The Word Hoard

/word/hɔːrd/ n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

Hangover
Masthead

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HANGOVER
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In our call for submissions for this issue of *Word Hoard*, we asked potential submitters: “How do you prepare for a hangover?” Our declarative answer—“You can’t”—reflects the mythic uselessness of the abundant folk medicines for curing or ameliorating the aftereffects of indulgence. There is neither preparation nor cure for the cotton-mouthed mornings after celebration, outburst, or exertion, yet we seek remedy through preemptive rituals and retrospective routines. So while there is little comfort when we are in the throes of hangovers, they continue to frame both what has come before us and what is still to come.

Wading through the muck of the morning after, we carry the twin burdens of reflection and critique. How did we arrive? How will we get elsewhere? In this respect, our submitters did not disappoint.

* 

Our issue gets out of bed with a consideration of hangover as both physiological and social condition. Joshua Adair’s irreverent personal essay “Chasers,” a humorous working-through what we have come to know as the hair of the dog, considers whether poison can become remedy—or, perhaps, remedial address. Writing of a small, “moist” town in the American south, Adair invites us to reflect on how alcohol and indulgence have saturated rituals of academic initiation and professional collegiality. How does one welcome a new colleague if not with a drink? Indeed, how does one express fondness, display celebration, or mark occasions without a drop of alcohol? Threading the professorial proclivity towards liquored indulgence together with the general prudishness of an ideally “dry” but practically “moist” population, Adair gestures toward the intertwining of hangovers and hang-ups, our quickness in condemning others’ behaviour and our belatedness in critiquing our own. Lest we romanticize or trivialize the effects of alcohol on the collective, Napatsi Folger responds with “The Booze Blues,” a personal essay on growing up in then-“moist” Iqaluit, Nunavut (previously Frobisher Bay, Northwest Territories). Folger recognizes experiences in Adair’s story that run parallel to her own—e.g., the booze-hoarding obsession prompted by prohibition—but contextualizes Iqaluit’s former “moist”-ness alongside both regional history and life in Iqaluit as well as the philosophical inspirations of the American temperance movement. When withdrawal is manufactured both by publically sanctioned sobriety and by the effects of decades of alcohol abuse, she asks, why do we still turn to the poison for the cure?

The notion of hangover extends beyond
the bodily schisms induced by alcohol, of course. Many of our contributors consider how our bodies process experiences, memories, relationships, and moments of intimacy that have marked us and that continue to shape our interactions with the world. The bodied, bawdy physicality of Devon Balwit’s poems “Post-Operative,” “Extraction,” and “A God with Big Titties”—invoking medication, procedure, and recovery—show how this more existential dimension of hangover resonates with the bodily and chemical. Erica McKeen’s response, the short story “A Slant Cut,” explores the atomization of memory and self that accompanies the brutality of “remedy” through procedure. While critiquing the harshness of medicine and recovery as registers for addressing experience, McKeen’s story formally attends to hangover’s ability to shred one’s will to pieces—particularly when in concert with other forms of physical and psychological desire and habit.

In the space of hangover, physicality and memory can indeed scatter, but they can also bleed together. Lars Horn’s prose poem “The North Sea in February” shows us such fleshy retrospection in process. With its tumbling, oceanic illogic, this poem depicts a body that is both static, immobile, locked in violation and somehow also vicious, flailing, violently encroaching on memory. Annick MacAskill’s short story response, “Night Comes Early,” urbanizes a similar bodily disorientation. Here is grasping after somatic and narrative integrity in the face of routine labour and desire, the jaws of the cosmopolitan deep. MacAskill asks us to consider how substances and architectures saturate how we conceptualize time and story.

Our issue’s next fiction, Evelyn Deshane’s “In Search of Lost Time,” narrates the ways that our hangovers and hang-ups are baked into the texts and objects that shape our encounters—and into the encounters that shape our selves. Animated in part by the idea of a “blackout” or “lost memory,” Deshane’s story reflects on how the occasions for filling the gaps in one’s history—whether decisively omitted or strategically retold—leave one awash in a playback of formative moments and memories. From family photos to Fight Club, from Marcel Proust’s madeleine cookie to a buttercream-frosted apology cake, Deshane sketches in the gaps of a “lost” time, a “blackout” of self and intimacy for the story’s sarcastic yet disarmingly gentle lovers. Angie Quick responds to Deshane’s short story with an original painting, a first for Word Hoard. Interior Landscape, from which this issue’s cover is taken, binds a body through its limbs. Its central terracotta-esque form both embraces and recoils from itself, is both doubled and displayed in a pose of intimate connection. Quick’s painting presents us with a vision of embodied reflection that is yoked to itself even in its apparent severance, that kisses itself even in contortion, and that flexes in constraint.

From personal and communal histories, bodies, and hangovers, we turn to Saffiya Hosein’s interview with Ryan Clement, “The Proverbial and Image Hangover: A Discussion between Comics Researchers.” Hosein considers the comic industry’s efforts to wrestle with di-
versity, with patriarchy, and with which characters are and are not considered “canon.” Hosein and Clement discuss the hangovers of creative anachronism, authenticity, cultural representation, and consumer preferences, reflecting on and modeling a working-through of what has come before while also considering how the future may be hamstrung by the past. Responding through a thirteen-panel comic, “Modern Supr Heroes,” Hinson Calabrese recontextualizes Hosein’s and Clement’s discussion of industry hangovers within a “juvenile” entertainment culture still blind-drunk on capitalist accumulation. But even as Calabrese’s ranting avatar wants to leave behind his capitalist intoxication, he seems trapped in the nihilistic desperation of the hangover. Calabrese thus illuminates the great catch-22 of social criticism: either you are still drunk or you are hung over, attempting to reason with drunks.

From this discussion of comic and existential hangovers, Jennifer Komorowski continues our interrogation of the canonical in her essay “A Space to Write Woman-Becoming: Reading the Novels of Kathy Acker as Simulacra.” Komorowski considers Kathy Acker’s Don Quixote (1986) and Blood and Guts in High School (1978) as texts actively invested in using “pure plagiarism” to work through modes of writing, theorizing, and criticizing that lionize male-centric creation and pleasure. Taking up Komorowski’s analysis of Acker’s “pure plagiarism,” respondent Nina Youkhanna provides an interpretive re-writing, by way of translation, of Nawal El-Saadawi’s Isis: A Play in Two Acts. Youkhanna’s translation marks another first in Word Hoard’s short history. Plagiarism, copy, and interpretation coalesce in these pieces to the point that working through a hangover must be done through the language, genres, styles, and structures of what has come before. Youkhanna tweaks and teases this assumption with translation, suggesting that copy—in the linguistic, interpretive sense—might exceed strategic regurgitation and retrospection.

Geoffrey Morrison’s two poems, “Two Diaries” and “After Van Dyke Parks’ ‘Van Dyke Parks,’” similarly take up the notion of hangover as both creative and social inheritance. From a folk singer’s self-titled opus to moments of national and social crisis, Morrison’s poems suggest that writing “after” or “following” another’s words, melodies, or experiences is less working through what has come before than it is composing and curating the lingering traces of those words, melodies, or experiences alongside the artists they have shaped. Blair Trewartha’s “Modern American Worship,” subtitled in turn “After Geoffrey Morrison,” invites us to critique “the wisdom / of worshippers” whose “word reversals and resuscitations” betray deeply held convictions that their actions are downright providential. In this sense, a uniquely American modernity—marked by resource precarity, violence, and ongoing colonization—uses writing and retrospection as tools of absolution that allow their users “to pull the slaughter out of the blade after the cut.”

Kevin Shaw’s double review of Sarah Schulman’s Conflict is Not Abuse and The Cosmopolitans brings this issue to its conclusion with a discussion of what is at stake in debates surrounding disagreement, harm, victimhood, and censorship. Addressing this issue’s concern—
how to look back and reconsider our choices with the (apparent) benefits of hindsight—Shaw asks, “[a]ren’t there moments in our intimate or public lives where we must shun another person—even temporarily and even if they are not directly at fault—because their words or presence are just too painful for our psychic survival?” Surviving our hangovers is, in this respect, a matter of social and personal intimacy—of address and engagement.

*  

We cannot prepare you for a hangover, and we cannot accelerate your return to normalcy after celebration, outburst, indulgence, excess, memory, or experience. Yet, in the absence of preparation or remedy, we can offer attempts at working through and reflecting on what has come before. That is, if one cannot prepare for or repair a hangover, then one can at least wade through its muck to a variety of conclusions. We say cheers to that.

Emily L. Kring, Copy Editor-in-Chief  
with Andy Verboom  

Works Cited  

By the time I set foot in Murray, Kentucky, in 2009, I had been forewarned that the city was chasing a hangover. My dissertation director tipped me off first: after finishing her reference check phone call with a professor from Murray State University’s English Department, she expressed concerned amusement. “He kept talking about alcohol,” she said with a kind of chuckle, “and it sounds like all they do there is drink. It’s very strange.” Since she can be rather overcautious, I didn’t think much of this until I received a call from that same professor to make arrangements for my on-campus interview. After “How are you?” his next question was “You know that Murray is moist, right?” I didn’t know whether to laugh or simply agree. I figured he was referencing the South’s higher humidity, though I couldn’t imagine why since it was late January. I made some noncommittal murmur that elicited this remark: “So ... you should probably bring your own alcohol to have in the hotel room after—or even before!—your interview and research talk.” Alcohol! He meant alcohol! “Oh, okay,” I responded, as though this were the most normal conversation in the world. I still didn’t really have a clue what he meant.

Our conversation traversed the expected content—where to park, interview length, etc.—and then suddenly came round to booze once more. “Don’t forget a corkscrew!” he shouted. “Excuse me?” I ventured, wondering whether he’d enjoyed a pre-call pour. “That’s a common problem with our job candidates: they don’t take us seriously when we tell them there is NO package alcohol for sale anywhere in town. Or if they do, then they usually remember the wine and forget the corkscrew.” “Oh, I see, yeah, okay, thanks.” I didn’t dare ask if people were really so eager to spend an interview drunk. Our final order of business—selecting a location for my research talk—somehow, incredibly, also managed to center upon alcohol. He said a classroom could be reserved for the purpose, which I indicated was my preference since I intended to project images to accompany my talk about house museums. “You could do that,” he offered, “but I would choose the Faculty Club instead.” When I asked if the Club had a projector, the answer was no. “But you don’t seriously want to give a talk to a room full of sober people, do you?” I thought I did, but I was starting to worry that would make me seem too sober.

“Moist,” as it turned out, meant that restaurants and bars in Murray were able to serve alcohol by the glass or pitcher so long as those sales were roughly equally matched by a food

Hangover
purchase. This model for controlling access to and consumption of alcohol was apparently relatively new in the town. It had been dry since Prohibition, caught in a seemingly endless hangover of arcane, religiously inflected Blue Laws. According to a number of folks, the sale of alcohol in any form was considered outrageous by some, who prophesied doom and destruction. For others, it offered hope that the endless stupor of Prohibition might give way, finally, after nearly a hundred years of ensuring that the good times would not, in fact, roll. As an outsider, I was astonished to discover that such laws persisted into the 21st century. I had no idea that there were places in the U.S. that didn’t sell package liquor or, worse yet, didn’t sell any alcohol whatsoever. I began to understand that professor’s fiendish fascination with stockpiling the sauce.

When I arrived in Murray for my two-day interview, I learned more about the effects of alcohol on the body, mind, and soul than I did anything else. Shortly after I settled into my hotel room, a new faculty member arrived to take me to dinner. We exchanged pleasantries in the doorway, where he asked, “Is Thai food okay?” I tried to say sure, but before I’d even spit it out, he was already hurling back, “We can have drinks there!” For a moment, I wondered if this is what it’s like to visit a prison inmate, deprived and jonesing for contraband. I agreed, realizing that there wouldn’t be any pre-game nutrition to fight a hangover that night. The dynamic of the ensuing meal was rather strange since a major ice storm had just started and my companion was the only faculty member new and brave enough to risk an evening out. I suspected the others were nursing hot toddies in the safety of their own homes and dreaming of charming me the next day with their firewater fairy tales. For much of our first hour together, we tackled the topic of tipples and their scarcity. He regaled me with yarns about faculty driving to the nearest liquor stores in bordering Tennessee or Paducah, KY, to buy cases of their spirit of choice. From his charming description, one would have imagined this was the most valiant humanitarian effort ever launched, with folks banding together to pick up supplies for friends and colleagues. Everyone, apparently, shared the burden of impending impairment. I kept it to one drink that night, fearing this drunkenness—or the even more heinous hangover—that every job advice manual stringently cautions against. Once I had returned to my hotel room, as I attempted to coax on sleep, I conjured a scenario wherein I refused the drinks and was sent into the dark of night at once for clear lack of collegiality.

Throughout my interview day, I marveled at alcohol’s ability to hang over the entire proceedings. Even self-proclaimed teetotalers brought the subject up, the restriction of liberty obsessing even the nonparticipants. At lunch, senior faculty joked about the lack of alcohol in the campus-adjacent restaurant they’d selected. They assuaged my perceived disappointment by telling me the bar had recently been restocked at the Faculty Club. Even the student worker who
toured me around campus in the middle of the ice storm felt the need to announce, with great earnestness, that should I accept the position I would definitely need to bring all the liquor I could carry from Northern Illinois. I imagined abandoning all my worldly goods and opting instead for a booze-filled U-Haul. I might fashion furniture out of wine crates in my new, liquored landscape. Since it was clear the student didn’t care to talk about the library or the nearest gym, I asked her, “Do you think students drink more because of this limited access?” “Look around you,” she quipped, “this campus is a constant hangover.” I saw a number of pained, zombie- esque students plodding the frozen paths. I’d assumed their anguish stemmed from the ice storm, especially since it was a Monday.

Later that day, when I gave my research talk in a classroom, attendance was sparse. Yes, everything was covered in ice, but I also wasn’t serving anything with ice. After I concluded, a small group of us gingerly skated across campus to the Faculty Club for the long-anticipated reception, which drew a bigger crowd. I had expected some dimly lit institutional building with a graduate student playing bartender and classical musical softly wafting through the room. What I found was a 1930s Colonial Revival house—a club in name only—with liquor assembled on the table of what was otherwise a very ordinary dining room. If you know the scene in Interview with the Vampire in which a coven of famished vampires descends en masse upon a single victim, then you know that dining table’s experience. The company was amiable and engaging, though we discussed Schnapps as often as Shakespeare. The denial of alcohol, I now think, left them in a kind of perpetual hangover both because they felt deprived and because many of them frequently overimbibed to compensate for that perceived (but rarely, if ever, actual) deprivation. I joined in the fun—I never was one to turn down a drink—and then rounded out the evening in a campus bar, where I was treated to dinner.

I was hired for the position several weeks later and moved to Murray in June, 2009. I managed to forget all those dire decrees about bringing alcohol with me, so I showed up empty-handed. It was a real shock to me when, still in the midst of unpacking, it struck me that I couldn’t have a drink unless I wanted to drive a considerable distance or go out alone, since I didn’t really know anyone, to a restaurant or bar. For the first time, I felt the panic of an addict. Just the idea that I couldn’t easily acquire alcohol set off an unreasonable craving in me. In the coming weeks and months, I started mentioning alcohol more and more to friends and family via email or phone as they checked in on me and my new place. I’m certain they saw it as the fastest onset of abject alcoholism they’d ever witnessed. A lingering feeling of loss and near-asphyxiation came over me when I realized what this restriction signaled about the culture I’d moved into. I wanted to drink defiantly, to rebel against the Bible-Belt conservatism that drove such measures. After a few months, I started to grasp that all my interviewers—now my colleagues—weren’t so much dependent on drink as they were experiencing...
the hangover of lost freedom. We had all, somehow, stepped back in time and forfeited something for the coveted tenure-track life. And now we were all traipsing about, raving like Cassandra, decrying doom and downfall in our drinkless domain. That’s dramatic. We could have gone out to a restaurant or bar and drunk ourselves silly, one glass or pitcher at a time, but it was the principle of the thing, you see. We wanted it when and how we wanted it, and some nameless, faceless, Foucauldian power refused our demands.

Then, early in 2015, a movement got afoot to legalize package liquor sales. The endeavor, known as “Grow Murray,” highlighted the local tax revenue (and so town wellbeing) that would be raised by such a measure. I and many of my friends and colleagues quickly signed on to this long-awaited hair-of-the-dog campaign. We wanted our cure, and fast. It didn’t take long for things to turn Old Testament, though. As quickly as yard signs were planted and t-shirts were donned, the opposition found their voices and Bible verses suddenly started serving as icebreakers. Prophesying quickly became commonplace in the classroom and the checkout line at Kroger. The end days were at hand, and we all knew it. We awaited a revelation.

We supporters knew that the chaser we craved was within slurping distance. Kentucky, we felt certain, was about to lurch forward into the cocktail-crazed ’50s, at least. Mad Men would seduce us all. Our opposition, predictably, sought to safeguard Prohibition with a little help from the book of fire and brimstone. Without any sense of irony or impishness, folks were suddenly decrying the drunks in the gutter, warning that more were already en route to our fair town. They would come pre-mussed to save us the difficulty of identifying their role in this passion play. “You better get ready to protect your women!” a nontraditional student bellowed at me one day before class started, a la John Wayne, apropos of nothing. “Excuse me?” I half-barked, half-chortled. “If that law passes,” he said, “none of your womenfolk will be safe. There’ll be rapes and robberies ever’where.” I couldn’t decide whether to point out that the vast majority of the U.S. allowed package liquor sales without descending into frontier lawlessness or just to start thundering Old West nonsense at him in return. I opted for the former and was treated to my first impromptu Greek tragedy chorus, my composition students overflowing with dark prognostications about faithlessness and sin and the encroachment of the mid-20th century into their God-fearing lives. I stopped the deluge by reminding them that purchasing and consuming alcohol would not, should the law pass, be compulsory. Several looked at me like they were seeing me anew, fully aware that I might be the one forcing them into keg stands, funnel in hand.

Shortly after, my headaches subsided; the measure passed by a mere 200 votes. Since it would take months to get package sales started, we celebrated over drinks at our favorite bar. We regaled one another with our own tales of restricted alcohol sales woes: romantic nights short-circuited by sobriety, legitimate problems faced with no perceptible BAC, bright-eyed
mornings filled with exercise and energy. Clearly, none of us really understood the extent of what we had endured individually, but it helped to unburden ourselves collectively and rejoice that we had finally banished President Wilson’s pernicious policies from our lives. In the midst of our revelry, I glanced over to the bar just in time to glimpse the student who had been so chivalrous about the fate of the womenfolk. He flashed me a rather sheepish grin, raising his beer mug to air-toasting me before exhaling his cigarette smoke and turning back to his friend. I was floored: what had all that damnation nonsense been about? I recounted the story to the table and asked for insight.

His behavior, if my cronies were to be countenanced, was its own variety of Bible-belt hangover. I groused that that guy had even advertised free rides to the courthouse for church folk to vote. My friend, who had taught in Murray since the ’60s, smirked a little, chuckled, and said, “You’re still new to the South.” Not taking his meaning, I asked him to expand.

“It’s not considered polite here to point out someone else’s drinking. Many folks hold religious or quasi-religious objections. In fact, most will deny drinking even as they have the glass in their hands. Many of my neighbors who have consumed countless cocktails with me planted those ‘Vote NO to Alcohol’ signs in their yards even as they voted the contrary. We’ll all simply avert our eyes when we cross paths at the liquor store and pretend as though no conflict exists. It’s not polite to point out hypocrisy. That’s how it’s done here.”

His explanation, of course, cleared a foginess about many features of life in the South that had persisted in my mind for so long. It also goes a long way toward explaining the recent turn of events with our national election. Going through the motions of resisting change and so-called sin is, here, more important than actually committing to any of that dogma. But we outsiders practiced the same style of artificial resistance when we painted ourselves as insatiable drunks incapable of surviving without a liquor store. Alcohol is one of many flashpoints in this place, and no real moral quandary is posed by telegraphing disapproval and then washing it down with a nice Kentucky bourbon. It’s simply what one does. Some hangovers, especially of the cultural variety, have no known antidote except loud acquiescence followed by quiet defiance.

Late last year, our local alcoholism became a bit more abject, figuratively speaking. Our city council, after much deliberation, voted to institute limited alcohol sales on Sundays. This time, only a few Henny Pennys showed up to cluck about the sky and its imminent shattering. Three and a half years after the initial “wet” vote, many folks’ fear hangover had vanished thanks to the new revenue stream this change brought—a chaser just about everyone could swallow. They found it much harder to make the case for Hades when they saw, along with many other benefits, the increased police surveillance and shiny, new, tricked-out cruisers that the devil’s brew had bestowed upon us all. Our friends and neighbors, and even strangers, seem nicer now. I don’t even have to avert my eyes when I buy cheap wine at
the Rite-Aid, and this is a surefire sign of progress.

In the intervening years, most of the surrounding counties—including those that had long housed distilleries unable to sell their product locally—followed suit to ratify alcohol sales. At the very least, we’ve all chugged a Gatorade, choked down an Alka-Seltzer Gold, and started to recover from one especially peculiar hangover of our local history.
In 1975, in the small arctic town of Frobisher Bay, Northwest Territories, a child was killed by a drunk driver. The incident spurred public outrage, and stories of family breakdown and alcohol-fuelled violence drew the attention of N.W.T. Commissioner Stuart Hodgson. Hodgson took immediate action, heeding the public call, circulated by petition, for the closure of the retail liquor store in Frobisher Bay. Frobisher Bay has since been officially re-named the traditional Inuktitut name, Iqaluit, and it is the same town where I was born, grew up, and—after spending 12 years in Vancouver—returned to live in 2004. For the entirety of my existence, Iqaluit has been without a liquor store. But like the Murray, Kentucky, that Joshua Adair describes in “Chasers,” Iqaluit was, until very recently, a “moist town.”

While “moist” meant that the sale of packaged alcohol was prohibited, Adair explains, it also “meant that restaurants and bars in Murray were able to serve alcohol by the glass or pitcher so long as those sales were roughly equally matched by a food purchase” (Adair 1). I want to dig deeper into Adair’s idea of a “cultural hangover” and explore the importance of historical context when trying to understand social norms, even—perhaps especially—if those norms are contrary to the logic of an outsider.

What struck me immediately about “Chasers” were the parallels between Adair’s descriptions of Murray, Kentucky, and my own town, 3296 km away. I found myself laughing and nodding as I read situations I had experienced many times but had yet to articulate or even consider as phenomena. Everyone in Murray with whom Adair spoke, prior to accepting a position there, seemed obsessed with the topic of alcohol, advising him to stock up on his favourite booze before moving in—advice that he, in his haste to uproot and move to a new city, did not heed. He surprised himself when the fear and desperation set in. When and where would his next drink come from? These are the kinds of thoughts that regularly plague residents of Iqaluit, where the only means of access are by plane and by annual ships that come in when the bay is ice-free.

After yet another warning to bring his own drink when he moved to Murray, Adair writes, he “imagined abandoning all [his] worldly goods and opting instead for a booze-filled U-Haul” (Adair 3). It’s an amusing thought, but it reminds me of another aspect of having limited access to liquor: what happens when you do get access. I’ll never forget my first adult vacation south, in 2005, to one of Iqaluit’s gateway cities—Ottawa. It was great to escape the greasy
burgers and limp, sketchy produce of Iqaluit and to taste sushi, pho, and Indian food again, but what my boyfriend and I were most excited about was drinking draft beers on sunny patios and visiting the liquor store to stock up for the coming winter. I can think of nothing that has made my cheeks burn hotter—with the exception of actually being drunk—than walking into a liquor store with a cart and having the locals gawk at me while I weigh the benefits of enjoying a good bottle of wine over the quantity I could lug back if I bought boxed. Quality over quantity is not a truism in anyone’s twenties, however, and we had more than one box of wine burst in our luggage on its way back home. It’s another trait we northerners share with the people of Murray: even though I could never shake that shopping cart shame, I would always feel a wave of relief when I saw a fellow resident of Iqaluit, cart in tow, filling it to the top with spirits. We always acknowledged each other with a nod of silent solidarity.

The other popular mode of import, if you have patience and a credit card, is sealift. Every year between June and October (depending on the breakup of the sea ice), freighters come into Iqaluit bearing dry goods, furniture, lumber, vehicles, all manner of non-perishable goods, and, of course, crates and crates of booze. It is, for the middle classes, the most economical and logical choice for bringing up your year’s supply of libation. It also affords much broader choices than the local restaurants and the territorial liquor warehouse, which is located in another city and region of Nunavut. With sealift, you can bring home whatever your heart desires (as long as you have a permit from the liquor commission). You can forego the Coors Lite and Molson Canadian for anything from Ontario craft beer to Japanese whiskey. Being notoriously disorganized and lazy, I finally took the plunge last year and put in my first sealift order. What I found most interesting about my ready access to alcohol was the change in my social habits. My desire to hit the bar lessened dramatically, and I more often opted for bringing a bottle of prosecco (okay, two bottles) to a friend’s house and sipping chilled happy juice in the comfort of a home. This is a luxury that most people who drink in Iqaluit can’t afford, which is how the historic closure of the Iqaluit liquor store gave rise to the pernicious bootlegger trade.

Though Adair doesn’t comment on bootleggers or any illegal booze-related activities, he does note that the moistness of Murray harkens back to the American Prohibition—legislation that, as Daniel Okrent writes in his book Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition, “would provoke the establishment of the first nationwide criminal syndicate” (4). The significance of bootlegging trends is intrinsically linked to the social ramifications of mandatory temperance on societies that have already been soaked, for generations, in alcoholism. When a commodity becomes illegal or restricted, the risks of trade become greater, and thus the cost of the commodity increases substantially. I can’t speak to specifics in twentieth-century America, or even
modern-day Murray, but what I do know are the astronomical costs of contraband liquor in Iqaluit and a few other communities in Nunavut. If, for example, you were looking to buy a 60oz bottle of liquor (usually with very limited options, probably Russian Prince Vodka or Bacardi White Rum), you could expect to pay a bootlegger $150. The same bottle could go for $180 in Rankin Inlet and a whopping $600 in Pangnirtung, a completely dry community. These are average rates that don’t take into account the inflation prompted by holiday seasons or customer desperation. Okrent points out that the women’s temperance movement that began in late nineteenth-century America was driven by the misery that alcoholism had inflicted on women’s lives—first as children, then as wives and mothers. The desire to bring sobriety into their homes, to stop watching helplessly as husbands and fathers drank their livelihood away at saloons, was one of the major factors that rallied hundreds of thousands of women across the United States (Okrent 15-16). What followed the Eighteenth Amendment, and the enactment of Prohibition, are those dominant tropes of 1920s America: speakeasies and illegal moonshine production. Temperance movements went awry because they failed to take into account that addiction trumps regulation every time. The habits instigating the temperance movement were not eliminated because—for those who struggle with alcoholism or even a semi-regular desire for a night of drinking—prohibition does not hinder consumption. It merely makes the acquisition of liquor more expensive, risky, and (for some) exciting. In the United States, it served to exacerbate domestic situations for the majority of families across the country that depended on the wages or the physical work of men to support the household. The situation is mirrored in Nunavut, where the build-up of family and community violence and domestic misery erupted into action with the death of that child in 1975.

What people couldn’t see, through the haze of outrage and concern for the community, was that alcohol was and continues to be not the problem but just one in a multitude of systemic colonial legacies that have lead to the social issues that plague our communities. The same can be said for the generations of working class and farming families that made up the United States over a century ago. It is the nature of complex social systems: they are not easily dismantled or fixed by a single focused solution. Adair highlights the point well, though somewhat morbidly: “‘[I]f the law passes,’ he said, ‘none of your womenfolk will be safe. There’ll be rapes and robberies ever’where’” (Adair 4). This statement struck me immediately, not because of its grandiosity but because rape and theft already are huge problems in my community and in the world at large. Perhaps this is where Iqaluit and Murray differ. But rape, violence, and other illegal behaviours don’t stop because people are sober. They’re woven into the fabric of our lives—some lives more frequently than others, unfortunately. I am certainly not saying that alcohol does not contribute to the lowered inhibitions that might lead to such actions, but the bigger picture—the problematic effects that alcohol has on a community—can-
not be viewed as a single issue. Alcohol directly causes many physical problems when abused, but it is also linked to many farther-reaching problems. For most, the actual alcohol is either a distraction from these or an exacerbating contributor to them. It is not the one, hard-line cause.

Recent discoveries in addiction research have illuminated the long reach that alcoholism has on generations of people. Neurological studies taking place all over the world, but notably in Italy and the United States, have shown that “addiction remolds neural circuits to assign supreme value to cocaine or heroin, or gin, at the expense of other interests such as health, work, family, or life itself” (Smith 36). It excites a neurological change in us that can’t be undone by deprivation but can—even after days, months, or years—trigger relapse in the most devoted of people. It’s not a wonder, with that in mind, why the people of Murray, Kentucky, were so obsessed with the idea of alcohol or why we take our liquor orders so seriously in the north. It’s a destructive drive that I have seen so often in my life that it’s small comfort knowing “addiction is a disease, not a moral failing” (Smith 37). A small comfort not because it should provide hope that my town, my friends, or my family might be magically cured by electromagnetic therapies that aren’t yet available to the public. When you see a wayward childhood friend wandering the convenience store—drunk off the contents of a stolen bottle of mouthwash, sadness permanently etched into every feature—and you know the hard life that led them to this place but still can’t understand how someone could get to such a point, it is a small

comfort to know that there is a reason, beyond the scope of emotional or spiritual strength, why someone you once loved has fallen so far.

Works Cited

Post-Operative

The *days after* kick the *day of* in the teeth, protective endorphins gone, swelling a technicolor bloom on the surgical field, anesthesia pissed away, narcotics stingy.

The hours are long, your comforters returned home leaving you to creep, alone, towards the next increment. The doctor makes a call, pro forma, protocol says you mustn’t keep him, mustn’t cry, saying instead, like Oates, toes and fingers gone, *I am just going out.*

*I may be some time,* and disappear into the snow. *After,* you dust off the deities of childhood, invoking their return, rusty in practice and belief, hoping your current self pitiful enough for condescension. Sibylline, you’ll take anything for a sign.
Extraction

Your mouth spills blood in clots, gauze, saliva. We are both of us bleeding, your gums, my bank account, both of us numb, giddy with the unreality of loss. When someone comes to put you under the knife, I look at them with love, expressing with my whole being my certainty that they are the best, the brightest. Even as they quote me fantastical sums, a per-minute wage to make Midas grin, I nod, already writing the check. Only after does the pain bloom, every part of us swollen and tender, our insides bruised as if worked over with an unkind fist. Was it even necessary? We were assured so. To doubt whacks the world like a gong, mistrust ringing outward, a pessimistic tinnitus. We curl up together on the bed, buttressed by pillows, fortified with Percocet and booze, drooling comfort food. In a week, the swelling will shrink, in a year, it will become but an empty pocket, in ten, only the x-ray trace will remain.
A God with Big Titties

“What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts.”
(Hazel Motes from *Wise Blood*)

Anybody tell you about a reward that ain’t here and now, you get shed of ‘em real quick. You need a God with big titties you can squeeze, a body broad as a beach to break against. No angel choirs but ice cubes clinking, the cold glass sluicing drips between your fingers, hooch hammering your head like the apocalypse. We ain’t got nothing on our tail we didn’t sit in. Don’t look ‘round back—ain’t no devil there. Even your shadow would rather snuggle into Leora’s dark places, a hallelujah of funk. The only eternity’s between here and the last second of what you pay for. Leora don’t care what kind of hat you wear, how trouble’s creased your face. She’ll look away until each red-slashed help-wanted crushes to trash then lay her weight right on you, smoothing you almost as good as new. Open her door come morning, and the wind will lift you right up. That’s right. Heavenward.
Dr. —— told me the procedure is highly experimental. A slant cut, a sideways look at the human time capsule of memories. The past fifteen years of medicinal research have un-bedded the strings of connectivity within the brain.

Sam and I are the perfect candidates. I learned all of this six weeks ago, before the extensive check-ups and check-ins and interviews, during the last of which Dr. —— asked me to call him Stephen and henceforth became associated in my mind not with the incomprehensible lab coat-clad men of my childhood anxieties but with some spotted, bespectacled, crooked boy by the same name who tried to kiss me in primary school. I imagine what Sam would have said—Oh how our heroes have fallen—and wonder if she has already crept between my ears, independent of science. *Stephen*, the doctor announced, with one word murdering my deities and setting me on the slippery course of damaged confidence. All this, all these gained and lost connections in six weeks, and all from first-name familiarity. Sam’s been kept on ice and unchanged. Meanwhile, I took crash courses on memory and psychology, shock and brain development and amnesia and phobia, meditation, hypnosis, dissociation. Remember, the procedure is highly experimental and therefore apt to produce overstimulation, psychological bruising, or death, partial or complete. Sam’s been preserved in a freezer. Meanwhile, I’ve grown sour—mouldy, I would say, if I were feeling poetic—on grief and overripe hope. Dr. ——, Stephen, told me any alterations that have occurred in my brain shouldn’t matter, that all of this information and self-education passes only into my short-term memory, that my long-term memory remains unmined in the sense that I still possess the psychological tools to reconnect with Sam organically.

All six weeks ago or somewhere between then and now. I sit in a green hospital gown, the back open like a wound, my spine running in a ridge to the base of my skull. Skin seems a thin covering.

Fortunately, the most likely case of failure is a rejected transplant and the loss of the manipulated portion of my hippocampus. In short, regret is a clinical impossibility.

———

*My boss fired me for clinical disorganization. That’s what she called it. Clinical. As if my behaviour can be diagnosed, shaven down to accommodate her cube-like definitions. Pah! It was that vegan fast-food place downtown. Not the best gig, and I would have fired myself months*
ago had I been manager. Ever smelt pot? This lady apparently had not. She accepted my sleeping in and missing work as “running late.” So, clinical disorganization. I’ll take it.

A disorderly disorder. Greta didn’t get the humour when I called to tell her the story. Another? Another? I suppose she’s worried about rent. If I can pay for pot, I should be able to cough up some coins for laundry, right? Pah! Pah! Pah!

Greta’s completing her Ph.D., you see—should be finished within the year—so it’s all this mug belongs in this cupboard, please don’t talk to me when I’m at my desk, I’d rather not order take-out again. She’s in the right, of course, always has been. This is why she can’t understand the comedy of a disorderly disorder. When I mentioned my boss’s phrasing, “clinical disorganization,” she said I could be as clinical or as disorganized as I damn well pleased, as long as it didn’t bugger up her life in the process. She mentioned respect and commitment, and I suppose I agreed, because I’ve just spent the traditionally pot-filled portion of my afternoon vacuuming the apartment rugs and washing dishes to make it up to her. She’ll be home by nine, she said. Take-out’s acceptable when she’s not around, but it’s less acceptable when I no longer have the discount that went along with my vegan gig. I suppose tea and rice will have to do. And Night by Elie Wiesel, for that matter, because I’m downright sick of these Netflix series people keep telling me are phenomenal and which turn out to be another lengthy struggle between quirky characters desiring connection and achieving nothing but misconception.

But now I’m sounding like Greta. Our minds bump occasionally, it’s not unheard of. Look, here’s the thing:

Night begins with the line, “They called him Moishe the Beadle, as if his entire life he had never had a surname.” That one line got me thinking about Greta and myself and about what if we could marry and what if kids and what would their surname be. And what of definitions, labels, compartments. “Clinical disorganization.” That line from Night got me thinking about all the people with only surnames. I saw a psychiatrist a week ago, five blocks from where I work—used to work—free and government sponsored, you know, and the moment I read his name I knew I wouldn’t be telling Greta about that particular excursion. Not because his name was anything special but precisely the opposite. Something about its broad, generic quality put me on edge, got me thinking about surnames, about Greta and me, about compartments. About the miniscule capsules the doctor wanted me to take, costing fifty bucks a bottle.

Goddamn, what to do now without the gig downtown? If I’m not careful it’ll be twenty pages of Greta’s thesis to look over. Never! Enough! Pah!

The tea’s bitter. The bathroom’s my only private capsule in this studio apartment. Bugger me.

———

I dreamt during the surgery, and I never dream. It was the anaesthetic, I’m certain. Dr. ——, Stephen, Stephen, assures me that connections can’t be made that quickly. But I dreamt of
Nazis, and of Sam holed up in a long, cold, dark cabin, bone-thin, as skinny as she ever was; or rather it was me holed up in there. I can’t help asking Stephen about it when I wake.

He is blunt and conventionally assertive. The transplant has not been rejected (good), an incalculable amount of childhood memories were removed and therefore lost (unavoidable), and the connections between myself and Sam, if any, should begin to form concretely within twenty-four hours (uncertain, hypothetical, verging on conjectural). The establishment of these connections cannot have already begun. The dream, he explains, was projection, imagination, and wishful thinking. It was not Sam’s mind merging with my own.

I think, What’s the difference? It’s something Sam would have wondered. Does it matter whether Sam’s real, physical brain causes me to dream, or that the memory I have of her does? The dream is the same, my experience of the dream is the same. I suppose the difference lies in Sam’s experience.

Stephen looks at me and sighs, says the drugs are still in effect, the headaches will only get worse, and he will have to wake me every half hour for a short interview, some note-taking on his part, and a routine check of my bodily reflexes.

Now I swallow this pill and get back to sleep. But first, what was my mother’s full name? Charlotte James.

Good, Stephen says.

Unavoidable. Uncertain, hypothetical, verging on ...

———

Made brazen and befuddled by mystery meat.

That’s Greta’s answer when I ask her how she’s feeling. She acquires a kind of nervous joy while employing alliteration. It’s this fake literary genius thing she gets a kick out of, like she’s a part of something by partaking in Ph.D. studies, but still apart from it. She feels safe in her compartments but also constricted. Very in-depth and psychoanalytical, and she would love to explain it to you if you gave her half a chance.

I’ve come to join Greta for lunch in one of the university’s smaller cafeterias, and she certainly does have a pile of mystery meat all in a mess on the paper plate in front of her, but why this should make her feel brazen or befuddled I have no idea. I’ve brought my own lunch. Rice and chopped peppers and pinto beans.

I could at least add soya sauce, Greta advises.

I harrumph! at her mystery meat.

Our eating habits are contradictorily representative of our personalities. Here are my beans, for example, all tied up with the rest of the meal, and yet plainly distinguishable as beans. I eat slowly; I don’t finish. Greta’s meal is a mystery that needn’t be solved, in my opinion, but Greta’s always got to sort things through. She’ll eat ‘til the plate’s clean.

She surprises me by smiling. She leans across the table and kisses me.

Greta, Greta, Greta ...

Stephen wakes me through whispers. It is night. He reminds me of our check-ups half an hour, an hour, two hours previous. I pretend to remember, but he catches my fib when I can’t answer questions about a story he apparently told me thirty minutes ago.

What colour was the pony’s tail? Who did the man go to see that morning? Can I recall any major plot points?

No. Please leave me be. Even these sentences, these words, are arduous and overlaid with connections Sam wouldn’t see, wouldn’t care to see. I tell Stephen I’ve had enough of thinking.

What am I thinking about?

Mystery meat. But please don’t tell Sam I was never in love with her veganism. My mother... What about my mother?

My mother taught me meat-eating. She told me I was omnivorous.

What was her name?

I suck my lips between my teeth. Charlotte.

Full name?

Charlotte.

If I’m honest, my attraction to Greta didn’t begin as physical, perhaps never was. I’ve never felt much attachment to bodies. We met in a hospital. I was studying in the university, completing my B.A. in history with a focus on the Holocaust. A week earlier, I had fainted in an underground hallway between classes and was now forcibly hospital-bound. Greta was visiting her mother, who was in the process of dying.

I was on my way to the vending machine for a bag of potato chips, under the pretense of going to the cafeteria for a banana, which my doctor highly recommended. My heart was dangerously weak. Vulnerable? I found some poetic symbolism in my diagnosis, didn’t mind playing the victim. I welcomed Greta’s intrusive stare as I turned a corner in the hallway.

Have I seen you around somewhere?

Like most people fumbling through grief for the first time, Greta was starving for connection, but I was more invested in compartmentalization at the time. She had not, as a matter of fact, seen me around somewhere. There was a woman in one of her literature classes with a similar haircut, also anorexic. I could hardly feel offended. Greta looked so bedraggled herself that I didn’t believe her when she told me she was a visitor and had wound up in the wrong ward.

She wound up in the wrong ward on purpose after that, and we eventually wound up in bed together. It wasn’t physical, not for me. Greta’s mind was so cavernous after the death of her mother that I found myself fitting—contorting—into all available spaces within her brain.
She opened herself willingly. I fell in love with her vacuities.

She told me her mother’s name for safekeeping. Charlotte James. Like me, Greta knew the significance of definition.

Later, now, it’s all this mug here, Ph.D. papers, mystery meat, coins for the laundry, and I wonder if our hospital encounter was obtusely warped by my memory. It seems much too spontaneous. A pot-induced fantasy? A waking dream?

———

It was me in the dream, I know that now. Me in the long, dark cabin, Nazi-surrounded. I’ve lost the words to explain it to Stephen. When I squeeze out, “bone-thin,” he tells me, yes, he knows that Sam died of anorexia. A weak heart. It’s all in the paperwork. I find some poetic symbolism in his phrasing, and I shriek at him to take back the words.

Shhh, shhh, softly. Careful.
I don’t want to be careful. It’s suddenly very clear, that here is Dr. ———, all of the doctors, the man who diagnosed my mother, the man who diagnosed Sam, met her downtown five blocks from the vegan gig, offered her compartmentalizing pills for fifty bucks a bottle, all separate and yet the same man who approached me the day after her death, presently diagnoses me. I will not sit for one more moment.
I try to stand.

It’s quiet, it’s okay. Have a seat.
No.
It’s okay. Greta, Greta, it’s me.
Yes.
Good.
Good.
Now tell him your mother’s name. How—? You gave it for safekeeping, Charlotte James. Tell him.
Unavoidable.
Pull it together. He’ll send you home with me.
Uncertain, hypothetical, verging on conjectural.
I remember the mystery meat—Brazen—is that not enough? I remember ...
You should have been a meat-eater, like me. It had nothing to do with that. Nothing? Let it go. Let it open.
Be cavernous for me.
Carnivorous? Cavernous ...
Vacuous.
Vac—
Greta, compartmentalize me.

Greta. Sam. Charlotte James. Stephen. (Dr. ———.)

She is neither up nor down, straight nor slant.
Where? She is living here with me. Stephen approved. We agreed. There are no more clinical diagnoses, decisions, or disorganizations. There is no longer even the impossibility of regret.
The North Sea in February

Lars Horn

The North Sea in February: not cold enough to kill you, or at least not straight off, not where you were. But still, it was cold and grey. It was as if someone had opened a tap somewhere and was syphoning out the blues and creams, the pur-pley flashes. Everything was toning down, like on Photoshop when you click the saturation level and the picture flattens, chacks its innards out. It had been a good two and a half hours now. You felt you were going the same way as the blues and the pinks. Despite all the wetsuit gear, the hood and the gloves and the boots, your body was blurring—the details bruising into crude strokes.

Fingers and toes, then hands and feet, arms, legs: all the finer points of yourself were fading into larger, clumsier limb; your lips felt like a part of your cheeks; your fingers had become hands, and now you weren’t sure where they ended and your arms began, same went for your feet and legs. You were probably about six blocks of flesh now: body, arms, legs and head. And you were heavier than before, not just colder, but heavier.

You thought about the distance it had taken to get here: the past couple of hours, and then generally: yesterday, the day before yesterday. And from being six you felt the body finally solidify, rigidify into single form. The absoluteness of it was so sure. And the elation of realising this was how it went: understanding that colour-bleed was meeting body-recede, one movement sinking into the other, this paradoxically sent you rising; you remember you felt you were flying.

And you rolled; your eyes rolled into the wet, into the grey-greeny depth; and you remember thinking how odd that it should seem green from underneath when it was grey from above. And it was odd how hot it was in your chest; you had been so cold. And the burning in your ears, you had forgotten you had ears.

It was as you were thinking this, thinking it all very matter-of-factly, that you felt

Hangover
your solid lump of a body wrench-crooked: as though someone, seeing you had
lost your limbs and that the joints had stopped, someone had decided to make a
new one—not a very good one mind, this new joint—it was right on the hip and
it wrenched again. You felt like saying to them that this was a bad choice. Your
legs wouldn’t fold sideways, no-one’s would; they’d have to fold you front ways—
torso forwards to the legs—that’s how the pelvis works, Christ, anyone knows that.
They’d have more luck trying to bend you backwards, shoulder blades to calves;
I mean that might work at a push, but folding the pelvis sideways? Why try and
make a body fold the one way it can’t? And you shouted this at them, shouted
so hard the burning got hotter; and then they seemed to understand because
they turned you round; and you were going to say, you were going to say that
was good because then they could fold you forwards into a pike, but they missed
the point again: they let your head roll back, flop like that, like they’d forgotten
about folding you up, which wouldn’t do. You don’t leave a bed sheet midway
there and then drop it to the floor do you? And then you felt them at your back
then cold
dry icy cold
then bright
then shouting, quiet then loud, like someone was messing with the volume; it
was them again, the one who couldn’t fold a body, or a bed sheet probably; it was
them making all the noise. And still grabbing at you, and fastening and shout-
ing and pressing at your face. Or was it your mouth? Yes, mouth. You shouted to
get off—but you couldn’t have because you could feel your teeth. And you could
feel your teeth because something was pressing your lips over them tight, really
tight. In fact, what you could feel was less your teeth and more the sharp points
where they dug into your cheeks. And then you could taste the salt, and yes,
the thumb on your lips, and now the fingers, the hand; you could feel the whole
hand grappling round your jaw. And the salt again, but this time in your eyes.

Eyes, teeth, lips, jaw. And ears. You knew you could feel your ears because the hand
round your face was still shouting, really shouting. And, to be honest, it was ir-
ritating because you were trying to think, to work this out, because it didn’t look
right: everything kept sliding. And now you could really hear: a slopping-sloshing
sound kept slapping into your ear. That was unpleasant. But then again, at least
it muffled the shouting. Is that them still tugging at you? What are they doing? Can’t even fold a body. Can’t even shut up and see how green the sea is. In fact, Christ, that grey had gone bluey-green and the sun was out—fable-like that, the timing. And you wanted to tell this hand and this voice that they should just shut up and stop trying to fold you in by the mouth because you wouldn’t roll up that way either, because you weren’t one of those stow-away anoraks that stuff in on themselves. But more to the point, you wanted them to shut up and to realise, realise they were living a miracle moment, a light-shifting end: the sun sitting there, splitting sea from sky. And it had brought all the colours with it, was tossing them back into earth and air, adding dark and light everywhere. The sun had caught up with three-dimensionality and was shaking it back into the landscape.

If they stopped shouting, they might see what a moment you were in. But the hand didn’t stop grappling, and the voice didn’t stop shouting. And now there was a jaw that kept gristling against your face, jolting the eye sockets and, dirty sod—kept blowing into your nose. But you couldn’t seem to shout, so you just let your shoulders slump. At least you saw the sun better that way. At least one of you would be making the most of it. And that was when you decided that this would be your sun. Like all those famous suns, like the one that bred maggots in dead dogs, the tall tinging one, or the one whose cymbals burst tar and blinded, well, this sun was yours: the colour one. This sun brought clouds into heaviness, deepened the sea and vaulted the sky, scattered birds through it, and changed the burning in your ears for one in your eyes.
She opens the door and sees her, leaning over the freezer, stretching as if to press her face against the August night.

The dishwasher stops and she pushes herself from the window, held open by a rag, the curtains pulled to the sides, offering light and a suffocating heat. She sees her, tries to smile, her face tightening in protest. She offers a heavy tray piled with cocktail glasses and highballs. A wine stain on her tunic, the smells of a liqueur coming from her skirt. In her mind she recites the names of the flowers she sees edging the walls of the bars across the street. White rose, rose blanche, rosa alba. English, French, Latin. Words learned from pouring over botany books and dictionaries. The door closes, and she is gone.

She leans to coax the dishwasher open. Steam comes out of the lazy yawn, an open-mouthed croak of emotion. She picks up a damp dishtowel and attempts to dry a sangria glass, careful not to twist her wrist too fast. Last shift she snapped a white wine glass in half, a clean break. Across the street a band plays. She sees the saxophone player, his white button-down sharp against the navy gate that leads into the restaurant terrace, open to the wide sky. She considers him, imagines herself next to him, a warbling, high voice, a flower limp from the heat slipping through her fingers as she fumbles for the mic.

The sun sets early for her. That’s how high the rooftops are, their cobalt lines affecting, limiting the day. The haze of the August sun and the latitudinal slant of Brittany are just enough that the sky remains illuminated—hazel, not blue—until deep into the evening. She can’t see the bright globe past eight, so it’s nighttime.

The door opens. By the look on her face, she knows that the night is almost done. Another indicator of time. This and the silence. After midnight even the musicians on the sidewalk disperse. Small bars become crowded as the street cools.

The girl is watched, studied. She would like to paint her, la Canadienne, soft but severe, her face warm and soft in the fading light. A van Gogh blur behind her, because you can’t replicate the noise of this restaurant any other way. You can’t finish this impression of her face—warm and smooth, as if untouched, but what could ever keep her steadied like this, as in a separate existence? The whir of the restaurant-goers like rushing water downstairs.

The big eyes, lids shrinking them to a slit when she is tired.
Lily of the Valley, *muguet, convallaria majalis*. Her lips form these words but she adds no sound. She is quiet here.

Glass tumbles, breaks. Sweat pours. To quicken the process, she rinses out the glasses with their own contents. A laboratory serenity in the heavy night. Marie-Colombe—the art student-waitress with the name of a saint and a bird—stands at her side. They ignore the shards in the sink and stare at this careful pouring, an alchemist’s precision. The red wine blooms in the white, growing out like a cloud to kiss the edges of its cage.

“It looks like fire’s breath,” she says. She nods. It’s trite, and terminally romantic, but it’s true.
1.

When I first met Noah, I was blindfolded.

My sister Julia wanted a baby shower for her first kid (a speck on a sonogram that she’d nicknamed peanut, then a boy she’d refer to as Charles—not Charlie or Chuck, but Charles). On a Saturday afternoon in the middle of rainy April, all the women were supposed to go to the living room of the house she shared with her husband, while all the men were supposed to go to Kevin’s mother-in-law’s place.

I opened the pink envelope and wanted to tear it apart.

“Why the separation?” I asked, over tea once I was calm. “Surely, you don’t want Kevin to get out of diaper duty because he’s a guy?”

“No, not at all. That’s why he has his own party when normally men don’t have baby showers. There are things that only women know how to talk about, though. Like the epidural, post-partum depression, and the bleeding that apparently doesn’t end until like six weeks after birth. Did you know about that? Jesus. The things we don’t know. So I want as many women there as possible.” Julia ran a hand through her long, golden brown curls. Her hair was lush with pregnancy hormones. When we were fourteen and fifteen, people thought we were twins. Now at twenty-nine and thirty, my hair barely got past an inch and no one mistook us for twins anymore.

Yet, two weeks later, here I was in the middle of a sea of chatter about how vaginas made us all more women.

When the baby food taste testing came around, I was first to volunteer to sit in the middle of the room with a black tie over my eyes as my sister and her best friends from grad school fed me bits from baby food jars and I guessed what I was tasting.

“Cream of corn?”
“No, try again.”
“Okay ... Squash.”
“Good. Okay, this one is hard.”

My sister’s voice faded away and a new presence stepped beside me. Strong presence. Stiff jeans I felt against my wrist. The person spoon fed me something that tasted like cranberries—then dropped it down my shirt.

“Shit.” The voice was panicked, thinned. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I stood from the chair, reaching out to grab the stranger’s arm. The stranger held back. “Can you take me to the kitchen?”

“Yes, yes.”
My sister didn’t say a thing as the new person led me aside. The crack of baby food lids sounded like the drumbeats to a song I wasn’t privy to, now on the other side of the kitchen door.

I was relieved to be away from the crowd, but I still couldn’t see. The cranberry mess fell between my bound breasts and caught on the ace bandages. My left arm was also covered in something wet and sticky, trailing between my fingers.

“Hey. You still here?”
“Yeah. Sorry ... I-uh—”
“I’m going to need you to take off the blindfold.”
“Oh. Of course. Shit.”

Then I saw him. Noah’s green eyes were framed by dark hair, cut short to the sides. His *Planet of the Apes* T-shirt was accentuated with a jean jacket and dark skinny jeans that clung to his thin legs. Under the harsh lights of the kitchen, his barely-there stubble was visible; the straggling kind that came in when a person first started testosterone. His voice was hinged with the same dry pitch that most trans men had the first few months as they spoke “this is my voice [x] months on t” into cameras for a YouTube audience. Noah was so familiar in that moment I’d worried that I’d watched his YouTube videos late at night in my one-bedroom apartment and I already knew too much about him.

“Shit,” he said again. His favourite word. He directed my hand to the sink and started to clear away the baby food under the hum of water.

“Was it cranberry?”
“Hmm?”
“The food. I think it was cranberry. But I’m not good at this.”
“I’m not either, apparently. It was blueberry jam. Whatever that means.”
“Well, we can be failures in the kitchen together, then.”

His eye caught mine. He introduced himself to me, saying his name with a certain staccato rhythm. “I came with my sister,” he explained next. “Natalie.”
“And I came with mine. Julia.”
“And you are ...?”
“Chris,” I said before he could say my full name. “Just Chris.”

“Nice to meet you. I don’t think we can get the blueberry out of your shirt, though.”

I glanced down at my bound breasts and skin, realizing he didn’t want to try and clean that area of me. Instead of telling him to do it, I went upstairs and got a new shirt from my sister. The only thing she had that wasn’t professional ware was her old campus shirt, two sizes too big for me. When I came back downstairs, Noah was still waiting for me in the kitchen, his hands nervous and fidgeting all the time.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m nervous and don’t really want to go back out there. They ... they all think I’m a woman and it flusters me. Frustrates me. So I drop stuff everywhere.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I understand. They think I’m a woman too.”
2.

“You’ve met me at a very strange time in my life.”

Noah held his laundry basket to his chest as he pushed open the laundry mat door for me. The inside was overrun with the smell of detergent and cigarettes, like half the room had been divided by scent. The red and orange chairs at the front, along with the *Cosmo* magazines from the 1990s, made whatever small date we were having feel like we were stepping back in time.

Noah plopped his laundry down on the first free machine. His off-white binders lined the top of his laundry. He dropped them into the machine as if they were shameful, followed by the black T-shirts he wore overtop of them for more than twelve hours at a time.

“You’re not supposed to do that,” I told him, when he’d confessed how long he’d worn them the week before. “It’s going to cut off your circulation.”

“Says Mixter Ace Bandage.”

I shrugged. “I only did that at the party. And only for an hour.”

“Whatever. You’re not like me in that regard. You can get away with an hour.”

“And you’re so special because ...?”

“I told you: you’ve met me at a very strange time in my life.”

“And I ignored your *Fight Club* references because all times in our lives are strange. All parts of our lives are strange. Just like our laundry.”

Noah pulled out a sports bra, panties he wore when (and if) he got his period, and tried to hide them under the Batman and other superhero boxers, the men’s slacks, and a dozen men’s collared shirts. His skinny jeans were his one weakness, the one area where he shopped in the women’s section and didn’t care if he looked out of place. He turned each one of his T-shirts inside out so the printed logo or band or *Planet of the Apes* didn’t fade too much with wear in the wash.

Noah’s “strange time” in his life was the waiting period after applying for surgery. We lived in Ottawa, a four hour drive from the gender clinic in Toronto. Every other Sunday, he’d been driving down and staying with another trans friend named Malcolm so he could see those doctors, get his shots, and try to do the right gender song-and-dance routine to a community of experts who approved surgeries. The Sunday we met, he shouldn’t have been at the party with my sister’s friends, but in downtown Toronto, but all the forms were filled out and filed away. He only had to wait now and instead of staring at the wall in his small apartment, his sister had dragged him to the taste test.

The waiting part was the hardest on Noah, making him jumpy at each phone call and each email. It would take at least six months for the forms for a mastectomy to go through; and until then, his prescription for testosterone was transferred to our local doctor. If not for the baby shower, I was certain we would have met again in the doctor’s office, equally blindfolded and uncomfortable, except we may not have spoken.
I was glad we were speaking, even if he was always quoting pop culture as a way to deal with his feelings.

Noah dug his hands in his pockets and pulled out several rolls of quarters and loonies. They clanked against the machine as he put them inside and twisted it to start. The hum of the washing machine sounded over the traffic outside. Noah held his empty laundry basket over his chest. He was washing his binders and only had his emergency super-tight sports bra to cover himself. Somehow, it never seemed enough.

“I need that fucking surgery,” he muttered.

“I need the fucking world to change.”

He nodded, sympathetic. “No one understands what’s in between. I knew a person once, who applied for the surgery as non-binary. The council denied the orchietomy the person wanted because they weren’t going from one point to another. So the person just did it themselves. Come into the ER like that, and they gotta treat you.”

“I’m not that desperate.”

“It’s not about desperation. It’s about love.”

“What now?”

“It’s about love,” he repeated. We headed to the orange and red chairs and sat down. Noah didn’t remove the basket from his lap, in front of his chest. I thought he was reading from the scattered *Cosmo* headlines about love until he spoke again. “This person couldn’t move on until they could love their body. And after they got their DIY surgery, they were fine. Better. So how can we love someone else without loving ourselves first? It’s impossible.”

“I think that still depends on the world we’re living in. We shouldn’t exist, so it’s hard to find examples of love. If we just love one another and find ways of doing that, then maybe our world will change.”

Noah shrugged. “I don’t know. You and I want very different things.”

I sighed. I never wanted surgery. I never wanted hormones, either, really since without them bones turned to dust and broke at the slightest provocation. I wasn’t ready for osteoporosis at twenty-nine.

But I was ready for love.

When Noah’s laundry was done, and we had exhausted our extensive discussion about the merits of Brad Pitt’s films, we gathered up his clothing without bothering to fold it and carted it to his one bedroom apart a block away. There, in front of *Fight Club* on his laptop, we folded everything over pizza.

The ending scene rolled by and I watched as Noah’s lips said the same words Edward Norton’s character did in the movie.

Then I tried to kiss Noah. And to my surprise, he kissed me back.

Our soft, hesitant kiss became more forceful and soon became making out. When I tried to touch Noah’s chest, he pulled away.

“No. Not right now. It’s not the right time.”

“When will be the right time?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“You know, we don’t have to do it the
way TV tells us. I don’t have to touch your chest. You don’t have to touch mine. We don’t have to pretend to be gay men or a straight couple or whatever.”

“Then what are we?”

*In love?* I thought, but remained silent. I wanted to kiss him again. When I did, Noah kissed back. He always kissed back, but always pulled away before our clothing came off. “No, no. Not now. Not now. It’s never the right time.”

The next Sunday, we went to the laundromat and folded clothing at my apartment, watching *Mr. And Mrs. Smith* instead of *Fight Club*. We made out again and, like clockwork, Noah pulled away. “No, no, never the right time. I can’t love you until I love myself.”

“More garbage from the TV. We don’t have to be like that at all. I’m not Marla. I’m not Mrs. Smith. I’m not—anyone.”

“You have to be someone. You have to choose.”

“No, I don’t.”

“The absence of choice is a choice, Chris. You may not feel cis, but you’ll always seem it.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said. “This is my choice. I’m nothing and no one and everything in between.”

Noah stopped pushing then. Our gaze fell on the space between our bodies. Different bodies, different landscapes, different strange times in our lives. While Noah’s time was coming to an end, mine was never-ending, always in perpetuity; I’d never be normal.

“Let’s watch another movie,” Noah suggested.

He put on *Fight Club*. Always fucking *Fight Club*. As the ending scene played over and over again, I knew that the first time we fought it would be about this—our bodies and our time in them and who served the worst sentence.

3.

The first time we fought, it was about music. Noah took me to a bar across the city that a friend of his was supposed to play at. His friend was drunk and sang shitty songs about women in mini-skirts. He couldn’t play his instrument, and it was clear from Noah’s wincing that he realized his friend was full of shit. When the set was over, Noah tried to hide at the back of the bar.

“I’m sorry I brought you here. It’s really weird.”

“I’ve seen stranger,” I said. “There’s a jukebox at the back, though. You have any more quarters?”

Noah dug into his pants and pulled out a roll of them, followed by a couple loonies. I took everything from his palm and sauntered to the back. The jukebox was genuine; I hadn’t seen one since I was six or seven and my part-time father took me to a bar one of the weekends he was supposed to take care of me. As it turned out, it was one of the last weekends.

I slid the coins into the machine. Selected “Common People” by Pulp. When it didn’t work, I slapped the red rim of the jukebox once or twice until it finally spit out the tune.

When I sat back at the bar with Noah, he
was talking to his drunk friend like he hadn’t just shit-talked his performance the past forty minutes. He laughed and joked and carried on like I wasn’t even there.

“What the hell is this shit?” Patrick said between sips of his beer. “I haven’t heard this trash in ages.”

“It’s pretty awful, yeah,” Noah said. “This is why jukeboxes shouldn’t exist.”

“But ‘Common People’ is a classic.”

“Yeah, for Muzak in supermarkets. For here, though, it makes no sense. Who wants to be reminded of William Shatner’s god-awful version of this song?” Patrick laughed as if it was the best joke. Noah followed him. When I shot Noah a look, a please defend me gaze, Noah turned away. He showed me his back as he focused on his piss drunk friend who I thought he’d been avoiding.

So, when my song was over, I took my jacket and I left. Noah came by my apartment at two in the morning, asking to be let in with a slight drunk-drawl to his voice. He buzzed in again and again. I ignored him each and every time.

“Come on, don’t play the silent game. I was just having fun. Patrick’s a good guy, just a bad musician. You have good choice in music, though. Not my favourite era, but it’s good.”

When I didn’t respond, he finally left. In the morning, he sent me a text message riddled with the mistakes of a man who didn’t know his limit the night before.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done or said any of that. I regret drinking but I just can’t fucking stand thinking about the surgery forms when I’m sober. I regret taking you there. Not because I don’t like going out with you, but because when I see Patrick I feel like even more shit than I already do about the surgery. And that song, too—it’s like I’m seven again and my dad is telling me that I shouldn’t play with the boys. Because I’m not a boy. I used to sing that song in the shower and pretend to be a boy in a band, someone I wasn’t, and sometimes it still feels like I’m pretending. Like a bad taste in my mouth after a hangover.

I said nothing. He wrote me back three hours later. Also, I just hate the fucking music video.

In two days, when my anger ebbed away, I looked at our text messages and marveled at our first fight. It wasn’t about our bodies or our names or our pronouns. It was so wonderfully simple that I wanted to frame it.

Instead, I texted: I only accept apologies in the form of cake.

4.

Three days later, he brought a homemade vanilla bean cake thick with butter cream frosting.

“Only adults appreciate butter cream,” he said as he put the dish on my counter. “I learned that a long time ago after looking after my sister’s kid. Always make the cake from scratch, but the frosting is just sugar to kids. Buy that shit in a can.”

“But for adults?”

“Adults will notice the difference between canned frosting and the real deal. So, if you want to impress them, use that butter cream.”

Noah smiled. I forgave him that instant because he wanted to impress me. He wanted to make
things right.

When he pulled out a shaker of rainbow sprinkles and candles from his jean jacket pocket, I knew I was in love with him.

“Oh my God. Why all this?”

“Is that a good ‘oh my God’?”

“Yes!” I grabbed the sprinkle can and poured some over the edges of the cake. Noah’s smile was large, genuine. I had never seen him like this before. In love too? I wanted him so badly, and I needed him to know it too. I kissed his cheek and turned his face to meet mine. He opened up to me like he always did, holding my sides and keeping his hands there and only there, like ten and two position on the steering wheel of a car.

“So why the candles?” I asked after we had pulled apart. The heavy scent of vanilla in the room made my stomach rumble, fighting off my desire for that second.

“It seemed appropriate. I know it’s not our birthday, but hey, who doesn’t like blowing out for wishes, right?”

So we put them all in the centre, every last one of them, until the cake seemed to be an Olympic torch. Noah hummed the baseline of the song we fought about, but I told him to stop.

“We both have to blow this out, okay?”

“Okay.”

On the count of three, we blew. Wax flew everywhere, mixing with the frosting and our skin.

“Ah, shit. Shit.” Noah tried to remove the wax from the cake. When it didn’t work, he opened his bag to grab some Kleenex. I saw a book bigger than the bible at the base of it.

“What’s that?”

“What? Oh. That.” He put down the Kleenex and pulled the book with a dozen dog eared pages. “Remembrance of Things Past by Marcel Proust. It’s one of the longest books ever written.”

“What’s it about?”

“A lot of things. Mostly this guy’s life. It starts with him eating a madeleine cookie—basically a butter cookie from France—and the smell triggers memory. He goes back through all the events of his life and catalogues them.” Noah fanned through some of the sections he book-marked, then shut the book and handed it over to me. “Seemed like a good thing to read while waiting for the doctors, you know? I’m almost halfway through it. Maybe by the time I get surgery, I’ll be done.”

I took the book from him and looked at the cover emblazoned with a cup of tea and a cookie. All so much fuss from a single dessert; a single smell of butter and vanilla. While I skimmed the pages, Noah cleaned up the mess we’d made of the candles. The butter cream and vanilla now smelled like the clean nothingness of wax and the burnt wick of the candles. How will I remember this? I wondered, flicking through the book. How will Noah remember it?

“The title,” I said after a moment.

“Hmm?” Noah shut off the water from washing his hands. “What about it?”

“It’s translated wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Noah squinted as I showed him the original French title of the
book, À la recherche du temps perdu, that I’d found in the first printing information. I’d grown bi-
lingual while in Montréal and moved to Ottawa because it still used French as much as English while Noah had moved here when he was eighteen for school from Ontario. He’d picked up the French on the street signs and bilingual food la-

labels, but still relied on his English mind.

“The title can also be ‘In Search of Lost Time;’” I explained to him. “The word perdre in French, where perdu from the original title comes from, means both ‘lost’ as in something that can’t be found, but ‘wasted’ as if you were given some-
thing but didn’t use it. So you miss both mean-
ings when the title is in English and especially when the title is called Remembrance of Things Past. It’s more than just time passing—it’s time being lost and being wasted.”

“Huh. I think I like Remembrance better, though. It’s better to think I’m remembering things in the waiting room, rather than wasting them.”

But you are wasting them, I wanted to shout. You can’t even enjoy music anymore.

Instead, I folded the book and got us plates for the cake. Noah slid a knife through the sprinkled frosting, now clear of most of the wax. When he handed out the first slice, the fork on the plate slipped down and clattered on my apartment floor.

“Shit. Will nothing go right? Shit.” Noah’s voice was deeper now when he spoke his favourite word. I could see him growing, his stubble getting thicker, filling out in front of me. I wanted to see all of him so much in that mo-

ment.

“What do you look like naked?”

“What?” His cheeks reddened in a single breath. “What?”

“You heard me. What do you look like naked?”

He didn’t answer for some time. Just when I thought he’d get up and leave, he asked, “What do you look like naked?”

“Not like you. Not like a woman. Not like anything. Do you want to see?”

He nodded, but just barely. We forgot about the cake. I took his hands and led him to the bedroom.

Our months of dancing around one an-
other fell always with our clothing. He tried to hide his body, his thicker curves, but I focused on the parts he wanted me to see: the trail of hair between his nipples that led down to the dark patch above his mound, the coarse hair on his chin, his jaw line thick and hard muscles under-

neath, and his name on the back of my mouth.

“Noah, Noah, Noah.” I said it like a psalm.

“Chris,” he said. “Be ... gentle ... don’t ...”

“I know. Not like TV.”

I took his hand and told him where I wanted him to focus: my neck, my ears, the soft spot between the two, and the junction of my throat. He held my breasts, which weren’t too scary to me as they were to him, and my thighs, already wet and slick. He shuddered as he touched me. He trembled next to me. When I didn’t think he could take too much of my skin and my tattoos that were song lyrics he knew too
well, I bent down in front of him and took the lead.

The smell of him was thick, heady. Better than vanilla and butter cream on my tongue. Better than Brad Pitt or Edward Norton; the testosterone shots changed his body composition and made him into Noah and not just masculine. I brushes my hand along his thighs, spreading him and revelling in his body as he grew closer to his climax.

“On the bed,” he whimpered. “I can’t stand like this.”

So we moved, and I spread his legs so I could see his clit. He was longer than me and both hard and soft to the touch. The words clit and cock blended in my mind; Noah’s click became what I needed. I ran my fingers along him, inside of him, and tasted him with the flat of my tongue.

“I want to fuck you,” he said. He writhed beneath me.

“I want you to,” I said, breathy. “I am consenting fully.”

He laughed like music, like something I needed to hear. He kissed me as he rolled me over. I opened up to let him explore. He braced our sexes together, grinding into me, entering me in a new way. His thumb and tongue found my folds, separated them, and brought me closer—harder—faster—than before.

When I came, I heard and smelled and tasted everything at once. I felt everything at once. Everything—anything—as long as it was with him. His orgasm turned his voice into the grainy whisper that I’d seen without seeing his true face. That I’d know in the dark and love in the dark, no matter what.

5.

Three months later, Noah was in my bed again, the incisions from his surgery hidden behind bandages. I helped him up to the bathroom every few hours and helped him with the drains. I made him soup, put on TV shows for him, and made sure he wasn’t alone.

He surprised me by not wanting to watch *Fight Club*. The strange time in his life was over—or maybe, it was only beginning.

“Come sit with me?” he asked on day three. The pills were wearing off. He was more alert and less in pain. I sat on the edge of his bed and he pulled me closer, towards his hip and his now flat (but still swollen) chest.

“Are you in pain?”

“No. But I wanted to show you something.” He opened his phone and went to an old album labeled ‘before 2000.’ Inside were a dozen pictures of a family at a table, a family at an amusement park, and a bunch of kids graduating from elementary school and performing plays.

Little Noah. Noah before he was Noah. He started to tell me all the stories from his youth, the way vanilla cake smelled when his mother made them, and the many, many birthday parties that his family seemed to have at McDonalds.

“Do you want me to make you cake? Like you made for me?”

“No. I want you to be naked again.”

So I took off my clothing and got into...
bed with him. He was only in bandages, his body now his own. His body now a home. He told me about his life, his hands on my hip, then breast, then my sex again and again.

And I was home.

6.

It’s all the same story. Proust bites into a madeleine cookie and spends over a million words talking about his childhood as it rushes back to him like a film reel. Tyler Durden and the narrator become one person during a strange time in their lives. I meet Noah in the dark and we fight and fuck and fall in love over cake. We stay in bed together, in one another’s arms, always in search of lost time.

Always in search of something not wasted, only shared, from here on in.
Interior Landscape
Angie Quick


Hangover
I. Introduction

Recent popular scholarship has shown a particular interest in the comic book industry: rhetoric and semiotics scholars such as Janice Edwards and Carol Winkler have found it a rich area of study for visual ideographs, and scholars such as Nicki D. Philips and Staci Strobl have analysed its crime-telling tactics. However, debates by comics scholars like Albert Fu and Miriam Kent about the industry’s transformative efforts to incorporate diversity, particularly in the superhero genre, have become more common. Indie comics have always included diversity; indeed, some of the industry’s most celebrated indie works, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Sartrapi’s *Persepolis*, spotlighted minorities. However, the process of diversifying the superhero has become a formulaic hangover, which often starts out as a daring approach to a new issue but manifests as a recycling of old concepts that rely on clichés. This return of leftovers from a previous time is the comics industry’s hangover, and it is most clearly illustrated in the industry’s approach to diversification.

At this point, it is important to address the term “canon” with respect to the superhero genre, particularly insofar as the term has become a source of debate in current discussions on changes in superhero storylines. Normally, canon refers to the “official” story in a comic universe, and what is and is not canon is fiercely debated amongst fans. For starters, original characters are always considered canon, which provides a possible explanation for some fans’ aversions to these characters being killed off. However, as Albert S. Fu points out, “in comic books, ‘history’ is constantly being unwritten” (274). For example: “retcons,” which are stories created to facilitate dramatic plot shifts that are often presented as part of a “what if” scenario, are a fixture of the comics world. In relation to canon, retcons sometimes become so popular and enduring that they are eventually accepted as canon in their own right. They are often widely used to redraw lines, undo plot points, and, above all, offer different interpretations (Fu 274). In this respect, when considering the “official” characters of comic book superheroes, the comic term “legacy” (recently discussed by G. Willow Wilson) may be a suitable term (Cf. “So about that Whole Thing”).

Discussions about diversity in the superhero world have become louder over time, and
reached a fever pitch recently after Marvel’s vice president of sales, David Gabriel, singled out diversity and female characters as the reason for the company’s loss of sales (Shepherd n. p.). In this piece, I use Wilson’s term “legacy character” together with observations from a lengthy Tumblr post in which she responded to Gabriel’s comments and addressed some of the methods employed by the comics industry’s approach to diversity. In her post, she stressed the importance of “authenticity,” as opposed to “diversity,” when creating new characters that assume the superhero mantle, since authenticity suggests more focus on characters’ cultural makeup rather than token nods. Her post also critiqued the trope of killing off legacy characters as a flawed move because “it sets the character up for failure” (“So about that Whole Thing” n. p.). Wilson’s comments were in response to Gabriel’s statement that initiatives to include diversity in the superhero genre affected the industry’s sales negatively—specifically, Gabriel’s statement that “[w]hat we heard is that people didn’t want any more diversity ... I don’t know that that’s really true, but that’s what we saw in sales ... Any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their noses up” (Cain n. p.). Wilson’s response about setting up diverse characters for failure was no doubt inspired by fans’ backlash to legacy characters, such as Spiderman’s canonically white Peter Parker, who have been killed off to facilitate replacements, such as Miles Morales, an Afro-Hispanic teenager. It is worth noting that the series that Wilson is best known for writing is the rebooted Ms. Marvel, which handled the legacy character’s role with delicacy. The new Ms. Marvel is the Pakistani-American self-described “Jersey Girl” Kamala Khan. Written by Wilson, who has converted to Islam, and co-created by a Pakistani-American, Sana Amanat, Ms. Marvel is currently one of Marvel’s top-selling superheroes. Notably, Carol Danvers, the first and only Ms. Marvel before Kamala, does not die when she passes on the mantle of Ms. Marvel to Kamala. The gesture is not only uplifting but also ceremonial, with Captain America present while Hindi music plays in the background (Wilson, “Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal”). Passing on the Ms. Marvel mantle is presented as the opposite of tragic insofar as it did not use a convenient death, but rather an upgrade, to propel the transition: Danvers takes on the role of Captain Marvel and moves on to star in a series very much like her previous one.

The trend towards including diverse characters in the superhero genre is a welcome change to the superhero archetype of the traditionally white, hyper-masculine, cisgender, male. However, the mad rush to create intersectional characters points to a troubling series of hangovers. For starters, many of these “diverse” characters have not been developed by diverse creative teams. There has not been a concerted effort in the comics industry to include greater diversity at the creative level by hiring more writers who are representative of the demographics included in current comic storylines, and so
many of the most controversial intersectional characters have been written by white cisgender males. Take, for instance, the latest Ironman reboot, which includes the African-American teenager Riri Williams, a gifted fifteen-year-old MIT student. Created by veteran comics writer Brian Michael Bendis, Williams was first introduced with a controversial cover that fans argued sexualised the fifteen-year-old character (Carissimo n. p.). Similarly, her new name, Ironheart, rankled others for its connection to a previous Japanese porn-parody of Ironman (Pulliam-Moore n. p.). However, most devastatingly, Riri Williams took on the mantle of Ironman after its canonised character, Tony Stark, was killed off—a move that was also heavily criticised by fans. Considering Gabriel’s remarks about diverse characters negatively affecting sales, it is possible that the new Ironman series’ sales were affected by fans reactions to Stark’s death. In this respect, the success of the new Ms. Marvel series prompts the question: is it possible that Ironman could have benefitted from not killing off Tony Stark?

Riri Williams’s debut has unfortunately—and unforgivably—been subject to racist and sexist backlash. Even fans who were eager to have a high-profile African-American female superhero expressed dismay that her creative team was all-white (Gaudette n. p.). As previously stated, many comic book creators are white, cisgender, heterosexual males and, while that should not and does not bar anyone from creating diverse characters, the industry’s executives have yet to acknowledge that creative teams with diverse representations have all created distinct characters that were well received by readers. The best example of this is the aforementioned new Ms. Marvel. Wilson herself has commented on the lack of diversity amongst comic creators (Gilly 9) and, in her Tumblr post, she may have stumbled onto the best remedy for moving out of the comics industry’s hungover approach to writing diverse characters. Comics readerships are growing more heterogeneous, and indie comics and webcomics are finding increasing success, so mainstream comics can no longer address the issue of diversity with soft passes if they intend to remain relevant in the coming years. At this stage, incorporating diversity—specifically by creating believable and complex characters—is a necessary means by which to attract and maintain readership, especially as prominent writers like Margaret Atwood and Ta-Nehisi Coates venture into comics and possibly bring their fan bases with them. With respect to Williams’ storyline, Bendis reinforces negative stereotypes associated with African-American communities by killing off her stepfather in a drive-by shooting and making her biological father conspicuously absent from her life—all without addressing how these absences shaped her identity. It is important to ask whether an African-American writer would have felt similarly compelled to write off two fathers in a character’s debut issue. This question is entwined with the need to question how authentic a character like Riri Williams is.

The creative team for Miles Morales (mentioned above as the character who has taken on the mantle of Spiderman following Peter Parker’s death) included Marvel’s editor-in-chief
Axel Alonso, who has mixed Mexican and English heritage. However, it is worth noting that Bendis also wrote Miles Morales’ character, whom he used as a mouthpiece for his views on race relations. In one notable scene, the biracial Morales complains about being pegged as “The Black Spiderman” and sulks about his race defining him. Again, this raises the question: How authentic is this character to the experiences and perspectives of Afro-Hispanic people? Would it even occur to a minority writer to address biracialism by having a character sulk at the mention of being the first “Black Spiderman”? What is the point of introducing diverse characters who do not want their identities to be part of what defines them? In the absence of this recognition of the importance of identity, how are these characters engaging with what makes them diverse? Racialised people do not confront their races just once by paying lip service to their ethnic constructions and then ignoring them for the rest of their lives; rather, their ethnic makeup comes with cultural aspects, such as family dynamics, traditions, and social mores. Moreover, they are shaped by a sense of DuBoisian double-consciousness: an awareness of how they stand out from the majority white societies in which they live. When shaping identity for a racialised character, writers must avoid tokenising and instead must work to detail the ongoing encounters and negotiations that occur within the majority societies in which their characters live. In the debut issue of “Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal,” Kamala Khan struggles with her identity as the new Ms. Marvel who has no role models apart from her blonde predecessor, Carol Danvers. The issue is so pressing to her that, in her first few transformations, she becomes a blonde woman with white skin. It is not until she negotiates a third space (to use Homi K. Bhabha’s term from The Location of Culture) as an immigrant, Pakistani-American, Muslim superhero that she is able to come into her own, lose the blonde hair, and transform to her dark hair and skin again. In this sense, Kamala’s identity crisis is acknowledged, real, and resolved with a happy ending; it functions as a coming-of-age story that might resonate simultaneously with teenagers in a broad sense and minorities more specifically. Fans were happy with the outcome, and Kamala was praised as a success story. Furthermore, her debut in October, 2014, landed Marvel Comics with the #1 comic bestseller that month (“Top 100 Comics and Graphic Novels” n. p.).

All of this raises the question of whether it is necessary to introduce diverse characters into already-established comic book titles. Arguably, Kamala Khan is a convincing character who is fundamentally different from her predecessor and stands on her own. The reader is privy to her relationship with her loving but overbearing Pakistani family, her participation in cultural events like Mehendis (a South Asian pre-wedding ceremony), and her religion. As a result, she demonstrates authenticity through interactions with her community. But it is also worth noting that the character of Kamala Khan could have sustained the storyline of an entirely new superhero rather than continuing the storyline of Ms. Marvel. With this in mind, a possible way out of the murky haze of approaching diversity in comics is
through the creation of new superheroes rather than the shoe-horning of new alter egos into older, well-established superhero titles. There is no question that existing titles carry significantly more popularity and influence than new, unknown characters. However, there are ways to establish new characters in a mold that gives them star power and room to grow authentically—or, at the very least, represent diversity. Marvel has already done so with two Muslim X-Men characters: Sooraya Qadir as Dust in *New X-Men*, and Monet St. Croix, also known as M.

Dust is a highly orientalised character who lacks authenticity to an extreme. Her niqab seems to be the sum of all her parts, and her superpowers involve her ability to transform into lethal sand particles that flay her opponents to death. In Dust’s debut scene, she is unconscious and at the mercy of Wolverine, who thus functions as her White Saviour. Plot and character elements such as these are simply negative reinforcements of stereotypes about Muslims. Dust was originally created by Grant Morrison and Ethan van Scriver, who wrote her debut in “New X-Men #133.” She was later written by Christina Weir and Nunzio DeFelippis. Even though the character is ostensibly a full-practicing Muslim, there has never been a Muslim present in any creative team that has produced her. Thus, Dust’s Afghan culture has not been spotlighted in storylines that feature her, and her niqab merely adds an exotic and sensational visual element to her, rather than engaging in any true way with Islam and Muslims.

Monet St. Croix is more secular in her appearance, and her Muslim identity has been written with sensitivity after her “coming out” as a Muslim in “X-Men #23: The Burning World.” In this issue, which was written by Wilson, Monet is depicted as a “lapsed” Muslim who expresses her penchant for alcohol—which is forbidden in Islam. In a moment of crisis, Monet finds her faith renewed and recites an Islamic prayer to help herself find the courage to climb out of rubble that buried her (Wilson, “The Burning World”). Her renewal of faith and her revelation that she is a Muslim is told to the reader through a childhood memory of her parents squabbling over religion. In the memory, her caftan-clad Algerian mother teaches her an essential Islamic prayer, the *Surah Fatiha*, while her French father interrupts to discuss his disdain for religion (Wilson, “The Burning World”). This is a clear example of how diversity can be constructed in a character through their individualized development and reflection, as opposed to stereotypical representations that pay only lip service to complex identities. Monet’s childhood memory allows the issue to explore her biracialism by illustrating how her parents, who come from two very different cultures, quibble about religion. Her identity is not addressed through her own questions about whether and to what extent race defines her vis-à-vis white society, but rather is engaged as an inevitable part of her identity and family history. It is also important to note the subtlety and detail that Wilson uses to communicate Monet’s biracialism; indeed, it serves in stark contrast to Morales’ acknowledgement of his biracialism when he hears himself referred to as “[t]he first Black
Spiderman” on TV and complains about the distinction. Morales’ conversation and ensuing scenes are token because they make no effort to meaningfully engage how and why biracialism is relevant (or, per Morales’ view, irrelevant) to his identity. The mere fact that he has questioned its significance and not engaged the reader into his experiences, memories, and cultural milieu contributes to his character’s lack of depth. From this, it is clear that Morales is there to look like a diverse inclusion in the Spiderman world without really exploring what diversity looks like for characters. In this sense, when diversity holds no meaning for a character’s construction, perhaps Spiderman would have been better off staying as white Peter Parker.

A common method of white, cisgender, heterosexual male writers’ diversification approaches has been to confront racial conflict head-on as opposed to in nuanced and subtle ways, like Wilson does through Kamala Khan’s and Monet St. Croix’s stories. Bendis’ use of racial conflict and “othering” with Morales’s forced declaration that he wanted to be “The Spiderman” as opposed to “The First Black Spiderman” is an example of this approach. However, writers have featured racial conflict and “othering” in ways that have been more convincing, despite suffering from their own unique pitfalls. Geoff Johns, a writer for DC comics (now DC’s Chief Operating Officer), was the writer for the Muslim Green Lantern, Simon Baz. Johns’ writing shows shortcomings related to his knowledge of both Islam and Lebanese culture (Baz is Lebanese-American). For example: one of the first scenes in Baz’s story features mosque-attendees wiping off a sign on their defiled mosque that read “You idol worship” (Johns “The Green Lantern”). Islam is an Abrahamic faith that adheres to a strict interpretation of monotheism, much like Judaism, and eschews pictures and idols in their holy places of worship. In addition, an official interrogating Baz assumes his name is common in Lebanon, even though it is neither an Arabic nor Muslim name. However, despite these shortcomings and Baz’s generally offensive characterization (e.g., Simon is a low-level car thief who has the unfortunate luck of unknowingly stealing a van that contains a bomb), Johns creates a story that criticises Muslim-hate and illustrates the problems Muslims—particularly Muslim men—face in the U.S. in a post-9/11 climate. His story highlights the concerted efforts of the state to surveil Muslims, the victimisation of Muslims through pre-emptive security measures, and the torture that Muslims are vulnerable to in off-shore penal colonies. It also showcases the systematic forms of discrimination Muslims face. These aspects of Johns’ story suggest that his effort is, overall, well-intentioned. While not as emotive as Wilson’s work with Ms. Marvel, Johns paints a sympathetic portrait of an outsider who is bullied primarily for his cultural and religious background, which is evident in early scenes of him defending his hijabi sister from being attacked. Baz is misunderstood from the start by law enforcement officials as well as his own colleagues in the Justice League. After he is chased and interrogated for being a suspected terrorist, he is anointed with Green Lantern powers only to find
he must deal with both law enforcement hunting him and a suspicious Justice League fighting him. This effectively communicates the complexity of American identity and the othering that minority groups have faced at times in U.S. history. While the emphasis is on American identity as opposed to Muslim identity, and Baz is relegated to the position of “alternative” Green Lantern while the other Green Lanterns are suspended in an intergalactic prison, the story offers a powerful tale of an outsider. It illustrates the double-standard required of a member of a hated group in society who must overcompensate to prove his or her loyalty. In this instance, the use of a Muslim character serves to do more than just “exotify” a character or comic world for shock value, as is the case with Dust in the X-Men universe. Unlike some of Bendis’ plot choices, Johns’ piece engages with race and religion to communicate a sense of outrage over the character’s treatment by society. Such an engagement is exemplary of an original approach to superhero diversification because it takes up issues facing a racialised character’s community in ways that are relatable to all readers.

In what follows, I interview comics researcher and writer Ryan Clement on current diversity trends in the comics industry. Clement weighs in on new superheroes like Riri Williams, the comic book canon, and Wilson’s Tumblr post addressing diversity in the comics industry.

**II. Interview with Ryan Clement***

Safiyya Hosein (SH): Brian Michael Bendis is a veteran of comics writing and is known for writing popular characters. This article discusses diversified superheroes like his character Miles Morales (Spiderman) and Riri Williams (Ironheart). What are your thoughts on these characters? And what are your thoughts specifically on killing off legacy characters like Peter Parker and Tony Stark?

Ryan Clement (RC): Unfortunately, I have not yet had a chance to read Bendis’ *Ironman* or *Spiderman*, so I can’t really comment on his personal skills as a writer. That said, I do know that Marvel has been trying to diversify its ranks as of late with a degree of mixed results. David Gabriel, Marvel’s VP of sales, recently took a lot of heat for blaming Marvel’s ongoing sales slump on the diversity approach, although some would argue he was simply exasperated that Marvel’s efforts to be more diverse weren’t as rewarding [as expected]. I would argue there are many contributing factors to this, such as: too many titles, higher costs, an over-saturation of “event” comics and spin-off titles, and stronger competition, etc., that have contributed to Marvel’s decline. Marvel did get a lot of good press for its recent foray into diversity. For example, the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, was well-received critically. That said, Khan didn’t really replace Carol Danvers—Danvers in fact got a promotion of sorts to Captain Marvel—so a long-time reader of *Ms. Marvel* was less likely to be insulted by the replacement of their beloved character. Furthermore, while Khan borrowed the Ms. Marvel title, her powers and character were distinct...
from Danvers, and she was much stronger as an original character. Riri Williams has basically the same powers and abilities as Ironman, although she’s only fifteen, while her comic is still titled Ironman—which seems almost pejorative towards the woman in the suit—despite her going by the name Ironheart. To make matters worse, Tony Stark—spoiler alert—is killed at the end of “Civil War II” soon after Williams’ debut, meaning that Williams is, for better or worse (really worse), positioned as his replacement. That means that Williams is not only up against the skepticism about another token minority character inserted into a beloved franchise, but her emergence precipitates the death of what is now arguably Marvel’s most popular character. That other most popular Marvel character—whose face was associated with the logo until they replaced it with Ironman—is, of course, Spiderman. There have been other Spidermans over the years, but Peter Parker is still the original and most well-known. Spiderman after all was a ground-breaking comic in the 1960s that really put Marvel on the map, and he’s been such a popular character for so long. He was also the first successful teenage superhero who wasn’t someone’s sidekick, and the obvious forerunner for characters like Kamala Khan. The problem though is that too many characters running around at the same time gets confusing for readers who haven’t been following along and then you end up with titles competing with each other. Like with Stark and Williams, killing off Parker to allow for Morales can make for dramatic storytelling, but it’s very short-sighted. Associating the death of a beloved character with the seemingly forced arrival of a diverse character sets that character up for failure. While shocking fans can certainly sell comics in the short term, in the long term it’s liable to turn them off the franchise for good. It makes me think Marvel’s recent woes have more to do with making terrible decisions with their characters than with comics readers being opposed to diversity. Marvel has a long history of success with diverse characters in the past—Black Panther and Luke Cage spring to mind—but it does a much better job with them when the characters are original, well-written by someone who understands the culture in question, and are given the chance to succeed on their own and not at the expense of a decades-long icon. Unfortunately, Marvel seems more concerned with pulling the rug out from under readers than with telling compelling stories, which suggests the House of Ideas may have in fact run out of them.

SH: There is a debate about canon in the superhero world. One argument is that canon isn’t fixed but rather fluid, due in large part to the use of retconning. Do you follow any suggestions or guidelines that you think would be helpful for readers and analysts when approaching superheroes and canon?

RC: “Canon” is always a tricky question and, as someone who’s doing a Ph.D. in English literature, I’m always very hesitant to throw a word like “canon” around. There’s really two uses of the word—one meaning all the major works in a genre and the other meaning whereby stories
are a part of the larger shared universe. In English lit of course, “canon”—in the first sense—used to be all the rage, until it became apparent that certain texts which were being recognized as canon—i.e., great masterpieces that everyone fancies becoming acquainted with—were being written only by certain groups of people to the exclusion of others. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t read Shakespeare, Milton, and Dickens, but we need to recognise that some voices have an easier shot at getting heard than others.

When we’re talking comics—or more specifically superhero comics—certainly there are key works in the genre which I think anyone interested in the genre should read, particularly ones that represented pivotal shifts in how comics were made. I’m a believer in a fluid canon rather than a fixed one because you must allow room for a genre to evolve over time—gaining new entries as new revolutions take place, losing obsolete ones as they become irrelevant. In terms of the second sense of the word, the shared universe canon, comics has had a long field day with this over the past few decades. But I worry that over-indulgence has worn away the novelty of the shared universe and has in some cases handicapped stories from being strong on their own. If Batman’s spending all his time with the Justice League, for example, what the hell’s happening in Gotham, the city he swore to protect? Don’t get me wrong, shared universes can be a beautiful thing, but they really work best when used sparingly and not in the face of logic. In terms of tips for readers or analysts approaching this second meaning of “canon,” I would suggest focusing on individual characters and their arcs before trying to unravel the myriad plot twists of major crossover events.

SH: Finally, this article has dealt heavily with the approaches to diversification that the comics world has taken lately, particularly with the superhero genre, and has asserted that some of these approaches have been formulaic—resulting in a hangover-effect in the industry. G. Willow Wilson declared recently in a Tumblr post that emphasis should be placed on authenticity rather than diversity. What are your thoughts on developing an authentic approach to superhero characterisation rather than a diversified approach?

RC: Certainly, comics have a long history of taking formulaic approaches to diversity, and I wouldn’t say it’s only a recent issue, although it may have taken on more importance recently as more and more diverse cultures are reading the same comics, and comics are getting less isolated from other media forms. My question is: Must a diversified approach be inauthentic? Any decent writer knows that no matter what character you write—be they a white, cisgender female European; a brown, transgender male Peruvian; or a purple, multi-gender alien Skrull—must be true to the culture they come from, or your character becomes a caricature. I don’t buy for a minute that we, as readers, must have the same identification as our favourite characters to love them—people love Chewbacca for example, yet so few of us are wookies—but it can help to see characters like yourself in the comic panels. That said, there is no reason why a well-written character of any
race, gender, religion, etc., shouldn’t be able to find an audience. I think the big issue right now is market saturation. There are so many superhero comics right now that it becomes difficult to do anything new, particularly if your characters are tied up in a decades-long shared universe that has already seen and moved past infinitely more crises than you can count. In fact, I often find the most compelling comics writing comes from writers who can flourish in their own universes without worrying about what external crisis is about to steamroll over their main plotline. Saga, while not a superhero comic, is still one of the hottest comics out there. It features a diverse cast (technically, they’re all aliens) but they physically resemble diverse peoples here on Earth—and a complex universe. But everything in the universe serves the main thread of one storyline told through one title. The superhero genre may feel overdone, but it’s been popular for so long for a reason. Who doesn’t fantasise about how their life would change if they suddenly had amazing powers? And there is still a lot of room left to explore. “Diversity” characters can and do work, but only when they’re given the same respect as any other characters. Instead of executives deciding that we need another minority character here attached to this brand, we need writers who know how to write, and artists who know how to draw, to create the compelling characters that tell stories we want to read.

*Questions and responses have been edited for clarity and concision.

III. Conclusion

While attempts to diversify pivotal characters in the superhero world are a step in the right direction in terms of incorporating more inclusivity, without sincerity the good intentions behind these attempts are ostensibly wasted. Ryan Clement’s suggestion that the comics industry’s push for diversity amongst superheroes is possibly a result of recent superhero movies attracting a wider demographic is a practical insight. His suggestion that any well-written character can universally appeal to audiences is an effective answer to addressing authenticity. The best approach moving forward for the comics industry should be to treat diversity with greater care than is currently involved in the production of these new narratives. By hiring more diverse contributors to their teams and recognising diversity as something that is central to peoples’ experiences, rather than an exotic or token sentiment that can be marketable, perhaps the comics industry can finally move away from its superhero hangovers and create characters that resonate with fans.

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Modern Supr Heroes

Hinson Calabrese

Hangover
The Constant Onslaught of Zillion Dollar Marvel Movies, DC Reboots, the only thing that remains true about these stories is that they still make ungodly money for a few people who’ve figured out how to manipulate our dreams!

...uhh Hinson?

Yeah?

You smoke a lot.

...is the story of Capitalism!

How do you not??

We’re standing on the cusp of environmental and nuclear cataclysms and all this culture demands is an endlessly churning farago of masked mutants and space aliens—all a fantasy that impossible heroes will descend from space or from the billionaire class to save humanity and tighten its petrified death-grip on the twentieth century and all of it’s faked promises. Punching one bad guy in the face after another... so... uhm... alright, I figured it out.
you're boring.
The novels of American experimental novelist Kathy Acker make strategic use of plagiaristic techniques that function as simulacra, which serve to undermine the original Platonic Ideas upon which they are based and in doing so create a new aesthetic existence. In Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (1968), he examines the role of the simulacra in overturning Platonism by denying the primacy of “original over copy, of model over image” (66). Deleuze’s concept is central to interpreting the work of Acker as a piece of literature that subverts phallocentric writing traditions in order to overcome patriarchal hangovers. I begin by providing an explanation of this paper’s theoretical groundwork, which is based on several of Deleuze’s writings on the concept of simulacrum. After explaining the theory and the importance it holds in relation to Acker’s work, I will then attempt to situate and connect her writing within a tradition of art and literature that was emerging during the 1960s and 1970s. By using a Deleuzian framework to discuss the concept of the simulacrum in relation to Acker’s novels *Don Quixote* (1986) and *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), I argue that we can understand the way in which she simultaneously exposes how the simulacrum functions while also making use of the simulacrum to subvert phallocentric language by “appropriating male texts ... and trying to find [her] voice as a woman” (Friedman 13). Acker admits in an interview with Ellen G. Friedman that act of rewriting *Don Quixote* (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes was an attempt to copy out the text with the explicit idea of seeing “what pure plagiarism would look like” (13). Instead of the result being a copy of the original novel, however, Acker’s *Don Quixote* “breaks up the homogeneity of culture, exposing the numerous and varied discourses that at any moment influence and shape each of us” (Pitchford 59). In doing so, the novel becomes Deleuze’s simulacrum. Thus, Acker’s novel is “an image without resemblance” rather than a simple copy, what we could call “an image endowed with resemblance”

1 Academics describe her writing differently, with Nicola Pitchford terming her writing process pastische, which “builds her novels out of scraps from various literary and popular traditions” (59).
(Deleuze 357). Through this image, Acker creates a new aesthetic existence whereby becoming becomes possible. Opening up the possibility for becoming means taking a line of flight through the process of writing in order to become a minority. The one and only function of writing is to deterritorialize through lines of flight to expose “all the minority-becomings of the world” (50). This is where the potential exists for Anglo-American literature to serve as the “hair of the dog,” and alleviate the patriarchal hangover that is predominant in the Western canon.

In the 1970s, feminism was already a social production for Acker. In the interview with Friedman cited above, she discusses her disinterest in the work of most feminist writers, claiming they are too interested in social realism. Acker complains, “it's too much, ‘I used to be in a bad nuclear marriage and now I'm a happy lesbian.’ It’s diary stuff and the diary doesn’t go anywhere, and there’s not enough work with language” (19). Although feminists had started to praise Acker’s work by the late 1980s, she claims, “I was damned by them,” and she believes they hated her (22). She is openly critical of feminists like Andrea Dworkin in her novels, seeming to dislike the radical feminist approach they take, but at the same time admiring their willingness to take a stand for feminism. Carol Siegel affirms in “The Madness Outside Gender: Travels with Don Quixote and Saint Foucault” that “Acker was at least as avant-garde in her feminism as she was in her writing style” (34). She traces the trajectory of the feminism of the 1970s, when Acker emerged in the literary scene, as presenting “various versions of feminism that [reinscribed] binary difference and [supported] conservative attempts to regulate sexuality” (34). With this in mind, Stiegler explains that “a crucial determinant of how one understands feminist practice has become whether or not one finds bourgeois domesticity bearable” (34). This form of political feminism was dependent upon “bourgeois assimilation,” another form of patriarchal control that continues to hang over women, and which Acker would not have been able to tolerate (34). Her writing did not set out to become ideological, but nevertheless opened up the idea of finding one’s voice as a woman by appropriating and fundamentally changing male language. A criticism often applied to Acker is that she is not ideological enough, but that is not the way her art works. She sets out in a certain direction in her writing and ends up taking numerous lines of flight before she is finished, then completes her work by framing it within a certain context (through the use of the epigraph, reorganization of the content, etc.) (13).

In order to interpret Acker’s avant-garde literature through a Deleuzian lens, we can first turn to the dialogue between Deleuze and Claire Parnet, “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” from Dialogues II (1977). In this dialogue, Deleuze and Parnet discuss the ability of Anglo-American literature (in comparison to French literature) to “[discover] worlds through a long, broken flight” (36). They characterize the work of writers such as Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe, D. H. Lawrence, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, and
Jack Kerouac as “departure, becoming, passage, leap, daemon, relationship with the outside” (36). Acker can be situated in this group of writers because of her ability to deterritorialize the hegemonic patriarchy through her writing and to create a fissure where becoming can become possible. Although Deleuze and Parnet do not explicitly mention the concept of the simulacrum in their discussion of literature, in Deleuze’s earlier work he connects the same concepts—becoming, daemon, and relationships with the outside or other—to the overturning of Platonism through simulacra. In “The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy,” from the Appendix of *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Deleuze emphasizes the difference between the simulacrum and the copy with the example of the catechism. Man was created in the image and resemblance of God, but through sin man has lost the resemblance but keeps the image of God, thus “we have become simulacra” (257). The sacrifice of man’s moral existence in exchange for aesthetic existence reinforces the “demonic character” of the simulacrum (258). This demonic characterization provides a direct connection to the lines of flight which Deleuze and Parnet see in Anglo-American literature revealing the possibility for a piece of literature to be a simulacrum. The discussion on Anglo-American writing involves lines of flight which are characterized not as imaginary, but real; the writer is “forced to follow, because in reality writing involves us there, draws us in there” (43). Following the lines of flight through Acker’s writing makes this reality a becoming, “nothing to do with becoming a writer,” but rather becoming a minority (43). Deleuze and Parnet define the concept of woman-becoming as a line of flight that is created not by the gender of the writer but by the way they write in order to embrace the “minority-becoming of her writing,” thus one cannot “force themselves to write like women” (43). The becoming that is found in Acker’s writing denies the “powers that be” (44) the support they would seek through redundancy in the act, and instead engages in “life-experimentation” (47) through the act of writing where the aim is not to finish with the act of woman-becoming, but to move beyond minority-becoming until one is becoming-imperceptible.

Deleuze recognizes that the Platonic motivation is interested in “assuring the triumph of the copies over simulacra, of repressing simulacra, keeping them completely submerged, preventing them from climbing to the surface, and ‘insinuating themselves’ everywhere” (257). Deleuze continues by defining the simulacrum through its difference in relation to the copy of the Idea. Rather than being “an infinitely degraded icon,” or a copy of a copy of a copy, the simulacrum is a false pretender, a subversion which maintains the outward appearance of a copy, but in fact is dissimilar from both the copy and any original Platonic Idea; to overthrow Platonism, Deleuze believes we must deny the primacy of “original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections” (66). The simulacrum exists through the action of challenging and overturning “the very idea of a model or privileged position” (69), and in this act of overturning any resemblance between the original and the copy is destroyed. It is in the act of overthrowing the privileged position through

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the simulacrum that we can look for real experience, rather than possible experience, and create a “lived reality of a sub-representative domain” (69). Rather than the simulacra being something that is inferior, or seen as coming after an original, Acker’s work as simulacra subverts the privileged position of male writers like de Cervantes, and works to overthrow phallocentric language and open a space for becoming-woman. Thus, Acker’s work allows us to experience a simulacrum which subverts the privileged positions that dominated Western society in the 1970s and 80s.

In her interview with Friedman, Acker reveals that she sees herself as part of the same tradition of writers like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and the Black Mountain School of poets. Although most critics would now group Acker together with other postmodern women writers such as Angela Carter or Ann Quin, she sees her writing as part of a writing tradition dominated by male writers like those mentioned above. This group of writers make up a system of simulacrum that can “affirm divergence and decentring” (278). Her work is connected to these other writers in an “informal chaos” in which “no series enjoys a privilege over others, none possesses the identity of a model, none the resemblance of a copy” (278). Acker’s relationship to other women writers and artists is a complicated one because she dissociates herself from other feminists of the 1970s and 80s, but she still identifies herself as a feminist. Her initial problems with second wave feminism stemmed from the dislike they had for her work. Furthermore, both Don Quixote and Blood and Guts in High School contain open criticisms of feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, who Acker believes is too dualistic; in the same interview with Friedman, Acker also criticizes lesbian literary tropes (13). Her inspiration for what she describes as plagiarism actually originates in the work of photographic artist Sherrie Levine. Levine was part of the Pictures generation and became famous for her series of photos “After Walker Evans,” which have been described as the “feminist hijacking of patriarchal authority” (metmuseum.org). Levine describes her art with the following statement: “The world is filled to suffocating. Every word, every image, is leased and borrowed. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash” (“First Statement” n. p.). This description for Levine’s art is an uncanny depiction of the way Acker integrates numerous pieces of literature within her pastiche novels.

When we examine Acker’s Don Quixote in comparison to de Cervantes’ version, it would seem that Acker has simply copied the text in an effort to “see what pure plagiarism would look like” (Friedman 13), but by changing Don Quixote from a male to a female character Acker has made the text about “trying to find your voice as a woman” (Friedman 12). In creating a simulacra based on de Cervantes’ work, Neo-Platonists would say that she has created a false claimant which sits in second place, or in “simulacral fashion” (Deleuze 62) compared to the earlier novel. Following this line of thinking and ancient custom, the “false claimants must die” in order to prevent the usurpation of the position of power. The primary example Deleuze focuses on is Plato’s Sophist, who is the “false claimant par
excellence” (61); the ability of the Sophist to “lay claim to everything without any right” (61) can be called into question through the “glorification of simulacrum” (66). The original Don Quixote is unable to create the same ideas found in Acker’s version because she has the ability to write woman-becoming and deterritorialize the products of social production, while de Cervantes does not.

Acker creates a simulacrum through her use of language. Experimental language is the reason she was influenced so greatly by Kerouac, and she continued the tradition of experimental writing in her own work. In most of Acker’s writing she plagiarizes other texts, but we often do not notice because she is able to keep it “covered, hidden.” In her interview with Friedman she notes that her novel Empire of the Senseless (1988) is almost entirely made up of texts which she has plagiarized, noting that she has taken from authors like Jean Genet and William Gibson, as well as Freud and de Sade (16). Unlike Don Quixote, which she believes is deconstructive, Empire of the Senseless constructs “a myth to live by” in order to understand how you can “live free in a society that isn’t” (17). In Acker’s earlier novel, Blood and Guts in High School, she sees her character Janey as being much more cardboard than her later characters (like those in Empire of the Senseless). However, it is through Janey that Acker uses other texts to deconstruct patriarchal systems of control. She plagiarizes and creates a simulacrum out of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (1850), for example, by introducing the narrative through Janey’s book report, which she writes while imprisoned as a sex slave, and not in school as one would assume. Janey describes the plot of Hawthorne’s novel as being “about a wild woman. This woman challenged the society by fucking a guy who wasn’t her husband and having his kid. The society punished her by sending her to gaol, making her wear a red ‘A’ for adultery right on her tits, and excommunicating her” (Blood and Guts 66). Janey’s analysis of the novel is filled with profanity, transforming the Puritan world of the original novel into a simulacrum wherein it is possible for Hester Prynne to be “snake-insane” (66) with female desire. Within Acker’s work, it is the society that is “fucked-up,” not Hester, and she makes the important point that Hawthorne was able to freely criticize Puritan society because it was not his own. Therefore, his criticisms would not offend, but it is the society which “created the society Hawthorne lived in, the society that created the one we live in today” (67, 66), and thus his criticism is just as pertinent today as in 1850.

Deleuze believes that creating a new aesthetic involves the merger of “the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation” (Deleuze 68). This new aesthetic involves the “abandonment of representation” (69), which eventually becomes a chaos in which repetition occurs in order to centre and diverge. Acker’s ability to abandon representation and lead us into chaos can create a line of flight from the point of writing something as mundane as an Agatha Christie novel and turn it into a simulacrum by throwing in some sex, violence, and experimental language. With respect to her

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retelling of *Don Quixote*, she claims that she was not declaring: “I am a woman, a feminist, and I’m going to appropriate a male text” (Friedman 13). Instead, Acker notes that she saw it as a role in the theatre that she took on, allowing for the act of becoming to occur—in “the different, the dissimilar, the unequal” (Deleuze 128). Taking on this role she is not creating defective copies, she is making new “models themselves, terrifying models of the pseudos in which unfolds the power of the false” (Deleuze 128). The question that Deleuze poses about whether the simulacra possesses the power to subvert the concept of both the model and the copy can be answered through an examination of the simulacrum that Acker creates. Going further than the triumph of Plato’s Sophist, Acker rejects “the imprint of a transcendent Idea” (Deleuze 128), instead raising the possibility of the creation of new ideas.

*Don Quixote* begins with a change in identity of the protagonist through the process of an abortion. In Nicola Pitchford’s *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (2002), she points to Joe Moran’s interpretation of Acker’s work as texts in which “the self can be reinvented at the same time as it points to the existence of an innate, deep-seated identity” (66). Pitchford seems to disagree with Moran, and gestures to the essentialist viewpoint of postmodern otherness within Acker’s work. She argues that this is manifest in Acker’s “frequent representation of acutely painful bodily desires as absolutely fundamental to her characters’ social experience—and in her search for a language that can break free of existing codes to express those desires” (67). The “bodily desires” of women are expressed from the beginning of *Don Quixote* in the section titled “Don Quixote’s Abortion” (67). Pitchford interprets this section as Don Quixote losing control to the doctors and nurses performing the procedure, and in this loss of control she “marks the death of her identity” (84), but that does not seem to be entirely the case. Don Quixote does say, “when a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you’re lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to; finally, blessedly, you let go of your mind. Letting go of your mind is dying. She needed a new life. She had to be named” (9-10). This passage is the basis of Pitchford’s argument, but there are several important points about the abortion which make it an empowering act; prior to the abortion being performed and naming herself Catheter or Don Quixote, she has already taken on the identity of a knight in training, assuming her armour of “pale or puke green paper” (10) and setting her sights on adventures like seeking the Holy Grail. In the act of the abortion she actively rejects the role that her patriarchal society has set out for her and embraces the identity of a “female-male or a night-knight” (10). She compares herself to the other women waiting for abortions, who are “middle-aged and dumpy” (11) or young, innocent, and afraid of anyone finding out about their abortions. Don Quixote does not resemble the other women because to her “having an abortion is a method of becoming a knight” (11), leading to other benefits like receiving a name, having adventures, and saving the world. This is an active
rejection of bourgeois domesticity, and in this rejection she is subverting patriarchal control and the roles of women, like wife and mother, “as it is territorialized by her culture” (Siegel 33). The description of the abortion procedure is also an attack on feminist Andrea Dworkin’s “dualistic argument that men are responsible for all the evil in the world” (Friedman 13). This attacks Dworkin’s “dangerous” (13) idea that the evils of patriarchy stem from the act of sexual penetration by simulating sexual intercourse through the doctor’s insertion of the steel catheter. This is not a violent sexual act but a medical procedure that Don Quixote pays the doctor to perform, which she sees as leading to her freedom from the burden of motherhood and, thereby, to her knight-becoming. The steel catheter is the phallic object which frees her from the pregnancy, rather than impregnating her, and by naming herself Catheter, after the phallic object, she is embracing the becoming of “female-male or a night-knight” (Don Quixote 10).

Acker self-consciously exposes the ability of literature to create lines of flight which do not support the “powers that be” (44) through the power of art and writing. When Don Quixote is sick and needs help from her friends (the feminist, the Leftist, and the Liberal), they diagnose her condition as having “read too many books, instead of suffering like a normal child” (16). The Leftist tells her that literature is actually responsible for her abortion, and that she needs to “become normal and part of this community” (16). This attempt at reterritorializing her act of becoming a knight by telling Don Quixote to become normal and putting her to bed only causes her to wake up screaming, “I had the abortion because I refused normalcy which is the capitulation to social control” (17-18). Her refusal of normalcy can be read as a way “to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon” (Deleuze and Parnet 49) through flight. For Don Quixote, the production of the real means discovering how female desire works, asking, “How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love another person. By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound” (9). Pitchford identifies the problem at the origin of Don Quixote’s quest as being “conceived’ at the moment of abortion” (84). While this may be ironic wordplay from Pitchford’s, the idea is not actually impossible if you consider the act of abortion as a simulation of sexual intercourse that leads to the birth of her knightly quest.

For Acker, woman-becoming involves blurring the lines between male and female, and so opening up the possibility for women to become more than what society tells them is acceptable. Pitchford points out the unlikeliness of Don Quixote’s quest because of her gender, commenting that “women’s socially defined identity does not include the active expression of desire” (84), thus undermining “gender dualism” (84) throughout her quest for female desire. In “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” Deleuze and Parnet specifically address the role of the knight in English and American novels, characterizing knights as anti-heroes who are “absurd, strange, and disoriented [creatures] who...
wander about continually, deaf and blind” (74). The wandering knights “no longer know their name or destination” (74) and follow a zig-zag line, which becomes the point of deterritorialization. This deterritorialization places Acker’s work into the category of writing which rejects “conforming to a code of dominant utterance” (74), and instead becomes a becoming. Siegel makes note that Acker’s interest in transgressing gender norms is rooted in her “much reiterated interest in the 1960s New York art scene, this evocation of the iconography of male prostitution as captured in Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey’s Lonesome Cowboys (1969)—not to mention John Schlesinger’s Midnight Cowboy (1969)—immediately associates St Simeon with gender role transgression” (13-14). Thus, Simeon, described as Don Quixote’s cowboy sidekick and Don Quixote, as a knight, are both transgressing traditional notions of femininity and masculinity.

For Acker, the concept that women have “a history of overrepresentation in men’s texts” (Pitchford 89) means that rather than lacking space for her own writing-becoming, she undermines the male texts by rewriting them and destroys the pre-existing representations of women by confronting them directly and sardonically. In this way, Acker’s text serves as a theoretical guide for undermining patriarchal society, not as the only way in which this act can be achieved. Don Quixote describes herself to St Simeon as strong, valorous, sincere, slim and boyish, devious as hell, charming, cajoling, “the most marvelous fuck in the world,” devoted, and “totally callous just like Machiavelli” (26). She believes she is a “chameleon who has no goal except to change this world” (26), and she asks St Simeon (as well as the reader): “have you ever, in any book, read about a human being such as me? Has there ever in history, that is, in novels, been a human being such as me? You have to totally love me” (27).

We are told we should love Don Quixote because she is a new type of human, not just a new type of woman. By creating a woman who upholds characteristics which are typically attributed to men Acker is creating a line of flight in the narrative of women. We are being told we should love this new woman-becoming, and thus reject the old ideas of what a woman should be, as found in “Our Bible or The Storehouse of Language” (27).

Acker’s focus on history being the history found in novels and books is a reference to the importance that she places upon language and the role it plays in political life. She also says in her interview with Friedman that her fascination with Burroughs was tied to his interest in “how language is used and abused within a political context” (Friedman 14). In the section “HISTORY AND WOMEN,” Don Quixote reads a book on the history of women by Cid Hamete Benengeli, a fictional character from de Cervantes’ novel whose task is to chronicle the adventures of Don Quixote. In the Acker version of Don Quixote, Benengeli has been transformed from an author who chronicles the adventures of the male Don Quixote to an author who has written the “main tome” on the history of women. His history begins by stating: “Be assured ... that the true history of women is that
of degradation and suffering” (29), but “history shows us that no woman nor any other person has to endure anything: a woman has the power to choose to be a king and a tyrant” (29). This statement undermines the roles that have been laid out for women by opening up the door for a woman like Don Quixote to exist. As Acker continues the repetition of Don Quixote she incorporates more changes like this which help to abolish resemblance between the two novels, eventually reaching the point where “one can no longer point to the existence of an original and a copy” (Deleuze 69). This is where Deleuze says we must look for real experience and will eventually “find the lived reality of a sub-representative domain” (69).

The connection Acker makes between death and female desire becomes apparent in “HISTORY AND WOMEN” when she tells St Simeon, “just as death destroys pain and time memory, so magic does away with history” (30). History has become propaganda, and “it’s history’s opposite, death, which shows us that women are nothing and everything” (31). In Blood and Guts in High School, Janey characterizes the past in which Hawthorne sets his novel The Scarlet Letter as a lie (66). While sick with love, Don Quixote meets a handsome man in the brothel who tells her “as soon as a woman loves, she’s in danger” (33), subject to the rejection of love from men, physical and sexual violence, and pregnancy. The choice a woman is faced with, according to the handsome man, is to be dead or to die. She is faced with the choice of becoming normal or dying, but she cannot be normal because she cannot escape the desire for love and the “truth of [her] life which is [her] sexuality” (33). Similarly, in Blood and Guts in High School, Janey reinforces what we learn from the handsome man in Don Quixote when she affirms that “Hester was being a good dead girl” (67) by not having sex while waiting for her husband to show up. Hester exposes her “wildness or evil” to her Puritan society due to the need to fulfill her desire; it is this society’s conception of her which changes who she is, turning her into “a total freak” or “worse than a piece of garbage” (67). Don Quixote reinforces the emphasis on real experience: at the end of “The First Part of Don Quixote: The Beginning of Night,” Don Quixote announces her will, rejects writing and being right as illusions, and posits the only cure for her lovesickness to be “the mingling of our genitals” (37).

Though Don Quixote renounces the act of writing, she is engaged in the act of writing a will and at the end of the novel in the section “DON QUIXOTE’S DREAM,” the dead Don Quixote writes down and shares some important thoughts. On language she says, “Language presupposes community. Therefore without you, nothing I say has any meaning. Without love or language, I do not exist” (202). The problem with the use of language is the meaning that society inscribes upon it, but through the simulacra Acker is able to subvert the phallocentric use of language and open up a space for the language of women. In M. W. Smith’s Reading Simulacra (2001), he compares Acker’s use of language to the work of the Critical Art Ensemble, whose art is anti-institutional and works to “detrimentalize desire, identity, and the body by reappropriating and resigning them” (86). Smith’s analysis

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of simulacra groups Acker’s work together with various pieces of popular culture, such as Jean Baudrillard’s America, Oliver Stone’s Natural Born Killers, and the O. J. Simpson Trial, thereby situating her work within the postmodern milieu, but not specifically connecting her with other avant-garde women writers. The connection to experimental art is clear and has been well-established throughout Acker’s career, and this relationship is significant to the examination of how her novels work to create lines of flight. In Blood and Guts in High School Acker deterritorializes desire in this same way, and she self-consciously lets us know that this is her goal when Janey is contemplating Hawthorne and says, “There’s going to be a world where the imagination is created by joy not suffering, a man and a woman can love each other again they can kiss and fuck again (a woman’s going to come along and make this world for me even though I’m not alive anymore)” (100). Thus, by writing woman-becoming Acker is opening up space in the phallocentric tradition of writing for both women’s voices and desire. This new space allows women to say things like “Fucking’s the most wonderful thing in the world” (69) without being called crazy because “people have and can change the world” (69). Acker does the same type of thing with language in her writing when Don Quixote explains poetry to dogs, telling them: “Language is community. Dogs, I’m now inventing a community for you and me” (191). By inventing a new language in order to overcome the lack of understanding between dogs and humans, or women and men, Acker is creating a line of flight which takes “the world into the future” (Smith 86).

Acker takes advantage of the long-established connection between the simulacrum and repetition by incorporating repetition into her novels as a way to disrupt the status quo and create new lines of flight which will lead to new becomings. Deleuze establishes the link between the death instinct and repetition in Difference and Repetition when he cites Sigmund Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle. He makes the point that the disguises found in “dreams or symptoms” create a connection between repetition and the death instinct, which is an “integral genetic element” of repetition (Deleuze 16, 17). Like Deleuze’s simulacrum, this type of repetition can never be traced back to an originary “first term” because there is no point of bare repetition. Instead of tracing the repetition back to real childhood events to serve as the “ultimate disguised terms” (Deleuze 17) Freud has instead replaced the event with a fantasy “immersed in the death instinct” (17). This means that “symbols or simulacra are the letter of repetition itself” (17), and when we encounter a fantasy with repetition built into it we must look for the built-in difference which reaffirms the status of the simulacrum. Acker frequently uses repetition in her novels, and portrays a conscious awareness of the fact that simulacrum keep repeating when she titles one of the final sections “THE LAST ADVENTURE: UNTIL THIS BOOK WILL BEGIN AGAIN” (Don Quixote 175). This indicates that just as Acker has copied the text of Don Quixote, and in doing so created a simulacrum, she expects others to repeat the same process again and again. It is through the power of the imagination being used to create simulacra that human
beings are able to change society, just as we have been able to invent “cures for polio and syphilis by imagining” (Blood and Guts 69).

Early in Don Quixote, Acker includes a section of poems whose English translations seem to reaffirm the Deleuzian idea of the simulacrum. In “Poems from a City,” she writes, “By repeating the past, I’m molding and transforming it, an impossible act” (49), indicating the possibility of repetition of the aesthetic appearance, only containing a completely different substance. This repetition of the past is the repetition of real experience, and serves to reinforce the idea that you cannot repeat the same experience without the occurrence of a fundamental change. In the same set of poems, Don Quixote goes on to say, “The imagination is will” (49), which once again provides a connection between fantasy and reality. For Acker’s protagonist, the fantasy is real heterosexual love, or the ability to express female desire, thus the link in Acker’s writing between female desire and death. The female characters engage in repetition in order to find a way to express their desires, but the hurdles presented to them in the form of various anti-progressive men, politicians, and “friends” like feminists and leftists cause their desires to go unfulfilled.

The difficulty of actually molding and transforming something through the act of repetition is made apparent throughout Acker’s writing. While she denounces the education of a patriarchal society, Acker dreams of a re-education that begins with the physical body, “the place of shitting, eating, etc., to break through our opinions or false education” (166). In Acker’s email correspondence with McKenzie Wark, I’m Very Into You (2015), she explains how she feels about her complicated relationship with the feminine and the masculine saying,

I prefer disavowal of being man. Or of man. ‘Cause drag as perfection of the feminine makes me hate the feminine even more ... I don’t want that. But then ... sometimes ... I fetishize the masculine ... spreading legs and drinking beer and grunting...and sweating and being stupid and rubbing your crotch...it turns me on. Must be a sort of mirror...(Am I being clear?) I’ve got to get over my fears around the feminine ... oh all this shitty past ... the sexist society past. (Acker and Wark 113)

Acker’s responses establish the physicality involved with transgressing the gender norms of society, and the idea that we have reached a moment in history where we should have moved past the existence of a “sexist society” (Acker and Wark 113). However, we are still grappling with the consequences of this sexism, which can be described as a patriarchal hangover (113).

Those who teach the education of our patriarchal society are people like Roger Chillingworth, Hester’s husband in The Scarlet Letter, who is referred to as “a zombie and a ghoul” because he works to replace “living dangerous creations with dead ideas and teach these ideas as the history and meaning of the world” (68). Acker connects the dead idea of patriarchy to a physical sickness when she represents Don Quixote as lovesick, and when she describes the Reverend
as “spreading mockery and hatred and vomiting” during his interrogation of Hester (68). These symptoms are indicative of a physical sickness, much like a hangover. By overcoming patriarchy through the pleasures of the physical body, the link between language, desire, and woman-becoming is established through the physical realm. For re-education to occur we are told we must “act against our opinions,” which, rather than emphasizing a parallel structure, allows the language and ideas of women take lines of flight which can go anywhere; St Simeon tells this story of re-education to Don Quixote, and in doing so excessively makes use of repetition in order to drive home how many repetitions it takes to break through our “false education” (166) to create a simulacrum.

During the process of re-education we must discover what joy is, and in St Simeon’s story this is done through the pleasure received by sexual acts. Every question that the teacher (a re-educator, not an educator) asks is repeated three or four times, as is each answer and each sex act. The process of re-education begins like this:

Since the body is the first ground of knowledge, my teacher made me take off my clothes. A mouth touched and licked my ass. A finger stuck into my asshole. A dildo thrust into my asshole and a dildo thrust into my cunt. Both dildos squirted liquid into me which I saw was white. I was so over-the-top excited, I came. The main thing for me was my body’s uncontrolled reactions. (168)

After repeating this four times each reaction is analysed four times as well. Eventually the re-education process reaches the point where the teacher herself overcomes any restraint imposed upon her by society and says, “I’ll abandon my belief that I’m worth something in order to fuck!” (172). Here the point has been reached where repetition is no longer necessary to create the simulacrum, and the teacher has taken a line of flight away from the lesson of physical re-education in pursuit of her own radical female desire. The sexual acts that are performed as also a simulacrum of sex with a man, replacing penises with dildos which are able to squirt liquid. The loss of Laure’s virginity is also achieved with a dildo. While discussing what will happen we are told, “a small rod is the correct size of a rod” because “women know better,” indicating the authority women have over their own bodies (174). This idea emasculates the sexual desire of men, while making room for the desire of women. The removal of the need for a man in this re-education symbolizes the rewriting of men’s writing, which needs to occur to create simulacra and make room for woman-becoming and women’s writing.

Through the process of appropriating works of men’s writing and creating a simulacrum from them, Acker creates a new aesthetic existence in which woman-becoming is possible. Simulacra deny the primacy of an originary Idea
or an original copy and, in doing so, they empower the ideas which come into being through deterritorialization. The subversion of male writing through the act of rewriting texts serves as a stepping-stone that can allow a space to open up for women’s voices in literature to be recognized. The simulacrum holds primacy, not the original text, and by creating something that is a radically new idea women can change the world.

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The Word Hoard

n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

Translation: *Isis: A Play in Two Acts*
by Nawal El-Saadawi

Nina Youkhanna

Translator’s Note

“By repeating the past, I’m molding and transforming it, an impossible act.”
– Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote*, p. 49

If simulacrum is a cure for Anglo-American women writers’ patriarchal hangovers—as Jennifer Komorowski’s enlightening essay on Kathy Acker argues—then how would their Arab counterparts fare with such radical experimentation? This pressing question began a long search that finally led me to Nawal El-Saadawi’s play, *Isis*, which will be the fulcrum of comparison in my response to Komorowski’s article. Nawal El-Saadawi is a renowned and controversial Egyptian author and feminist who has written non-fiction, novels, and short stories that examine women’s place in Muslim society and critique patriarchal oppression in all its forms. El-Saadawi’s *Isis* (1986) is not only a re-evaluation of the mythical eponymous Egyptian goddess but also a re-writing of another play titled *Isis* (first published in 1955) by her male compatriot and fellow writer Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987). In the introduction to her play, El-Sadaawi argues that the goddess Isis has not be given her due as a woman who represented justice and truth but has been, instead, portrayed as the ideal faithful wife whose only mission was to resurrect her murdered husband, Osiris. She also critiques al-Hakim for naming his play Isis yet silencing his eponymous heroine when male characters engage in important philosophical discussions. El-Saadawi’s play, thus, serves as a simulacrum—as defined by Komorowski—in two ways. First, El-Saadawi, though claiming that she is merely rendering to us the “original” historical version of Isis, produces instead a “false pretender” (Komorowski 50) imbued with an unmistakable feminist message directed at the author’s oppressive, patriarchal society. Second, El-Saadawi subverts the privileged position of her fellow male writer by inverting his interpretation of the myth of Isis and creating “an image without resemblance” (Deleuze 357). Through this twofold simulacrum, El-Saadawi, like Aker, opens a fissure—a line of flight—through which becoming-woman becomes possible.

The play is, admittedly, imperfect in its chaotic structure and oversaturation of themes, which include critiques of monotheistic religions, political regimes, tyranny, corruption, and female circumcision. The story begins with the sun god Ra proclaiming his autocratic rule in heaven and on earth after defeating the goddess Nut. Ra is essentially modeled after Arab dictators who de-
mand absolute submissiveness of their subjects and punish any resistance with fire and fury. Set, who is Isis and Osiris’s brother, sides with Ra and requests the kingdom of earth as his prize. He must first get rid of his brother Osiris, the current king and husband of Isis, which he does easily and ruthlessly while also hoping to win Isis’s heart. Isis, dejected and distraught after her husband’s murder, resurrects Osiris and produces a son (Horus) with him only to see him killed again by Set, who cuts his body into pieces and scatters them all over Egypt. The play ends with Set being accused of murder in a public court. Horus exacts revenge by cutting off Set’s testicles. Isis, because she is a merciful goddess, decides that that is punishment enough and lets Set live.

The two excerpts I have translated below speak, mainly, to the simulacral nature of the play. The first section—from Act 1, Scene 3—is a conversation between Isis and Maat (the personification of order, truth, and justice) in which they discuss how to respond to Ra’s despotic regime. Maat advocates acceptance and defeat, but Isis, refusing to believe Osiris’ death, views action as the only possible solution. The most fascinating part of this discussion is the goddesses’ argument about the writer’s place in society. Maat, an author, claims that her job is either to record what she sees or to engage in creative writing that is unconnected to reality. Politics is not her forte or her concern. Isis vehemently rejects this position, maintaining that every written word is a stance and that silence only serves to condone injustice. Maat is indicative of many Arab women writers who, feeling that feminism is an extreme Western idea, simply content themselves with “neutrality.” Isis, on the other hand, subverts patriarchal limitations placed on women by maintaining the power of feminist writing and art. Remarkably, Maat, the goddess of order, embodies the calmness of cold reason while Isis speaks with a forceful rage that provides her character with more dimension. It is imperative to note the identical discussion topic (the artist’s place in society) as it appears in Tawfiq al-Hakim’s play, where the interlocutors are Tut and Mastat, two male characters. El-Saadawi’s play, in this instance, becomes an image that does not resemble the copy because she displaces the discussion from its masculine context to station it between two women. Defamiliarizing the words “artist” and “writer” exposes the masculine monopoly placed on creativity and cultural influence.

The second excerpt translated below—from Act 1, Scene 4—reveals El-Saadawi’s play as a “false pretender” that challenges pre-existing representations of women in history. In this scene, Set and Isis come face to face and enact an archetypal battle of the sexes. Set, the misogynistic masculine villain who embodies evil and injustice, acts as a mouthpiece for the trope of ideal womanhood (beauty, stupidity, obedience, docility, and faithfulness) and reiterates patriarchal clichés (why women should stay at home, and why they must be controlled by men). El-Saadawi does not shy away from those ignorant and revolting opinions; instead, she faces them sardonically (much like Acker in Don Quixote) and
opens, through them, a space for a woman’s voice to emerge in Isis’s reply. Isis challenges Set’s bigotry by summoning and exemplifying the ideals of virtue, honour, and justice, which are typically considered masculine interests. She breaks the boundaries of feminine representation, usually limited to wife and mother, and becomes a revolutionary philosopher and human activist. Much like Acker in Komorowski’s analysis, El-Saadawi creates a woman who defies the feminine image created in male texts by speaking as a “new type of human, not just a new type of woman” (Komorowski 55).

To answer my initial question, then, El-Saadawi’s work suggests that it is possible for Arab woman to use the simulacral as a subversive cure by which they can challenge the hegemony of “original” male texts and create new lines of expression for an empowered feminine voice. It is important to note, however, that El-Saadawi is one of the most radical feminist writers in the Arab world, and few others have dared to challenge the highly esteemed male canonical texts or their patriarchal values.
Isis: A Play in Two Acts

Act 1, Scene 4 (El-Saadawi 43-47)

Isis’s house.
The darkness of the long and silent night.
Still, the voice of the mother echoes like the faint wind calling, “Isis ... Isis ...”
The light, little by little, exposes Isis’s face while she sits in front of her house wearing mourning clothes. Sad, silent, proud, she gazes at the horizon. Near her sits Maat, sad and silent also.
Isis moves her head as if listening to the [mother’s] call.

Isis: I hear a voice calling me, a voice that resembles Osiris’s voice. Yes, it’s his voice ... his voice still rings in my ears and calls to me. Osiris is not dead, Osiris lives ...

Maat: (weakly and dejectedly) It’s the sound of the wind, the sound of air blowing from afar. Osiris is dead, Isis. Osiris is dead. Set killed him. We must admit this reality.

Isis: What reality, Maat, goddess of truth and justice, what reality? Don’t you hear his voice?! Don’t you hear? Listen ...

The mother’s call echoes softly like a quiet wind. Isis hears it but Maat does not.

Maat: I don’t hear anything. It’s the sound of the wind. Osiris is dead, Isis. The god of beneficence is dead, and Nut the goddess of heaven is dead, and Maat the goddess of justice is dead. Nothing is left except this Maat, a woman ... merely a woman. I’m not longer a goddess. I no longer own even my freedom, and my heart is broken ...

Isis: (in pain) I don’t like hearing this dejected and weak voice. You are still the goddess of justice, Maat. And my mother Nut is still the goddess of heaven, and Osiris is still the god of beneficence and kindness. And I, Isis, am still the goddess Isis. There is no power in the heavens or on earth that can defeat us as long as we do not want to be defeated. Humans, Maat, can only be defeated from within, let alone the gods!

Maat: (dejectedly) Woman is no longer even [considered] human. The god Ra has ordered her to subordination and submissiveness. There is nothing left for us except peeling onions and breeding children.
like rabbits and cats.

Isis:  *(angrily)* I do not like to hear this dejected and weak voice. Dejection is death and they want death for us.

Maat:  I do not see any hope in the horizon.

Isis:  As long as we live, we create hope. We are still alive, and as long as we live, hope lives.

Maat:  Us alone? You and me? Even my colleagues and my fellow women writers have abandoned us. Set has seduced them with money and [high] positions, and there only a rare and few scrupulous ones left. And even those are silent and fear Set’s tyranny, and do nothing except blow on reed pipes.¹ We must concede to reality and not live in delusion. And you, Isis, goddess of reason, you cannot remain living in delusion like this. Osiris is dead. This is a fact. Set killed him. This is a fact. Set has triumphed over us, triumphed with weapons and daggers and violence. Triumphed with injustice, bribery and pillage. Triumphed with every despicable method, but he still triumphed and we must admit defeat and give up.

Isis:  Admitting defeat is something, and giving up is something else. My mother, Nut, was defeated, but she did not give up. My mother died while resisting. And we too, we must resist until the last breath.

Maat:  And would Set let us resist? He follows us everywhere and terrorizes anyone who communicates with us. We no longer see anyone. No one visits us. No one comes near us, not even Tut and Mastat. We haven’t seen either since Osiris died. Everyone is afraid, and everyone is silent.

Isis:  And you, Maat, are you silent? Are you afraid?!

Maat:  I’m not afraid. But I possess only pen and words,² and I have no concerns with what Set is doing or with politics. I will write on matters of philosophy or write poems and stories…

Isis:  But you are the goddess of truth and justice. Don’t you have faith in truth and justice?

Maat:  Faith is in my heart, and faith means love. I love justice, and that is enough for me.

¹ Figuratively, this phrase suggests “a futile action” or “something done in vain.”
² Literally, “I’m the owner of pen and intellect.”
Isis: Love that does not lead to action is nothing but a hollow feeling. And the writer, man or woman, who does not seek justice is nothing but a siren blowing air into a reed pipe.

Maat: I am a neutral writer, and I am content with recording only.

Isis: A word, when you write it down, is no longer neutral. Because a word is a stance. You think that you are neutral because you do not stand with Set or against him. But your “neutral” position, ultimately, sides with Set. You know that he is oppressing and killing, and [yet] you stay silent. And this silence of yours helps him to continue this oppression and murder. You are not neutral, as you imagine. You are aligned with Set. Aligned with him in a negative and weak manner. Your position is alignment and not neutrality.

Maat: (angrily) No! I am not with Set.

Isis: But you are not against him either.

Maat: I am against him in my heart. Every night I pray and supplicate the gods of beneficence to dethrone [his] tyranny.

Isis: This is the position of the weak who are incapable of action.

Maat: I am weak and incapable, and you too are weak and incapable. But you live in delusion and fantasy, and you think that you are strong and able to create miracles. You think you can resurrect Osiris after his death. Tear away this delusion and live in reality. Osiris is dead. Yes, dead!

Isis: No! He is not dead. Osiris is the god of beneficence, and gods do not die, and goodness cannot be gone from this world. Osiris, the god of kindness, lives in my heart and in the heart of every kind human. Osiris is the Nile. His blessings extend to the people and the earth. Osiris lives in every green, fruitful tree, in every dew drop, in every mind, in every child’s smile, in every song. Osiris is love, beauty, virtue, and tranquility.

Isis falls silent. Maat seems in pain. She wipes away her tears in silence.

Maat: (drying her tears) Osiris ... was kindness and tranquility. Ever since he left, my heart has not known peace.
Isis is silent and sad.

Maat: Set will not be satisfied with what has happened, Isis. He will not cease [this] evil. He will not calm down until he possesses you too. And the only way ahead now is to flee and hide away from him.

Isis: I will not flee. I will confront him with the accusation of murder. I will confront him face to face. (She retreats.) But I hate his face. I don’t like seeing him. I will only see him when goodness is dispelled from my being. I never loved him. He never excited in me anything but feelings of hatred and aversion—the opposite of Osiris. Osiris used to excite in me the most beautiful things: love, justice, mercy, beauty, and virtue. But Set excites the ugliest things in me: anger, evil, hatred. He strips me of all my virtues and reflects on me all his vices. The evil features of his face reflect on my face. His anger and hatred pass on to me as if by contagion. I see him only when evil has possessed my body and my mind. I do not like to see him. He makes me hate myself and hate my angry face in the mirror. And hate my body that trembles with the desire for revenge that, like a cold shudder, crawls ... like death it crawls ... I hate him like death. I wish I could close my fingers around his neck, press on it, and press and press until he breathes his last breath. He turns me from Isis the merciful goddess to Isis the murderer.

***

Act 1, Scene 6 (El-Saadawi 80-82, 83-85)

Isis has been stripped of her house, property, and clothes. She wears a loose robe like the one worn by poor peasants. Set shows up wearing his armour, his swords, and gigantic shoes made of metal.

Isis: I remember since childhood that my mother, Nut, used to say that the virtue that characterizes the just ruler is more preferable to her than the bull he sacrifices. The god Ra has announced that he is the absolute ruler in the heavens after Nut, and it cannot be, dear brother, that a regime is overturned without [all] its values and morals being overturned with it—one of which is virtue.

Set: There was no virtue in your mother Nut’s reign. Woman lived with freedom and let her hair down.³ Children traced their lineage through their mothers, and they inherited her, and the father was almost unknown. Even the greatest god, Ra, the sun god, knew only his mother!

³ Literally, “she walked with her hair loose,” meaning she could do whatever she wanted.
Isis: And what about the law of virtue in the reign of the great king Set?!

Set: That an honourable woman should be killed if she is caught in the night with another man! Fidelity and loyalty to the husband is [her] honour and virtue, and a woman has only one husband.

Isis: (sarcastically) And what’s [left] for man? The virtue of fertilizing all earthly women?!

Set: If a woman knows a man other than her husband, the father will not be able to know his children. And if the father doubts his children, then how can he bequeath his property and throne to them?

Isis: So, only those with property and thrones are in need of the law of virtue?

Set: Of course! How can someone who is not my son inherit my throne? The sons of slaves do not inherit anything, so it is not necessary for the father to know his sons, and women slaves are incapable of virtue. However, women with an ancestry of kings and gods like you, Isis, can adorn themselves with virtue.

Isis: (sarcastically) Like being adorned with precious gems and bangles of gold and ruby?

Set: Yes! How much more beautiful do precious gems look on the breast of an honourable woman who is loyal to her husband?

Isis: And how much more beautiful does a man’s breast look if he adorned himself with justice, virtue, and honour.

Set: Yes, of course!

Isis: So, then, does a man’s honour differ from a woman’s honour? Does virtue differ from one person to another?

Set: Yes. No ... no ... no, of course not. Honour is honour and virtue is virtue, but if a man is unfaithful to his wife, that does not affect the inheritance because he [still] knows his children. But if a woman is unfaithful to her husband, then it is a crime.
Isis: Virtue, if it does not have one measure for all people, would not be virtue but a slavish and binary law—it gives freedom to the masters and imposes shackles on the slaves.

Set: The world is divided into masters and slaves. This is nature. Equality is contrary to nature. Look at your fingers! *(He holds Isis's hand and opens her fingers.)* Look, your fingers are not all equal [in length]!

[...]

*[Set passionately professes his love to Isis, who spurns him and reaffirms her devotion to Osiris.]*

[...]

Set: The laws of the god Ra are the best laws, and his holy book contains all the virtues and ideals. Have you read it?

Isis: Of course I have read it. He only talks about his holiness and his greatness and his supernatural strength and his burning anger and his intense revenge on anyone who casts doubt on his existence or does not obey him. I did not read a single word on justice among people. Instead, he divides people into masters and slaves. As for women, they have no place for him, neither in heaven nor on earth!

Set: We have not known in all our history a law that ennobles woman like the great god Ra's laws. What did woman take from authority and from the throne? What did our mother Nut, goddess of heaven, do? Her mind was busy all night and day with philosophy, religion, politics, and power struggles. We did not see her. I was denied a mother's love as a child. And my father was denied a wife’s care. What did my mother gain in her life except exhaustion and misery and battles and wars? A woman was not created for such a cruel and difficult life. A woman is gentle and her body is weak. Men’s bodies are stronger.

Isis: If the one with the strongest body must rule, then why are we not ruled by mules? No doubt, a mule’s body is stronger than yours, Set.

Set: A woman was not created to rule. A woman was created to be a loving mother and a delicate and docile wife—to wait for her husband with an affectionate smile, a bright face, and a soft and per-
fumed body. Yes, this is the ideal wife. Nothing occupies her mind and her heart except her husband. How I wish you could be this kind of wife for me, Isis, and give birth to a child who will inherit my throne. I wish I could put the crown of woman[hood] on your head. I would make you the crowned queen in my house, and I would enclose you in my arms every night. How much I want you Isis. I want you to be my wife and my lover. You are a beautiful woman with a gentle heart. You were not created for heavenly struggles and earthly wars. You were not created to wear these coarse clothes. You were created to wear silk and sleep in bed and leave the battles to me. I love it when you are this docile and obedient woman. (He caresses her head and her hair and tries to embrace her, but she moves away from him.)

Isis: Obedient?! Do you know what it means for me to obey you? It means that I should nullify my reason and my thoughts. I should become a body without a mind and [let] you become my mind and my head. You do not want me as I am and do not love me as I am—a complete human, mind and body. [Instead,] you want a pliant and weak woman, a lifeless body that is devoid of everything except adornments and perfume and jewellery. A stupid wife who waits for your return in order to fill your stomach with food and satiate your appetite for rape and lets you be a despotic and intolerant god. In front of you, she feigns stupidity and the inability to debate with you so as to satiate your sense of grandiosity and your dominance and divinity complexes. This is the wife and lover that you want, and she is definitely not me. She is not Isis, the goddess of reason and wisdom.

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Two Diaries

I. Gratefulness Diary

Small blessings: we were born after the heydays of dinner theatre, lawn darts, the guillotine.

The hole under our window doesn’t let in banshees or bad airs.

I don’t think the man in the building opposite can hear me when I say my ideas. If he did, he would do a “rude hand motion.”

If he heard your ideas it is okay, because they are good. He would do the “happy brows.”

Bad news no longer comes on video, Movietone, wireless, or packet steamer.

We once met a man named Lion; he thought that your name was “America.”

Two Poems

Geoffrey Morrison

Hangover
II. Clarity Diary

Methods of inside-and-out killing
mutate and double the fuck down.

There are holes under a thousand windows,
a rent and a fentanyl crisis, and a plan for market-rate
condos in the middle of Chinatown –
and that’s just my 10K radius.

Somebody is listening,
or could.

Bad news comes like five
hundred years of frigid rain.

America: a poacher
that thinks it’s a lion.
After Van Dyke Parks’ “Van Dyke Parks”¹

Nearer my God
without any hope of approaching nearer

my God to thee, my seismic pulse,
my cello on the lemon-clean boards
of what they called an unsinkable enterprise

holed by the hardness of
its own element and means:
cold, floating, shard-like whiteness

my finger beeps a Richter scale and
Mercury falls with a hiss in the wind
would I were

nearer God as a lemonade sun
cooing over soft suffusive sea

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1 The song “Van Dyke Parks,” from Parks’ 1968 album Song Cycle, features a lone vocalist singing “Nearer, My God to Thee” (famously, but perhaps never actually, played by the band on the RMS Titanic) over explosions and combat sounds.
There’s no such thing as small blessings: an optimist’s clever way of taking punches and sucking it up. Clarity. Gratefulness. Words of prayer squeezed through scabbed fists. Bad news never comes without its antithesis. America: a hunter who thinks it’s a lion—chasing its tail.

When God gives you lemons, there is no God. Pucker up. Eat fruit. Pretend there’s no such thing as a wound self-inflicted. At the initial kneel, that mercy-drunk monologue with eyes shut and pleading, we became conquerors believing they were worshippers doing someone else’s will.

Five hundred years of frigid rain is still a void of drought. In the wars of water, we’ll wield an arsenal. Any land that can’t be burned is just a fire You let us put out. This is the wisdom of worshippers: word reversals and resuscitations. A way to pull the slaughter out of the blade after the cut.
Review of Sarah Schulman’s

*Conflict is Not Abuse* and *The Cosmopolitans*

Kevin Shaw


*THE COSMOPOLITANS.* by Sarah Schulman. The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2016. 296 pp. $22.50 CAD.

Sarah Schulman is “undisciplined” (19). In the introduction to *Conflict is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*—what Schulman calls her “reparative manifesto”—the playwright, novelist, filmmaker, and feminist and queer activist observes, “I do not practice the ‘one long, slow idea’ school of thought. Instead ... I have evolved a style of offering the reader many, many new ideas at once” (18). Informed by queer studies but standing decidedly apart from its academic methodology—the “one, long slow idea” (18)—Schulman considers the discourse of harm across a wide range of fields and issues, from intimate relationships and HIV criminalization in Canada to pop psychology, trigger warnings, and Middle Eastern geo-politics.

Schulman argues that the narratives and rhetoric of victimization, which often invoke the past in dramatic and convincing ways, might occlude understanding and reparation in the present. Similarly, she demonstrates how those in positions of power (whom she terms “supremacists”) can too easily appropriate the position of victim to serve their own ends. While Schulman wrote and published *Conflict* before Donald Trump entered the White House, her critique of those who claim victimhood from a position of authority is particularly well timed.

But what might a narcissistic world leader and a bad friend have in common? Schulman’s book offers several “tiers” of conflict mistaken for abuse, progressing from the private sphere (awkward flirtations, poorly worded emails), to the state (police intervention in domestic violence, HIV prosecutions), and conflict between states (focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2014). Elaborating on her central thesis that the rhetoric which escalates conflict to abuse makes reparation impossible, Schulman offers a much-needed corrective to how we argue now—that is, our tendency to lean on personal history and trauma rather than to consider the personhood, or arguments, of the Other. At each tier, Schulman admirably interjects the kind of nuance that results from a willingness to deeply en-
gage in a personal or ideological dispute rather than to diminish it through reductive snark and hashtags, or outright dismissal.

Yet, as much as I admire Schulman’s interdisciplinarity and willingness to express what may be sometimes unpopular opinions, the book’s structure—moving from the personal to the globally political—does not always succeed at making the leap from here to there. Schulman observes that “simple shifts[,] in personal behavior and their expressions in political structures of power, produce changing public norms which can make huge differences in individual and collective experiences” (27); however, while the conflict in an intimate relationship and the conflict between nations may similarly stem from attempts at shunning the other, surely there is more at cause and at stake in the latter than in the actions of individual actors? For a book that makes a bold and necessary argument for wrestling with complexity in our politics, such a telescopic structure threatens to flatten, rather than deepen, the debate.

At times, the book lacks an argumentative cohesion that its interdisciplinarity and formal dexterity cannot fully excuse. For example, in Chapter One, Schulman makes the convincing argument that the “unidirectional” nature of email and text messaging is “often the source for tragic separations of potentially enriching relationships” (42). Yet she composes Chapter Eight, regarding violence in Gaza in 2014, as an assemblage of Facebook and Twitter posts. Here, Schulman praises online communication for how it allows a “genealogy” of witnessing, and demonstrates how political events—and our conversations around them—unfold in real time (210). But can’t social media be just as “unidirectional” as email or text messaging? After all, Twitter and Facebook users have the ability to “Block,” “Unfollow,” or “Mute” others. Are the social media posts collected in Schulman’s book a kind of evidence to make their writers accountable over the long term in a way that the fleeting nature of social media often disallows? The answer remains unclear, as does Schulman’s shifting opinion regarding various forms of online communication.

Despite its flaws, I took as much pleasure in disagreeing, adamantly, with some arguments made in Conflict is Not Abuse as I did from the passages that had me scribbling “Yes!” in the book’s margins. Schulman’s manifesto satisfies a hunger for progressive political discourse that does not cease with the necessary task of calling out offensive speech or ideas. Too often, such calling out results in merely “shunning” speech, in Schulman’s terms, so that we presume we have reached the solution to the problem when we have merely diagnosed and disavowed its symptomatic language. On the other hand, aren’t there moments in our intimate or public lives where we must shun another person—even temporarily and even if they are not directly at fault—because their words or presence are just too painful for our psychic survival? Can such moments be simultaneously necessary and not morally “right”? If I felt of two or more minds when
reading *Conflict*, then such an effect was likely intentional. Schulman invites divisive responses to her work when she warns, “This is not a book to be agreed with, an exhibition of evidence or display of proof. … Like authentic, conscious relationships, truly progressive communities, responsible citizenship, and real friendship, and like the peace-making that all these require, it asks you to be interactive” (19). *Conflict is Not Abuse* offers a necessary discomfort.

Schulman continues unsettling readers’ generic and narrative expectations in her second 2016 release, a novel titled *The Cosmopolitans*. Throughout *Conflict*, Schulman argues that fictional works make us aware of human motivation around the impulse to escalate conflict to abuse in ways that daily life (and, presumably, nonfiction) cannot. *The Cosmopolitans* makes a convenient case study to test Schulman’s thesis. A retelling of Honoré de Balzac’s 1846 novel *Cousin Bette*, Schulman’s narrative is set in the Greenwich Village of the late 1950s, a neighbourhood waking up to its queer and creative heyday. The novel focuses on the long friendship between Bette, a white middle-aged secretary, and Earl, a black gay actor who lives across the hall. When Bette’s cousin Hortense arrives from the Midwest, she sets in motion a series of events that causes a seemingly irreparable tear in the precarious domesticity Bette and Earl have managed to make for themselves. The rise of television advertising provides an integral backdrop to the personal melodrama; that is, if people are wont to escalate conflict to abuse, then the new marketing transforms want into need.

The novel benefits from Schulman’s obviously deep love and knowledge of New York history, and it recalls her earlier writing on the city’s architectural memory in *The Gentrification of the Mind*. Throughout the novel, but particularly in its early chapters, the reader gathers vivid details like interlocking puzzle pieces. For example, in the first chapter we learn, along with other facts, that Bette prefers watching movies at “the art cinema near Sixth Avenue, down the block from Nedick’s hot dogs and orange drink” (1), that Willem de Kooning will get into a pre-dawn fight at the Cedar Tavern (9), and “a brownstone built in 1880 is for sale for $30,000” on Tenth Street (11). The desire to show the diverse and complex forms of community she defends in *Conflict is Not Abuse* extends to her depiction of Bette and Earl. These are the kinds of characters rarely given any space at all in fiction, never mind the central roles, and Schulman’s depiction of their attempts at forming a chosen family is surely, in contemporary writing, one of the more original explorations of friendship between gay men and straight women. (Although, it must be noted, Bette’s sexuality in regards to Valerie, the dazzling advertising whiz at her office, remains as richly queer as Earl’s, if more elusive.)

In *The Cosmopolitans’* concluding (and, frankly, unnecessary) “A Note on Style,” Schulman observes that she was inspired not only by Balzac’s nineteenth-century realism and James Baldwin’s *Another Country*, but also by the “kitchen-sink realism” of 1950s theatre (374). Her characters also speak with the affected diction of the era’s Hollywood films, which reminded me
of Todd Haynes’ mimicry of the period in his 2002 film Far From Heaven. At times, the characters become merely ideological stand-ins for the arguments on morality that Schulman explores; however, if this is a fault of The Cosmopolitans, it may be an unavoidable fault of all realist literature. At one point, Bette even tells Hortense that she has come to “believe in ... the duty of repair,” quoting the subtitle of Schulman’s Conflict is Not Abuse (155). The two books form a diptych exploring the need not only for repair, but recognition in the face of dismissal.

Perhaps no one understands the desire to capture queer history better than Schulman, who was both a witness to and warrior against the devastation of the AIDS epidemic. Schulman, alongside Jim Hubbard, co-ordinates the ACT UP Oral History Project and co-produced the 2012 film United in Anger: A History of ACT UP. Both Conflict is Not Abuse and The Cosmopolitans are calls-to-arms of a different sort. In her novel, Schulman reminds us of all we stand to lose—an intellectually rich, creatively vibrant, messy, queer, and collaborative community—if we do not choose to engage in the difficult questions and conversations like those found in Conflict is Not Abuse.
Joshua Adair is an associate professor of English at Murray State University, where he also serves as the director of the writing center and the coordinator of Gender & Diversity Studies.

Devon Balwit is a writer and teacher from Portland, OR. She has two chapbooks forthcoming—’how the blessed travel’ from Maverick Duck Press and ‘Forms Most Marvelous’ from dancing girl press. Her recent work has found many homes, among them: Oyez, The Cincinnati Review, Red Paint Hill, Timberline Review, Sow’s Ear Poetry Review, Trailhead Review, and Oracle.

Hinson Calabrese is a writer, illustrator and musician from Cape Breton Island. He is currently at work on a book of short stories and on a graphic novel about Moses Coady, who founded the modern cooperative movement.

Ryan Clement is a fourth-year English Ph.D. student at the University of Waterloo and is currently an instructor at the University of Winnipeg and Brandon University. He is a seasoned comics researcher and reader, and has written comics for the anthologies Toronto Comics Anthology and Strange Romance. His current research interests are studying the relationship between narratives and games.

Evelyn Deshane’s articles on transgender issues have appeared in The Atlantic’s Tech Channel, Briarpatch Magazine, Plenitude Magazine, and Bitch Magazine, among other publications. Evelyn (pron. Eve-a-lyn) received an M.A. from Trent University and is currently completing a Ph.D. at the University of Waterloo. Find more work at evedeshane.wordpress.com or follow @evelyn-deshane.

Napatsi Folger is a freelance short fiction and non-fiction writer from Iqaluit, Nunavut. She has a background in history and creative writing and is currently working as a policy advisor and part-time server to enforce Charter rights and freedoms and privacy legislation with a passion that has been described as bordering unhealthy, to gain a better understanding of humans at their hungriest, and to pay her many bills.

Lars Horn works as a writer, mixed-media artist, scholar, and translator.

Saffiya Hosein is a second-year Ph.D. student in the joint program in Communication and Culture at Ryerson University and York Univer-

Hangover
sity. Her research interests are representations of Muslim female superheroes. She is currently conducting a study on young Muslim consumers of graphic novels, for which she won a Partnership for Change: The RBC Immigrant, Diversity and Inclusion Project at Ryerson University project grant. Most recently she has written a comic for the upcoming Toronto Comics Anthology #4: Yonge at Heart.

Jennifer Komorowski is completing her M.A. at The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University. She is currently writing my thesis on the voice in the work of avant-garde novelist Ann Quin. Her interests are in the work of Gilles Deleuze, psychoanalysis, and experimental literature.

Annick MacAskill’s poems and reviews have recently appeared in Prism, The Rusty Toque, Versal, Room, and CV2. Her poetry has been longlisted for the CBC’s Poetry Prize, longlisted for The Fiddlehead’s Ralph Gustafson Prize, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the author of a chapbook, Brotherly Love: Poems of Sappho and Charaxos (Frog Hollow Press, 2016), and a forthcoming full-length début (Gaspereau Press, 2018).

Erica McKeen is a storyteller, poet, and ESL teacher living in London. She is a prose reader for Persephone’s Daughters, a writer for The Mighty, and she recently partook in London’s collaborative poetry series, Couplets. In 2015, she won third in the Occasus Prize, and in 2016, she won the Lillian Kroll Prize. Her work has appeared in Occasus, Minola Review, Shirley Magazine, The Quilliad, and elsewhere.

Geoffrey Morrison is a poet and prose writer. He was a longlist finalist for the 2014 Lemon Hound and 2016 PRISM poetry contests, and also has poetry at ditch, Lemon Hound, and Echolocation (online). His nonfiction prose can be found at The Town Crier and The Rusty Toque.

Angie Quick (b. 1989, Calgary, AB) is a self-taught painter and poet working in London, ON. She is known for her large oil paintings that explore flesh in a historical and contemporaneous manner. Her practice experiments with the nature of language and sensation within both visual and performative contexts. More of her work is available at www.everythingpromisedyousell.com.

Kevin Shaw recently completed a Ph.D. in English at Western University. His research considers twentieth-century Canadian literature, censorship, borders, and queer studies. His articles and essays have appeared in Canadian Literature, The New Quarterly, and Event. His debut poetry collection, Smaller Hours, is forthcoming from icehouse poetry (Goose Lane Editions).

Blair Trewartha is the author of two chapbooks: Break In (Cactus Press, 2010) and Porcupine Burning (Baseline Press, 2012). His poetry has
appeared in *Carousel, Prism, Event, Existere,* and *Contemporary Verse 2.* Currently residing in London, Ontario, Blair is an active member of Poetry London and an editor for Anstruther Press. His debut full-length collection of poetry, *Easy Fix* (Palimpsest Press, 2014), was shortlisted for the 2015 ReLit award, and his poem “Breach” received honourable mention in *Ard’s* 2016 Poem of the Year contest.

**Nina Youkhanna** has completed a B.A. at Western University in Comparative Literature and an MA at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. She is currently a free-floating “scholar” who has discovered a latent passion for translating Arabic poetry and short stories into English. She has a wide range of (mostly unrelated) academic interests for which she feels an exceptional enthusiasm and, hence, is always in the midst of half-finished and pending projects. Those interests include, but are not limited to, satire and dark comedy in Syrian theatre, depictions of the homeland in Arabic poetry, memory and trauma in Palestinian writings, Dostoeyvsky, Roland Barthes, and Umm Kulthum.