is that he wanted to make visible a critique of totalitarianism without being personally targeted. As aforementioned, the communist Yugoslavian regime felt threatened by *Alamut*. Situating it in a time and place so alien to his contemporaries was likely a safeguard against persecution or censorship.

The decision to set it in Persia, however, places Bartol within a European tradition of appropriating Middle Eastern culture for self-interested purposes. In "Monster, Terrorist, Fag," Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai explore how long-standing racial ideologies caricature and stereotype Islamic terrorists. They describe the cliché perception of Islamic terrorists in post-September 11 America: "We hear often the idea that sexually frustrated Muslim men are promised the heavenly

reward of sixty, sixty-seven, or sometimes even seventy virgins if they are martyred in jihad" (Puar and Rai 124). Bartol ties this idea to Alamut directly. The terrorist is posited as abnormal, a "racial and sexual monster" symbolizing the deviant psyche in the Western notion of the individual (Puar and Rai 124-25). Hasan's operations at Alamut demonstrate nothing if not deviancy, and the fedayeen are portrayed as willing to die for, among other reasons, the virgins of paradise, exhibiting the stereotyped "sexual depravity of the Oriental torrid zone" (Puar and Rai 124).

In a note preceding *Alamut*, the publisher claims, "in publishing this book, we aim to undermine hateful stereotypes, not reinforce them" (i). They insist that the ideologies the novel cautions against are intended to symbolize the nature and dangers of ideologies in general, not to suggest that Islam or even religion in general incline one toward terrorist activity. The characters in the novel should not, the publisher emphasizes, be interpreted as representing Islam or the religion's endorsement of violence. However, the question of why the Middle East was singled out among all the regions to have produced extremist groups throughout history, from the Japanese to the European, still stands, and we are brought back to where we began, with the West's tradition of using the Middle East as a whipping boy for fanaticism.

Biggins also addresses the stereotypes operating in *Alamut* and attempts to caution against them in an ironic afterword to *Alamut* titled "Against Ideologies." Biggins realizes that "the most blinkered reading of Alamut might reinforce some stereotypical notions of the Middle East as the exclusive home of fanatics and unquestioning fundamentalists" (386). Besides reiterating the presence of such a risk for misinterpretation, Biggins does little to justify Bartol's decision to take that risk and instead hands responsibility to the reader to "come away from *Alamut* with something very different" (386). His defense certainly seems at odds, though, with the novel's back cover, which lures readers using Orientalist cliches: "If you want to learn the true story behind the 72 virgins awaiting al-Quaeda's martyrs in paradise, *Alamut* is the training manual."

Bartol elucidated his motivations for *Alamut* in a commentary he

published for the 1957 edition of the novel. In it, he suggests that readers focus less on Hasan's "terrible, inhuman, and despicable" methods and instead appreciate the solidarity and human connection fostered in response to these by the fedayeen and the houris (388-89). He praises the values of friendship, love, and truth, moralizing while evading the elephant in the room: why use this completely unfamiliar Middle Eastern setting and not so much as address its use?

I am not suggesting that Bartol was consciously forwarding a racist ideology; instead, I propose that his work produced such an ideology despite his intentions. In fact, the inevitably of the reproduction of this ideology is precisely the point: even a criticism of ideology cannot escape ideology. In "Orientalism in Bartol's Novel *Alamut*," Mirt Komel explains how the novel was first published in the United States following Al-Qaeda's September 11 terrorist attacks and was used to explain the "irrational behaviour of Islamic extremists, who disregard their own personal safety and have no moral compunction in killing civilians" (357). By conceiving of them as irrational, we distinguish ourselves from and polarize terrorists, making it easier to forget their humanity and the incredibly diverse motivations driving their behavior. Furthermore, we risk viewing them as reflecting a broader group of people, particularly when they become our only point of contact with an entire religion or country. *Alamut* became Slovenia's most successful piece of literature known abroad, "all the while reproducing Orientalist stereotypes disguised as answers to complex political and cultural problems" (Komel 357). For some, this novel could be the only representation they have ever encountered of the Middle East. Hence, while *Alamut* warns against reproducing Plato's ideologically driven political model, the reader must remember that it also reproduces stereotypes about a complex demographic. Indeed, this very essay could be read as perpetuating certain Orientalist ideologies for its selection of Al-Qaeda to exemplify modern terrorism; this is why thinking for oneself and seeking truth through different sources (a key lesson of *Alamut*, as well) is of vital importance.

A more subtle lesson we may draw from *Alamut* is that one way to escape ideology is to create one's own and detach from it post-production, as Hasan did.

However, as *Alamut* shows, such an existence is painfully lonely. Perhaps Plato designed his republic to be led by someone who would deny any emotion and human connection; such a leader could make citizens happy with fantasies while being fully aware of their spuriousness. Hasan often mentions how his followers found bliss in his illusion. And some, like the fedayeen who committed suicide for it, died ecstatic and fulfilled. In this interpretation, Hasan appears as the most altruistic of people, serving as a god on Earth who constructs truth for his adherents in a way that gives them real joy at the cost of his intellectual loneliness. However, this interpretation fails to rectify the fates of those who did not die blissfully, such as the heartbroken houris who lost their loved ones. When deception enters the political formula, citizens are from the very outset denied justice by being denied the right to the truth and the ability to make fully informed decisions. As Plato himself emphasized, truth is the highest good and is categorically superior to all beliefs and appearances, no matter how pleasant they may be (1049).

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Re:Search

"The Reporting is the Vengeance": Fantasy, Feminism, and Narrative Resistance in *The Woman Warrior*

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ABSTRACT

Fantasy has been recognized by feminist scholars and activists for its supportive role in social justice movements, both as a tool of critique and as basic equipment for designing better futures. While the imaginative nature of fantasy allows us to access important opportunities by conceiving of possibilities beyond the present and empowering action, future-oriented readings of fantasy tend to overlook the ways that fantasy delivers social change in the present, at the time of its creation. This article considers the use of fantasy as a present-oriented form of resistance in Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 autobiography *The Woman Warrior*. Granting fantasy and reality equal agency in her controversial book, Kingston employs fantasy to speak out about her experiences with sexism in the Chinese American community while writing difference into standard narratives of history and life as a Chinese American. This article emphasizes the power of fantasy in *The Woman Warrior* to disrupt the dominant historical narrative voice by representing difference in the present.

KEYWORDS

Fantasy, Feminism, Narrative Resistance, Chinese American, Representation, Memory

Maxine Hong Kingston enriches the feminist project of writing women's agency into history in her 1976 autobiography *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Kingston's extensive incorporation of fantasy into her account of her childhood, caught between the misogynistic morals and extraordinary women of her Stockton, California home, talks back to patriarchal narratives of life as a Chinese American by disrupting history-as-usual with difference. Like the ghostly presence of patriarchy in Kingston's life that cannot be fully described but only acutely felt, the task of recovering her experience with sexism in the Chinese American community, from the silence that patriarchy preserves, cannot be fulfilled using the available tools of historical production. Realism cannot paint the myriad shapes and shades of oppression. Kingston requires a more unconventional device for writing difference into history and narrating her girlhood among ghosts.

I use the term "fantasy" in this paper to refer to the moments in *The Woman Warrior* in which Kingston creates events outside of her lived experience, speculates about the lives of other people, or otherwise writes in details that draw from spaces beyond reality to narrate her story. In order to analyze Kingston's feminist use of fantasy in her memoir, I will closely examine the places in her book where fantasy becomes necessary to articulate her lived experiences with patriarchy as a Chinese American woman. As I contrast Kingston's struggle to speak out about her experience with sexism along with patriarchal narratives of what it means to be Chinese American, I refer to the tendency of standard narratives about life as a Chinese American to erase, by way of silence, the reality of misogyny and heteropatriarchal regulation of women's gender and sexual formation. That is, patriarchy as a system of power becomes invisible in dominant narratives, including those centering around marginalized ethnic communities, and its violence escapes detection. I am speaking about the difficulty of marginalized identities to emerge in stories when not directly named.

Although *The Woman Warrior* has been in print for several decades, Kingston's decision to employ fantasy in her narration of personal history is by no means familiar or intuitive to many of her readers. King-Kok Cheung, a literary

critic, notes in her 1990 essay "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?" that Kingston's blending of fiction and reality in her memoir has been the subject of controversy for Asian American critics since the book's debut. While literary giants Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan—and even her publisher Knopf—have famously accused Kingston of "misrepresenting Chinese and Chinese American culture, and for passing fiction for autobiography," Cheung views her memoir as continuing a feminist tradition of using the autobiography genre to "forge a viable and expansive identity by refashioning patriarchal myths and invoking imaginative possibilities" (238-39). Following Cheung's reading of Kingston's text, I will further analyze the memoir's use of fantasy to perform feminist work.

Many critics point to fantasy as a useful tool in feminist writing and social justice issues. Juana María Rodríguez, a feminist cultural studies scholar, identifies fantasy as "a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable" in her 2014 book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (26). Her observation about this function of fantasy as a means to conceive of more unrestricted futures confirms the power of fantasy both as a tool of critique of the present and as a medium for articulating the desire for a future that better supports freedom. But the tendency to emphasize fantasy as the abstract origin of social change to come makes it easy to overlook the way that fantasy produces change in the present, at the time of its creation.

To this end, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), addresses the unique position of fantasy, the supernatural, and other embodiments of difference to challenge historicist—homogenous, Eurocentric, secular—narratives of history by resisting translation into a normative narrative that would strip them of agency in order to include them in a so-called objective, universal form of history. He proposes a "radical untranslatability" that in Kingston's example means refusing to translate fantasy into social fact and instead treating it as equal to "objective" fact (76). This insistence on transforming the nature of our dominant mode of

producing history to represent difference is what makes Kingston's autobiography a powerful feminist act of resistance in the present as well as for the future.

My framing of fantasy in Kingston's text does not seek to dismiss the opportunities that future-oriented readings of fantasy as the expression of feminist critique or desire afford us as readers invested in what futures may be possible for those who share Kingston's feminist longing for greater autonomy, mutual care, and resistance against patriarchal oppression in all its forms. Rather, this consideration of the work that Kingston's use of fantasy does in the present to write difference into patriarchal narratives of the Chinese American experience aims to draw attention to the important intervention her use of fantasy makes in the practice of producing history in American ethnic communities. Kingston's creative approach in *The Woman Warrior* is generative in the example it offers for the practice of writing back to power and the ongoing struggle to represent difference in both personal and collective histories. This ability to represent difference in the context of colonial, cis-hetero-patriarchal narratives of history supports any effort by historically disenfranchised groups to challenge their detention in the margins and work towards social change. The use of fantasy in *The Woman Warrior* is therefore productive now.

Turning now to Kingston's text will help make her application of fantasy more explicit. The book is divided into five chapters, each presented as a combination of reflective narration about Kingston's own life as well as the life of another woman whose story became a formative influence on her development; I will address the use of fantasy in what I believe are the two most foundational chapters to the memoir. I will then return to Chakrabarty's proposal of a "radical untranslatability" in greater depth to consider how her use of fantasy in the memoir interrupts normative, patriarchal narratives of history.

By intimately tying together fantasy and lived experience in the creation of her memoir, Kingston makes fantasy an essential part of memory and a key component in relating her experience with patriarchal oppression in the Chinese American community. The best representative example of this use of fantasy belongs to the chapter entitled "White Tigers," in which Kingston recalls growing

up in the tradition of hearing her mother "talk-story," especially about the ballad of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior honored in the title of the book (19). As Kingston remembers listening to her mother's tales of swordswomen gracing humanity with their heroic deeds and the invention of a new martial art, her description of Sunday afternoons with her mother seamlessly slips into the world of the stories themselves. "[S]he taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan," Kingston begins, "I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). With each new development in the plot of the story, Kingston's life and Fa Mu Lan's life become increasingly intertwined, until Kingston occupies the position of protagonist in the ballad. Her first entry into the story introduces guesses about what the Fa Mu Lan experience must be like. She qualifies her narration with suppositions such as "I *would* be a little girl of seven the day I followed the bird away into the mountains" and "We *would* go so high the plants would change, and the river that flows past the village would become a waterfall" (Kingston 20, emphasis mine). I draw attention to the frequency with which Kingston speculates here to suggest that Kingston clearly and confidently situates herself within fantasy in her recollection of her childhood. As she solidifies her participation in the story and relates the events of her life as a swordswoman with greater certainty, Kingston describes becoming strong enough to "jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, leaping like a monkey over the hut" and the gruesome carving of oaths of revenge for the injustices of war onto her back (23). Kingston invents a lengthy and heroic life for herself, concluding that "From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality," locating herself at the center of an exceptional journey (45). The result is a long, engrossing narrative that envelops readers in the fantastic world of Kingston's imagination, which ultimately claims more space in the chapter than the realistic world of Stockton, California, and the events that take place there. The large space that Kingston's fantasies occupy in her memoir indicates the centrality of fantasy to her construction of her memories as a young girl.

As the direction of Kingston's narrative abruptly transitions back to her childhood at home, the intense intimacy of fantasy and lived reality in building memory and relating her experiences with sexism in her community becomes clear. After removing herself from the world of fantasy, Kingston gives us this reflection, including an exchange with her mother: "My American life has been such a disappointment. 'I got straight A's, Mama.' 'Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.' I could not figure out what was my village" (45). The sudden shift from epic Chinese chronicle to Chinese American reality in this passage all but ensures that the readers' memories of Kingston's life filling in for Fa Mu Lan will linger in their minds. Moreover, this method of structurally placing fantasy in the center of the chapter and granting it the bulk of its space is what allows fantasy to become essential information for understanding Kingston's experience later in her reality at home. In other words, due to the sheer magnitude of the role of fantasy in this section and its continued presence in Kingston's narration after the ballad ends, readers cannot remove fantasy from the chapter and have a complete image of Kingston's life. In this conversation between Kingston and her mother, Kingston's comparison of her American life to her previous adventures and her reference to her village in her alternate fantastic life as the heroine of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan hold little meaning without knowledge of her fantastic past. The two necessarily mix in the construction of Kingston's memory. Thus fantasy becomes a necessary condition for articulating Kingston's experiences with sexism rather than a simple artistic choice.

I will now take more time to examine how reading fantasy as irreplaceable infrastructure in Kingston's memoir is useful for reading what she has to say about sexism in her life. Kingston's fantasy has a sustained presence in her reality when speaking to her lived experience with patriarchy as her story continues to structure her narration of sexism in the Chinese American community during her time at home. Thinking of her childhood, Kingston recalls often hearing misogynistic comments from her mother and neighbors, such as "better to raise geese than girls" and "feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (46). These memories bring deep resentment, bitterness, and pain into her adult life. In a return to her

earlier memory of achieving high grades in school, Kingston cites the popular assumption among her home community that she "was getting straight A's for the good of [her] future husband's family, not [her] own" as her motivation in college and to stop performing well in school was to "show [her] mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency" (47). Here, where her anger and pain surrounding her experiences with misogyny intersect most strongly with her gestures towards Fa Mu Lan's story, the use of fantasy becomes central to Kingston's memory in general and to her memory of life shaped by sexism in particular.

If we recognize Kingston's fantasy as fundamental to her memory, we are better able to appreciate the parallels she draws between what she feels in her life and what she feels in her fantasies. Referring again to her retelling of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan and voicing the pain of living in a patriarchal environment, Kingston states, "I've looked for the bird" (49). In the context of Kingston's retelling of the story, this statement communicates not only desire for empowerment and escape from a sexist reality but a deep sense of loss for the life she had in her fantasy. Her confession helps her voice grief that might otherwise have been left silent for lack of material loss in her Californian life. Furthermore, she ends her chapter with this reflection defending her decision to speak about misogyny in her life:

> The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words…that they do not fit on my skin. (Kingston 53)

After sharing her experience with sexism throughout her childhood and adulthood, Kingston urges the Chinese American community to acknowledge the similarity between her and the celebrated woman warrior of its beloved story so that she can "return to them," or have an equal place in the community (53). Kingston explains that they share the burden of injustices—"the words at our backs"—which remain inscribed on their bodies as women, and by clarifying that

"[t]he reporting is the vengeance" rather than the violence, advocates for a reading of her exposure of sexism in the Chinese American community not as a condemnation of her community but as an act of justice in the service of its well-being, just as Fa Mu Lan's carvings function as a promise of justice to her village (53).

Cheung agrees that the struggle here is one of speaking out where patriarchy prefers silence and notes: "Aside from the fantasy connected with Fa Mu Lan the book has little to do with actual fighting. The real battle that runs through the work is one against silence and invisibility….[T]he protagonist eventually speaks with a vengeance through writing—through a heroic act of self-expression" (243). Far from representing a wish for slaughter, Kingston's revision of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan and incorporation of her retelling into her own story can be read as part of an act of resistance against silence. Her fantasy is critical to her process of speaking out. By positioning fantasy as such a large part of her memory of her youth, especially concerning her experiences with patriarchal oppression, Kingston thus employs fantasy as a tactic to respond to patriarchal narratives of what it means to be Chinese American that do not account for the gender and sexual regulation common to her life. Fantasy and reality support each other in the effort to articulate Kingston's trauma related to sexism in the Chinese American community.

The importance of fantasy to resisting imposed silence is also evident in the chapter titled "No Name Woman," which opens Kingston's text, setting the tone for the rest of the book. I include this first chapter in my analysis for both its emphasis on speaking out and for the way Kingston again uses it to parallel her story with that of another woman. Although chronologically this chapter comes before Kingston's retelling of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan, I choose to read "No Name Woman" at this moment because knowledge of how Kingston uses fantasy later in "White Tigers" is useful to recognizing how she establishes it as a tool in the beginning of her memoir. The first scene Kingston gives us of this story is a memory of her mother warning her: "You must not tell anyone…what I am about to tell you" (3). Her mother proceeds to tell her the secret: "In China your father

had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well" (3). If Kingston fails to be obedient, "what happened to her could happen to you" (5). Kingston's betrayal of her mother's grisly secret launches her efforts to fill in the gaps of the cautionary tale. In her mother's story, Kingston's aunt drowns herself after suffering a raid organized by her village to punish her for an extramarital pregnancy. Kingston quickly sympathizes with the No Name Woman and presumes that she "...could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex" because "[w]omen in the old China did not choose" (6). Kingston's conviction in the rigidity of repressive gender norms for Chinese women leads her to conclude that "some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil," and furthermore that "[s]he obeyed him [as] she always did as she was told" (6). Receiving no information about her aunt from her mother "unless powered by necessity," Kingston instead imagines a life characterized by abjection and endless labor against injustice (6).

Of course, her exposition of the imagined life of the No Name Woman becomes a critical context for reading her own life as a young woman hearing this story. Kingston's detailed narration of her aunt's struggle to cultivate a fulfilling existence under the violence of patriarchy joins her own memories of trying to control her relationship with men in adolescence. A young Kingston supposes that her aunt's attacker "may have been somebody in her own household" but adds that "[a]ll the village were kinsmen" and "[a]ny man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as a lover" by being referred to as "'brother,' 'younger brother,' 'older brother'" (11-12). Pausing to reflect on a supposed shared experience, Kingston confesses: "As if it came from an atavism deeper than fear, I used to add 'brother' silently to boys' names," a habit that "hexed the boys…and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as the girls" (12). She goes on to describe her negotiation of her sexuality to either attract or repel boys in reality before finishing the tale, but her commentary placed in the middle of her aunt's story, surrounded by fantasy, highlights the intimacy of fantasy and reality in her construction of memory.

This intimacy between fantasy and reality serves an instructive purpose for readers. erin Khuê Ninh, an Asian Americanist, calls attention to the relationship between Kingston's life and her aunt's life in her 2011 book *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*. Highlighting the links between Kingston and the No Name Woman that organize the chapter in this passage, Ninh argues:

> However "imaginary" the genetics of atavism here, the trope of lineage has its uses, making Maxine very much heir to her aunt's legacy, if not via genetic coding so much as by way of its consistent deployment in her socialization—and via the narrator's own assertion of an extended comparison between them…. In thus linking the No Name Woman's story to her own, Maxine employs…an associative logic, which leaks the tone and atmosphere of traumatic events with her own mundane history. (69)

Through suggesting connections between her aunt's imagined story and her own life, Kingston continually produces herself as someone who shares her aunt's trauma, even as she describes ordinary events that might disarm her claim to grief. In her analysis, Ninh emphasizes the purpose that Kingston's imagination has in assisting her attempt to make visible the sexism that structures her own life. This productive connection tying Kingston's experiences at home with her fantasy fashioning the No Name Woman's life is represented even more strongly at the end of the chapter when Kingston identifies her mother's instruction not to speak about her aunt as a command to "participate in her punishment" (16). Kingston suggests solidarity based on shared experience with her aunt by drawing parallels between their lives. In this way, Kingston's ability to articulate her experiences living in a patriarchal context becomes contingent on the supportive role fantasy plays.

However, the relevancy of Kingston's use of fantasy to feminist work is not limited to its service as an aid in the act of speaking out or even to its capacity for making legible patriarchy's record of perfect attendance in the affairs of Kingston's life. In order to examine how Kingston's use of fantasy represents a means of challenging dominant narratives of history, it is necessary to return to

Chakrabarty's argument about the opportunities offered by a politics of "radical untranslatability" when engaging the discipline of history. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty defines a structural problem with the way that the discipline of history "renews and maintains itself" by telling many stories while keeping certain basic assumptions the same, thus reproducing one dominant narrative of history with many chapters (99). More specifically, he observes that "there is a peculiar way in which all these other [non-Western] histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'" (27). By preserving and operating on the assumption that historical time by its very nature must be secular (independent and real prior to human activity as the earth itself) and homogenous (fundamentally unchanged by any number of events added to its frame), historians and writers of history succeed in reproducing history as contemporary readers know it, as the only way of narrating history.

Chakrabarty's proposal of a "radical untranslatability" makes an intervention in this standard, dominant way of producing history by challenging the assumptions that secure its monopoly on the way we understand history. In the interests of social justice as an means to resist a homogenous, Eurocentric tradition of history and recognize the heterogeneity of human existence, Chakrabarty's proposal advocates for a refusal to translate historical difference into universal categories that fit neatly into standard narratives of history. He directs us to the example of granting the supernatural power in our narratives of history to illustrate this point: "A secular subject like history faces certain problems in handling practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world" (72). To "take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human" would be to unravel the one immaculate stitch mediating thousands of years of difference on a master historical narrative but it would also mean recognizing difference and heterogeneity rather than managing it (16). And to the objections of Asian American male critics like Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, this is precisely what Kingston does.

While my reading of *The Woman Warrior* makes a point of distinguishing between fantasy and reality in her writing in order to study their relationship to

her efforts to speak out about sexism in the Chinese American community, here I want to emphasize the impact of Kingston's work in mixing the two forces. When Kingston presents her fantasy and lived experience together and blends the two in her autobiography so that they become inseparable and mutually supportive of her voice, she answers Chakrabarty's call for "a history that will attempt the impossible: to look toward its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation…so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous" (45-46). Chakrabarty's critique of history as a discipline asks for a way of producing and narrating history that accepts the differences that typically face translation into social or anthropological decoration—such as the supernatural, or, in Kingston's case, fantasy—and advocates for heterogeneity.

By including fantasy as an essential component of her autobiography, Kingston offers an example of a personal historical narrative that writes back to dominant means of producing history by declining the usual imperative to translate fantasy and thus making space for difference and plurality of experience. *The Woman Warrior* in this way delivers a powerful contribution to representing heterogeneity in the collective histories of the Chinese American community, especially gender difference. Kingston's autobiography writes women into the patriarchal imagination of Chinese American history in a way that rewrites their roles and revises the standard historical voice.

At this last point, I would like to prioritize bringing the conversation around Kingston's memoir and its feminist work back to contemporary social justice movements. Kingston's example of representing difference generates exciting questions about what the ability to write ourselves makes possible for collective efforts by marginalized groups, by the least of us, to work towards freedom in its multiple forms. As Kingston reminds her own Chinese American community, "the reporting is the vengeance," and recovering histories of oppression that are a part of our intersectional inheritances is one way of employing fantasy in the service of social justice in the present. What I hope to leave as a final thought is the suggestion that fantasy does important intersectional

feminist work, not only in the future by conceiving better worlds, but also in the present as we represent ourselves against dominant narratives of history. Then, our revision of the past as a place of possibility and fantasy and as a political tool for all times brings us closer to seeing the our importance and agency, as Kingston does in building the memory of the stories that filled her childhood, concluding that "at last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (19-20).

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