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2019

A Journal of Literary  
& Cultural Criticism

**Articulāte**



# Articulāte

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and Cultural  
Criticism

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Rhayna V. Kramer ‘19

*Rescuing Feminine Voices from the  
Rubbish: The Implications of  
“Meneseteung” and “This is a Photograph  
of Me”*

Brenna Raeder ‘20



**Introduction**

Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro are two of Canada’s most prominent and prolific writers, and both have leaned into frank and nuanced investigations of gendered experiences in their work. Additionally, both authors have made forays into the Gothic, exploring the macabre and mysterious. Placing works by Atwood and Munro in conversation with one another can produce compelling frameworks. In Margaret Atwood’s 1966 poem “This is a Photograph of Me,” a drowned speaker describes a photograph of the landscape and lake in which they drowned to an unidentified “you” audience. The speaker begins by describing the photograph as a physical object, “a smeared / print: blurred lines and grey flecks / blended with the paper” (Atwood 3-5). The speaker then guides the “you” through the image depicted by the photo, including “part of a tree,” “a small frame house,” “a lake, / and beyond that, some low hills” (Atwood 13-14). Here, the speaker’s voice shifts to a parenthetical for the remainder of the poem, where the speaker reveals “the photograph was taken/the day after [they] drowned” and that they are somewhere in the lake, “just under the surface” and difficult to see (Atwood 18).

The unnamed narrator in Alice Munro's 1990 short story "Meneseteung" functions as an archivist or historical investigator, and the story is the narrator's rediscovery and reimagination of Almeda Joynt Roth, a Victorian-era poet living on the frontier in Ontario. Based on Almeda's own published writing, a photograph of her, and excerpts from her local paper the *Vidette*, the narrator constructs a story of Almeda's grief for the loss of her family, her rejection of potential suitor Jarvis Poulter, and her evolution into "a familiar eccentric" before her death (Munro 350). After sharing the *Vidette* obituaries of Almeda and Jarvis, the narrator describes discovering Almeda's gravestone in the cemetery alongside her family and reflects on the power of people like themselves, people "driven to find things out" even if "they may get it wrong, after all" (Munro 351).

I will argue that Munro's use of water as a symbol for female creativity--both vital and dangerous--provides a feminist framework to read Atwood's speaker as a feminine voice silenced by a society resistant to women's self-expression, and that the very act of reimagining both Atwood's speaker and Almeda is a feminist practice.

### **Voices Reimagined**

The narrator's gender is not explicit in either text, meaning that they cannot be read absolutely as female voices. However, this ambiguity does not make such a reading unreasonable, and particular facets of these voices imply femininity. Atwood's speaker exhibits an outward uncertainty and hesitation while describing the photograph to the audience, evident in the description that spirals in on the speaker's location "in the center/of the picture" (Atwood 17-18). Despite revealing in the title, "this is a photograph of me," the speaker spends significant time describing the "photograph" in detail before so much as

mentioning the “me”; beyond simply providing a brief description of the image, the speaker dawdles, drawing out mentions of “a thing that is like a branch” and “what ought to be a gentle / slope” (Atwood 8, 11-12). The speaker’s hesitance suggests a desire to avoid seeming attention-seeking that is further implied by the fact that all description of the speaker within the poem appears in a parenthetical remark -- essentially, an afterthought. Especially when considered alongside the voice of Almeda in “Meneseteung,” this speaker’s reluctance implies a lack of confidence stereotypically associated with female voices.

At the beginning of “Meneseteung,” Munro’s narrator shares the notably apologetic preface to Almeda’s published volume of poetry, *Offerings*. Kim Jernigan has argued that the narrator includes this preface because, after analyzing the photograph of Almeda in *Offerings*, “the narrator realizes that Almeda’s carefully composed surface might as easily reflect what’s outside (‘the fashion’ [Munro 336]) as what’s inside.” By including the preface, Jernigan contends, “the narrator also attends to Almeda’s voice” (59), apparently as a remedy for surface-level understanding. After matter-of-factly describing her family and their deaths (in some ways, dancing around and spiraling in on herself much like Atwood’s speaker), Almeda shares how she has “delighted in verse” all her life and that poetry has “sometimes allayed [her] griefs” (Munro 337). However, she immediately adds the qualifier that her griefs “have been no more... than any sojourner on earth must encounter” (Munro 337), minimizing her own experience. For the remainder of the preface, Almeda acknowledges her “floundering efforts” to compose poetry, her “clumsy” fingers, and that this book, only “the product of [her] leisure hours,” is full of “rude posies” (Munro

337). Even as she publishes her life's creative work, Almeda feels compelled to undermine its validity. In all likelihood, this impulse arises from the attitude her community has towards her work; the *Vidette* calls her "our poetess" (Munro 336), and the narrator finds "a mixture of respect and contempt, both for her calling and for her sex" in this appellation (Munro 336). In such an environment, maintaining the respect of her community would require Almeda to follow in the tradition of many writers of marginalized identities by apologizing for her craft, even as (or especially because) it is deemed to be of publishable quality. Thus, Almeda's preface does not necessarily complicate the "carefully composed surface" visible in her photograph as Jernigan argues (59); the surface may also simply reflect "the fashion" of patriarchal attitudes towards women's artistry (Munro 336). In addition to revealing contemporary attitudes towards female creativity, the connection between Almeda's gender and her urge to qualify her self-expression gives further support to reading the speaker in Atwood's poem as female. Furthermore, both Munro and Atwood undertake feminist work by revealing the limitations placed on female voices in a patriarchal society.

Peter Barry has argued that the photo described in the poem "cannot be any real photograph" (162). According to Barry, the fact of the speaker discussing the photo from beyond the grave means that it "not only doesn't exist, but couldn't" (165). However, such a photo very well could exist, even if its true contents would be impossible to know. Despite a perception of photographs as "objective," they represent a viewpoint that is strictly limited in time and space. This leaves room to imagine the voices of photographic subjects, whether immediately obvious or "under the surface" (Atwood 18). By creating a

speaker that could not possibly reveal their fate due to their drowning, Atwood hints at a key feminist practice: in order to understand the evolution of oppression dynamics over time, voices that were overlooked and silenced in the creation of historical records must be imagined. Barry himself suggests that “the voice may be imagined as speaking the unspoken, perhaps of domestic abuse, suffering, and violence” (164), alluding perhaps to a feminization of the speaker and granting feminist connotations to the emergence of this voice from an apparently innocuous source. Although the speaker does not explain their fate explicitly, even the fact of imagining a more complex story “just under the surface” of the historical record has these feminist implications (Atwood 18).

### **Voices Drowned Out**

Katrine Raymond has read “the river of [Almeda’s] mind” (Munro 349) as “a metaphor for internalized (or ‘misdirected’) flow of Almeda’s... relationships with the outside world” (Munro 349). Raymond claims that because Almeda cannot relate to anyone in her community, “the flow of her dialogue... collapses into an internal ‘river of her mind’” (111). Beyond only an inability to relate, Raymond’s reference to “dialogue” implies that Almeda also cannot genuinely express herself, even on a day-to-day basis, to anyone in her life, much as she could not publicly find pride in her published work in her preface to *Offerings*. The narrator further develops association between water and Almeda’s self-expression at the climax of the story, as Almeda finds inspiration for “one very great poem that will contain everything” on the same night that the grape juice she was using to make jelly “has overflowed and is running over her kitchen floor” and that her menstrual flow begins

(Munro 348-349). Furthermore, the “one very great poem” will not only be named “The Meneseteung” after a river, but “it is the river, the Meneseteung, that is the poem” (Munro 348-349). The narrator’s claim that the river and Almeda’s greatest work would be one and the same supports Raymond’s reading; in this moment, all the creativity that Almeda has funneled away from her community and into the river of her mind overflows like the grape juice and can run out of her in the form of the Meneseteung. Jernigan adds to this interpretation, contending that the word “Meneseteung” itself “suggests a pairing of the words ‘menses’ and ‘tongue’ and hence a story about a woman’s struggle to find her voice, to discover what she wants to say along with the courage to say it” (56). While this interpretation does promise a release of Almeda’s suppressed creativity, it also reminds us that this is a story about struggle (borrowing a term from Jernigan), foreshadowing Almeda’s fate.

After imagining Almeda’s moment of inspiration, the narrator provides her obituary in the *Vidette*. The paper laments “that in later years the mind of this fine person had become somewhat clouded” and Almeda’s eventual status as “a familiar eccentric” (Munro 349-350), indicating that Almeda abandoned the community’s notions of propriety, likely allowing self-expression for the first time in her life. Notably, Almeda died after “she caught cold... having become thoroughly wet from a ramble in the Pearl Street bog” (Munro 350); apparently, “some urchins chased her into the water” (Munro 350), persecuting her as an eccentric. With the narrator’s established link between water and Almeda’s self-expression, we see that it was ultimately her willingness to be creative and unusual in her community that led to her death. Furthermore, the *Vidette* notes that Almeda’s cold ultimately killed her when it

“developed into pneumonia” (Munro 350). Essentially, her body drowned itself from the inside. In a text where bodily functions like menstruation are so closely associated with the status of the mind, Almeda’s pneumonia can be read as a physical manifestation of the “river of her mind” (Munro 349), a final moment where her suppressed self-expression overtakes her as her community will not allow it to be released.

Using this understanding of drowning as the destruction wrought by suppressed self-expression, Atwood’s speaker can be seen suffering a fate similar to Almeda’s. Returning to Barry’s reading that there is a “curious hint at some traumatic repressed narrative in the lines ‘halfway up / what ought to be a gentle / slope’” (164), we can understand the speaker’s trauma as the violence of losing one’s voice in society, much as the repression Almeda experiences in her community inflicts physical harm on her. Barry’s suggestion that the slope “maybe ought to be gentle, but it isn’t” offers the interpretation that the speaker’s death resulted from some unforeseen fall down the slope into the lake (164). The violence apparent in the landscape in this reading, in addition to the absence of any human community to frown upon the speaker’s creativity in the photograph, leads to the conclusion that the landscape itself stands in for patriarchal structures like the ones affecting Almeda. By claiming that the slope “ought to be... gentle” (Atwood 11-12), the speaker further indicates that the precariousness of the slope is, in some regard, immoral. Perhaps the speaker should have been guided gently into the possibility of self-expression rather than thrown down a precipitous slope into their own repressed creativity. Recalling that the lake is a relatively static body of water with no visible outlet further emphasizes that the speaker has no effective means to

channel their self-expression, and therefore drowns in it. Finally, that the speaker is speaking from the dead highlights how necessary creative expression of the self is, particularly for female voices; one reading of the speaker is that they are a kind of haunting presence, trapped with the photograph due to the unfinished business of expressing their trauma. In a metaphorical sense, Atwood reminds us of the haunting presence of past patriarchal structures and how their silencing effects reverberate today.

## Conclusion

Considering Atwood's and Munro's texts in tandem provides insight into their feminist implications for historical women and women's self-expression. By taking on the endeavor of reconstructing Almeda, Munro's narrator engages in a feminist practice, "rescuing one thing [Almeda] from the rubbish" of her patriarchal community's records of her (Munro 122). Furthermore, by foregrounding Almeda's own words (her preface and poetry), the narrator enables her self-expression to the greatest extent possible. Where there are gaps in the historical record of Almeda, the narrator endeavors to fill them in with a story that gives Almeda a depth and purpose that the *Vidette* refused to acknowledge in a woman artist. Similarly, Atwood's speaker communicates from beyond the grave, offering a clear (if hesitantly worded) path for us to reimagine a history that appears objective, as well as a stark reminder that "under the surface" of an idealized image there is often suffering (Atwood 18). Additionally, by employing a speaker who should not typically be capable of speaking, Atwood emphasizes the power, even necessity, of self-expression. While these are important feminist implications, perhaps the most significant effect of the works (particularly when considered in conversation with

one another) is their invitation for imagination, uncertainty, and just plain getting it wrong in developing a tradition of feminist voices.

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# *Listen to Language: An Analysis of Borders, Surfaces, and the Role of Translation*

Rosa Canales '20



Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*, published in 2015 and originally in German, addresses the current refugee crisis in Germany and across Europe. As a contemporary text, Erpenbeck's novel especially reflects the United States border "crisis," a national issue affecting migrants and their families and resulting in an unprecedented government shutdown. The novel follows Richard, a professor emeritus of classics, as he first notices (or notices how he fails to notice) the crowd of refugees at Alexanderplatz in Berlin and slowly becomes a crucial supporter of the refugees in their pursuit of asylum. Also originally published in German, Herta Müller's *Nadirs* (1982), through a series of short stories, uncovers the horrors of oppressive village life in communist Romania. The short stories are largely autobiographical, yet written in the genre of magic realism, they twist into the realm of the bizarre, complicating our perceptions of the real versus the imaginary. Both of these texts deal with the concepts of borders and surfaces--whether explicitly as with Erpenbeck or more subtly through language, as with Müller. Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone* displays the arbitrariness of these borders and surfaces, where she emphasizes nature in opposition to man-made borders. She additionally represents the "listening" of music and storytelling as a means to transcend or see beyond borders and strengthen

Richard's connections with the refugees. Herta Müller's *Nadirs* reflects a similar emphasis on storytelling in its ability to see beneath the surface of language, and underscores a manipulation of this surface as a way to form a connection between author and reader and incite a challenge with her narrative.

The most obvious representation of borders in *Go, Went, Gone* can be seen in the physical borders separating countries, people, and places, and the bureaucratic language used to do so. These physical borders and laws are convoluted and largely unnecessary, where the moment "these borders are defined only by laws, ambiguity takes over" (Erpenbeck 68). With legal documents constantly regulating these borders and whom they attempt to keep in or out, "the law has made a shift from physical reality to the realm of language" (Erpenbeck 68), often preventing the refugees from simply being able to understand their position, and thus change it. Although Erpenbeck generally presents these borders as dealing with nation states and governments, this theme stretches throughout the book, as Richard concerns himself with the questions of, "what is the one true, crucial border?" and "have people forgotten in Berlin of all places that a border isn't just measured by an opponent's stature but in fact creates him?" (210-11). Richard grapples with these borders and the substance beneath the surfaces of people, things, and concepts. As Monika Shafi says in her critical article, "The Lessons of Jenny Erpenbeck's Novel *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen*," Richard "is trying to determine the penultimate criterion separating people into different categories listing social criteria such as race, income, and family status but also personal preferences for food, drink, and music...Richard concludes that all these divisions are ridiculously small and should be regarded as less important than the common

humanity and the short time everyone has on the planet” (188). Through his experiences with the refugees, Richard comes to understand the inconsequence of these physical borders and see past surfaces which originally limited his perspective, and I wish to concern myself with the question of how Erpenbeck portrays this change.

Through emphasis on the border between nature and man, Erpenbeck underscores the insignificance of borders in contrast to the power of nature and the effect of this contrast on Richard. Richard reflects on a time when a colleague asks him to breathe in the Austrian air deeply, where

the Sirocco, his colleague said, came from Africa and across the Alps, sometimes even bringing a bit of desert sand along with it. And indeed: on the leaves of the grapevines you could see the fine, ruddy dust that had made its way from Africa. Richard had run his finger across one of the leaves and observed how this small gesture produced a sudden shift in his perspective and sense of scale. (Erpenbeck 55)

Erpenbeck portrays nature as a force stronger than that of man--of one which can cross man-made borders and create a shift in Richard’s perspective. In nature as well, sometimes on Richard’s late-night strolls behind his house, Richard “walks between the fields and forest on his right, the houses to his left...each step he takes belongs more to the forest than to him, and a state of wakefulness replaces seeing” (Erpenbeck 163, 29). When Richard crosses the border between civilization and nature, he experiences an even greater sense of awareness, more attune to his outside world and environment. Nature has always been there, yet now civilization brushes against it, and like the man at the bottom of the lake, man has crossed the border between

nature and civilization, and he has “dissolved in [the lake]” (Erpenbeck 163). This emphasis on the human dissolving within nature, underscores the idea of nature as more powerful than these man-made borders imposed upon nature and others, where previously none existed. Like the Berlin wall and its eventual fall, these borders will eventually prove arbitrary and pointless in confining humans to imagined nations.

Again, rooted in nature, the most commonly recurring motif throughout the book, and the one which plagues Richard the most--the man lying at the bottom of the lake--represents the importance of what lies below the surface, of what is not visible to the common eye. Ever since the accident, “day after day, [the lake] has been perfectly calm.... Strangers who walk past his garden gate on their outings return just as happy as they came. But he can’t avoid seeing the lake when he sits at his desk” (Erpenbeck 5). Just like the refugees at Alexanderplatz, the man at the bottom of the lake remains obscured to the common passerby; however, Richard cannot help but dwell on what lies beneath the surface--his ruminations on the lake appearing in almost every chapter. Although the lake visually obscures him from seeing the man at the bottom, it provides him with an alternate form of “seeing,” in that it serves as a reminder to look beneath surfaces. As Gary L. Baker says in his article “The Violence of Precarity and the Appeal of Routine in Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Gehen, ging, gegangen*,” the lake “stands throughout the novel as an allegorical reproach of bystander apathy” (508). This lake further stands as a symbol for its circular shape. When Richard gets home from the new refugees’ center in Spandau, he decides to go on a walk--a circular walk around the lake, because “maybe a circular walk could hold something together” (Erpenbeck 163). In a circle, there is

no beginning or ending point, which again alludes to the cycle of time and history we see repeated throughout the novel, where this invisibility cycles throughout time, generations, and groups of people. As Richard “[draws] a circle even around some who don’t see him: the dogs asleep in the houses, the children sitting in front of TV sets inside, or even some lost drinker sorting out the empty bottles in his basement” (Erpenbeck 163), he creates complicity between him and those in their houses, unaware to the outside world and the refugee crisis, including them in this circle of culpability. Richard used to be just like those in their houses, absorbed in his “existentially restless existence that is sustained through conditioned movements satisfying his own needs: eating, sleeping, and watching television” (Baker 509); however, now he sees past these insignificant everyday comforts--hyperconscious of the lake, the outside world, and the refugees around him.

Even more powerful than the role of nature, Erpenbeck presents the constructs of music and storytelling as means to see past borders and beneath surfaces. When Osarobo, one of the refugees Richard meets, says his greatest desire would be to play the piano, Richard expects him to expertly replicate Bach and Chopin at his unused grand piano, yet Osarobo simply plucks the black and white keys. Despite this, Osarobo keeps returning to play, and “what Osarobo is playing isn’t Bach, nor is it Mozart, jazz, or blues, but Richard can hear Osarobo’s own listening and this listening turns these crooked, lopsided, harsh, stumbling, impure notes into something that, for all its arbitrariness, still is beautiful” (Erpenbeck 121). Until this moment, Richard had been consumed with seeing and with the question, “Why didn’t [I] see these men at Alexanderplatz?” (Erpenbeck 19), yet now, as Richard instead learns to listen, to listen to “Osarobo’s own

listening” (Erpenbeck 121), his mind opens, and he experiences a transformative moment, as through music, he hears and sees the beauty in his connection with Osarobo. He is no longer content with his passive watching, and only now does it occur to him how long his daily life has been lacking sounds other than the ones he himself makes. He was always the most content, back in his old life, when his wife practiced the viola while he was sitting at his desk one room away, working on a lecture or article. *The joy of the parallel universe* is how he’d described in to her. (Erpenbeck 121)

For Richard, music possesses the ability to unite not just him and his wife in a “parallel universe” but to bridge the differences between the parallel universes of his life and the lives of the refugees. When Richard listens to music with Osarobo, rather than simply watching him play, these feelings are intensified, and “For a long time the old man and this young man sit there side by side at the desk, watching and listening as these three musicians use the black and white keys to tell stories that have nothing at all to do with the keys’ colors” (Erpenbeck 161). Not only does music cultivate a deeper understanding through listening, but the “keys’ colors,” and thus the color of the fingers playing them, become irrelevant to the stories emanating from beneath them.

Erpenbeck continues this metaphor of listening versus seeing in emphasizing the ability of oral storytelling to see and understand across borders. Richard’s position as a classics professor reflects his belief in storytelling, as he translates the present world through the classics--in his head naming the refugees after Tristan or Apollo from the Greek myths. As he listens to “Apollo” tell his story about fleeing from Libya, he is amazed by the power of stories to

guide the men across the desert and borders, where, rather than a map or modern technology, “they find their way by these stories” (Erpenbeck 150). The oral power of these stories remains stronger than any man-made border but also reflects Richard’s newfound understanding and respect for these men, as “never before has the connection between space, time, and words revealed itself to him so clearly as at this moment” (Erpenbeck 151). Furthermore, the stories shared between the men and Richard remain rooted in memory, and “without memory, man is nothing more than a bit of flesh on the planet’s surface” (Erpenbeck 151). Without stories, but more importantly without memory, man cannot break borders or see beneath the surface of the planet--past natural and human constructions. Erpenbeck thus reflects this transformative power of oral storytelling to “listen” past borders in the reversal of storytelling at the end of the novel. While Richard spends the majority of the novel listening to the refugees’ stories, the novel ends with Richard sharing with his German friend, Detlaf, and with the refugees, a story of his wife, which he and Detlaf, and definitely he and the refugees had “never spoken about anything like this before” (Erpenbeck 281). With this reversal between storyteller and listener, Erpenbeck underscores the ability of storytelling to see past borders of race and culture, and she more greatly includes Richard in this process. Listening acts as a higher form of seeing, in which borders of race, place, and understanding have been bridged through Richard and the refugees’ equal participation in listening and telling.

This connection to memory surfaces throughout the book, as Richard constantly reflects on his own personal memories and the collective memories of German history. Combined with storytelling, Richard uses these memories as a means to see beneath surfaces and borders in

cultivating a greater understanding of the refugees and empathy for them. He filters the present day through associations with Nazi Germany and the Berlin wall, where presently tourists are here to “see ‘Alex,’ the center of that part of Berlin long known as the ‘Russian zone’ and still often referred to as the ‘Eastern zone’ in jest” (Erpenbeck 15). As Baker says of these historical cycles,

Erpenbeck does not simply show a direct link between violence and precarity; her novel discerns as well politically divergent categories of violence across generations, geopolitical situations, geographical locations, and points in history... Though commonalities can be found in these experiences of violence, the aftermath of the violence that Richard knows from his own national history is radically different from that which the refugees experience in the twenty-first century. (511,13)

Although Erpenbeck may set up these contrasts in violence to highlight the radically different types of violence experienced by Richard and the refugees, Richard’s memory and reflections also serve as a point of translation, allowing him to see and understand connections across cultural memories. He uses these historical changes to understand from the men’s perspectives, searching for a grounding in similarity among his own historical memories and those shared with him by the refugees.

Herta Müller, in her text *Nadirs*, as well seeks to see beyond borders and surfaces, most notably doing so through the surface of language itself. Through the genre of magic realism, Müller crafts a narrative at first confusing for its encompassment of both the real and the absurd. Although storytelling does not carry the same oral tradition as shown in Erpenbeck’s novel, in this text, it instead

reflects the idea of bridging the border between author and reader. Playing with language and meaning, Müller's novel develops a set of codes for readers to decipher, mimicking a theme common to *Trümmerliteratur*, German "literature of the rubble" post WWII. Ernestine Schlant argues in her well received book, *The Language of Silence*, that feelings of denial, rationalization, and chaos controlled post-war Germany, and "most literature of the immediate postwar period was dominated by vague feelings of guilt ... and the relief over having managed to escape (21-22). Because of this, German *Trümmerliteratur* rarely spoke directly to the Holocaust, where "this silence was pervasive; it rested on unstated shared thinking, established unconscious bonds of complicity, and relied on code words for communication" (Schlant 25). Although *Nadirs* cannot be classified in this category of literature for its much later publication date, it shares this trait of language as speaking through code words and beneath surfaces. One notable instance of this in *Nadirs* is Müller's use of the word turnip as a "code word" or symbol of violence against women. In regard to the rapes committed by her father during WWII, the narrator hears, "Your father stuck a turnip between her legs. When we left she was bleeding. She was Russian. For weeks afterwards, we would call all weapons turnips" (Müller 3). This symbol of the turnip repeats itself through the novel, as later, when the narrator herself gets raped: "Jesus hangs on the side of the road bleeding and looks disinterested into the turnip fields through a window of broken plum trees" (Müller 92), where the turnip again alludes to violence against women. This coding throughout the novel infiltrates the surface of Müller's simplistic sentence structure, subscribing deeper meaning to language and crafting a fuller narrative of violence.

*Nadirs* as a text defined by the genre of magic realism additionally appears at first to act as an inhibiting surface to understanding yet ultimately affords Müller increased literary agency. As Costica Bradatan writes of Müller's style in his critical article "Herta Müller's Language of Resistance,"

Language is like air. You realize how important it is only when it is messed up. Then it can kill you. Those working for totalitarian regimes know this better than anyone else: messing with language can be an efficient means of political control...If the system's power comes from its ability to affect people's minds through language, any resistance should come from language as well. The regime may use magical thinking for its own purposes, but the writer can oppose it through an enchantment of her own.

Müller uses the surface of magic realism to gain power, manipulating language in the face of its manipulation by totalitarianism regimes--a form of oppression also reminiscent of Nazi Propaganda. To accomplish this, Bradatan speaks to Müller's description of village language completely its own--a language which "remains unaffected by political intrusion" (Bradatan). I would add that, through magic realism, Müller additionally gains control over acts of violence otherwise dominated by the regime. As Müller writes, "A man was leaning his cane against a big rock. He aimed his rifle and shot down the sleeve. When it sank to the ground in front of me it was covered with blood. The funeral congregation applauded" (4). This idea of language--and Müller's representation of violence--as far from stagnant, as shifting before your eyes, highlights a refusal of the dominant of language of violence and power. While the people remain powerless to the government and

perpetrators of genocide, Müller's violent imagery appears and then disappears throughout almost every sentence, allowing her, through imagery, to control the language of violence. As Bratadan quotes Müller in his essay, "Even though she does not use it for literary purposes, the language 'always accompanies me as I write, because it has grown into my own seeing.'" In this manner, Müller manipulates the surface of language to extend seeing and meaning beyond rhetoric and beyond who controls this rhetoric.

This idea of language as a surface--as something to be seen beneath, and as a tool to be translated into greater meaning, reflects the idea of translation itself. According to Walter Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator," "a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language" (79). Individual words and their meanings act as a surface to "a greater language," or a larger overall meaning. As both *Go*, *Went*, *Gone*, and *Nadirs* are both translated texts, this powerful message of surfaces and borders applies to more than just themes throughout the novels but to the role of the translator in bestowing a greater language beneath the surface of words. The act of translation occurs doubly as the translator seeks to maintain the greater meaning behind the authors' original texts, and as readers attempt to translate the surface of language in uncovering this larger intention.

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# *An Emersonian Theology*

Pilar Birrell '19



What I consider to be one of the most perplexing and intriguing aspects of human existence is the almost universal inclination for individuals to spiritually connect with some divine, ultimate, and spiritual force or being that is, in many ways, enigmatic. For a large percentage of people, this inclination manifests itself in the willing adherence to an established religious tradition that embraces the existence of some conventionally understood deity/deities. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus all belong to this category of spiritual seekers, but what of the group of individuals who reject the notion of such a transcendent and superhuman creator, and who are dissatisfied with conventional religious interpretations of what I call this “universal pull towards spiritual imagination?” I have always fallen into the latter category, and have spent my life attempting to reconcile my dissatisfaction with institutionalized religions with my equally strong conviction that there is “something greater” to life that cannot be understood through any concrete sensory means, but that can only be abstractly *felt*. Through time spent reveling in the monumental beauty of the natural world, I was able to arrive at the conclusion that this “something greater” can be found within Nature herself, that we need not limit the exploration/expression of this “universal pull towards spiritual imagination” to conventions and traditions, and that pious devotion can

therefore be practiced on an individual, case by case basis. One can display piety by dutifully attending Church as one of God's children, or one can spiritually devote oneself to Nature and worship beneath the trees; both modes of religiosity are, in essence, synonymous. Upon reading the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I found support for these personal theological convictions, and discovered an entire theology illustrated within his most famous texts. In line with my assumptions that appreciation of the natural world constitutes a religion of sorts, Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and "The Poet" construct an astoundingly sophisticated theological model in which God is reimagined as non-conformant human creative expression; moreover, Emerson depicts the Poet as a prophetic figure of sorts who is uniquely able to interpret the word of God and resist conformity through a deep connection with/understanding of Nature, and he suggests that the Poet can therefore bridge the cosmic gap between God and the physical world (humanity) and deliver the word of God by putting words to the enigmatic wonders of Nature.

In classical theology, God is customarily imagined as an absolutely transcendent being that is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. As one might imagine, an interpretation of God as entirely transcendent poses a problem for human devotees in that it creates a sort of gulf between God and man which restricts our understanding and our discussions of God. In an attempt to overcome this linguistic obstacle regarding human understandings of what God is/what God wants, theologians often create metaphors- or "models"- for God so as to bridge the gulf between the divine and the human realms. In her book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, theologian Sally McFague discusses at length the ways in which different theologies employ different metaphors for

God depending on what they consider to be God's ultimate agenda in the human world. McFague argues that traditional Christian metaphors for God are inadequate and distort the Biblical message by presenting a God-Human relationship that allows for man's continued abuse of the natural world and its limited resources; she therefore proposes an imagination of the "world as God's body" as an alternative theological metaphor that would classify sin as any action/worldview that brings harm to the environment (McFague). Although this brief divergence might seem largely unrelated to the objective of this essay, Emerson's "alternative theology" in fact subscribes to this very same pantheistic belief in the divinity of the natural world. In "The Poet," he writes that, "... the world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity..." (259). Since it is evident that Emerson displays similarly pantheistic beliefs, an understanding of McFague's argument and her environmentally conscious model for God is essential in order to likewise fully understand the theological implications of Emerson's work.

Similar to McFague's model of God and its attempt to reimagine the earth as "God's body," Emerson's model merges this same pantheistic philosophy with his own unique assumption that God manifests Godself in the world by way of human creativity and "self-reliance." Throughout the essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson seeks to emphasize the importance- to both society as a whole as well as the individual- of self-reliance/nonconformity, and covertly relates this idea to the topic of religious devotion with such subtle language as, "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind" (238). According to Emerson, the act of conforming to societal norms somewhat diminishes one's personhood, and moreover constitutes a

divergence from God's divine will. In reference to the majority of the population that does in fact conform to societal expectations and therefore fail to achieve self-reliance, Emerson writes that, "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents... but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. It needs a divine man to exhibit any thing divine" (237). He goes on to further develop this point, and does so in a manner so eloquent that it is worth quoting at length:

Trust thyself... Accept the place that divine Providence has found for you... Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay plastic under the Almighty effort... (237)

The clear connection drawn in this passage between religious devotion and self-reliance supports a reading of "Self-Reliance" as one of McFague's "alternative metaphors for God," in which God is reimagined as *human creativity*. Emerson intriguingly presents "self trust" as an act of "divine Providence," insinuating that the dismissal of one's personal desires/beliefs in order to conform to mainstream society would likewise constitute a dismissal of God's will. The language seen here indubitably articulates a theological perspective that equates the unique thoughts of every individual with the presence of God in human bodies and suggests that faith in one's own thoughts and

feelings is inextricably tied to one's faith in God. Whereas McFague argues that disrespect/abuse of our natural world constitutes sin, Emerson's new theological model for God further develops this idea by additionally classifying social/creative conformity as sinful (237). Just as McFague's theology envisions *environmental neglect* as an act against God, Emerson's theology additionally understands *conformity* to be an act against God and His divine agenda. "Self-Reliance" provides readers with the basic structure of Emerson's theology and illustrates his assumption that self-reliance and devotion to God are intertwined; however, it is not until we analyze Emerson's equally influential work, "The Poet," that we are shown his theology in full.

If we accept Emerson's two-pronged metaphor for God - which proposes that God manifests Godself in the natural world, and that conformity limits human ability to connect with this Godly manifestation by stifling individuality/expression - then it becomes evident that the role of the poet is to hear, interpret, and deliver the messages of Nature (or God) in order to awaken spiritual seekers from their conformity-induced ignorance. Similar to the theological habit of utilizing metaphors in order to bridge the gulf between God and humanity, many theologies also look towards physical incarnations of God, such as prophets, in order to overcome the problem of God's transcendence. In his theological text, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann discusses what he believes to be the defining characteristics of a religious prophet and asserts that socially/politically effective prophetic figures are well versed in scriptural traditions and use that knowledge of tradition to evoke profound emotion among religious adherents so as to catalyze a revival of "authentic" Christianity (Brueggemann 10). In "The Poet,"

Emerson presents an illustration of the poet that beautifully parallels the aforementioned characterization of a prophet. Early on in the piece, Emerson admits that all men are born with the ability to interpret nature, but that only the poet has the unique capacity to rationalize and articulate his interpretations. Emerson writes:

I know not how it is that we need an interpreter; but the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature. There is no man who does not anticipate a supersensual utility in the sun, and stars, and earth, and water... But there is some obstruction, or some excess of phlegm in our constitution, which does not suffer them to yield the due effect. Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. (255)

Much like my earlier claim that humans experience an almost “universal pull towards spiritual imagination,” Emerson maintains that all men “anticipate a supersensual utility” in nature, but simply lack the ability to “report the conversation they have had with nature.” This observation is a rather tragic one, but is rendered somewhat less so by Emerson’s assurance that, “The poet is the person in whom these powers [of articulation] are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” (255). Considering these passages alongside Brueggemann’s commentary about prophets, it makes sense to conclude that Emerson’s “Poet” represents a sort of Prophet in his theology. In line with the assumption that Emerson’s thoughts on self-reliance might be understood as a theological model for God, then the

poet- as the individual most immune to conformity and therefore most adept at communicating the secrets of Nature - can justifiably be interpreted as a prophetic figure. In the concluding paragraphs of "The Poet," Emerson slightly shifts his narrative style and employs language that sounds overtly biblical, using phrases such as "Thou shalt" and "God wills also that..." (268), that clearly invoke the image of God delivering commandments to human devotees. About the poet, Emerson writes that, "All the creatures, by pairs and by tribes, pour into his mind as into Noah's arc, to come forth again to people a new world," and intriguingly follows by briefly mentioning "rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael" (268). By referencing Noah and his prophetic role in liberating God's creatures from a catastrophic flood, Emerson effectively and quite clearly invites readers to categorize the work of poets as prophetic. From his basic linguistic choices to his insistence on the poet's superior ability to commune with the natural world, Emerson cleverly presents a description of the poet as a somewhat divine manifestation of God that exists to bridge the gulf between man and God (Nature).

With the central theological elements of Emerson's work having been teased out, we are now forced to question the overall significance of the argument that the Poet is a prophetic figure who interprets the word of God via Nature and translates it for less self-reliant, non-poets. On page 264 of "The Poet," Emerson proposes that, "Poets are thus liberating gods," seemingly conflating the Poet with God in a way that would move beyond an interpretation of the poet as a prophet. However, such a reading of this passage would be largely incompatible with the theology I am claiming Emerson has constructed in these works, for it would present the poet as being an actual, transcendent God rather than a *human* vehicle for

the deliverance of God's word. The poet is not God, but is rather simply the type of human best equipped to receive, interpret, and then deliver God's will. Because he possesses such innate immunity to societal conformity, the poet preaches the word of God by way of literary/poetic production, and in this way attempts to eliminate earthly sin and suffering. But how does this eliminate suffering? What does poetry do to eliminate sin? Why is the liberative work of poets even desirable? Emerson certainly seeks to answer these questions throughout the entirety of "The Poet," but paying close attention to two specific passages can help us narrow our focus and determine how these questions might be answered. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson proclaims that, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (238) by demanding conformity, suggesting that the liberating being done in "The Poet" is from the manhood-stripping confines of this conformity. "The Poet" argues that,

There is good reason why we should prize this liberation... On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying... Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene. (265)

These two quotations from two of Emerson's different essays seem to perfectly answer the aforementioned questions. The poet's eloquence with words breaks the restrictive chains of "society" by directing fellow humans towards self-reliance; a divine duty that is only available to the poet through his unparalleled bond with Nature. I always felt that individuals can achieve a special sort of

intellectual clarity by taking time to enjoy all that the natural world has to offer, and finding this same sentiment expressed within the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson reinforces my faith in Nature. Maybe all humanity really needs in order to right all of our wrongs is for each person to sit silently under the stars, take on the task of the poet, and listen to God.

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# *The Mythological Role of the Hymen in Virginity Testing*

Savannah Delgross '19



For an episode of her Netflix docuseries *Sex & Love Around the World*, journalist Christiane Amanpour traveled to Beirut, Lebanon to explore Arab culture in relation to female sexuality. In this episode, a gynecologist/sexologist in Beirut meets with a female patient who is about to marry her fiancé and not only fears losing her virginity, but sex in general. She says she is so uncomfortable whenever sex scenes appear on television that she must leave the room, and she has cancelled two other marriage engagements out of fear of sex, which for her, also comes with the fear of losing her hymen. The doctor tells Amanpour that her patient's fear of sex comes from growing up in a religious culture that fetishizes the hymen. "It's not easy letting go of something you've been instructed to protect your whole life," she says ("Beirut"). Clearly, the religious and cultural obsession of the hymen informs this woman's sense of self and limits her sexuality.

As the hymen is believed to be integral to diagnosing virginity, the cultural understanding around it contributes to determining a woman's social status. Virginity tests that involve an examination of the hymen to diagnose a woman's virginity rely on the notion that the appearance of a hymen can provide evidence of whether a woman is a virgin or not. However, given the lack of forensic evidence that the existence or appearance of the

hymen can indicate one's sexual experiences, virginity testing exists on the basis of belief rather than facts. Therefore, it is unethical for virginity tests, which are entrenched in religious values and cultural ideology rather than standards of evidence, to be performed as a medical practice. When a woman has an upbringing in a society that values virginity tests, recognizing the practice as a negative obligation to the woman's relational autonomy is of importance to denying the testing altogether. This is to say that the woman could be "in danger of oppressive socialization and oppressive social relationships that impair their autonomy by conditions that unduly form their desires, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes and improperly thwart the development of the capacities and competencies essential for autonomy" (Beachamp and Childress 106). A woman's autonomy should not be subjected to the harmful patriarchal constraints that socialize her oppression.

Although values of the hymen vary across cultures and eras, it is evident that the hymen plays a strong, symbolic role rather than a factual one. It is commonly believed that the hymen is a membrane that covers the opening of the vagina (Christianson and Eriksson 108). The existence of a membrane founds many cultural understandings of the hymen, as it is often believed that a hymen breaks or tears upon virginity loss. Although a societal understanding of the covering membrane still persists today, its existence has been debunked in the medical field. Early physicians, like Soranus of Ephesus of 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, did not find evidence that every woman has a thin membrane that grows across the vagina (15). Yet, recently, in 2013, researchers Monica Christianson and Carola Eriksson found that people believe a membrane is the norm, as 66% of international midwives believed girls are born with a covering membrane that breaks during

vaginal intercourse (Christianson and Eriksson 108). A 2011 study found that 1 in 1000 to 1 in 10,000 girls are born with a covering membrane, known as a “hymen imperforate” (Christianson and Eriksson 108).

Universalizing this conception – that the hymen is a covering membrane – dismisses the fact that physical variants among female bodies exist, allowing sociocultural politics to determine and popularize a mythologized definition of vaginal anatomy. In parts of the world where chastity ideals remain strong, Christianson and Erikson conclude that, “the myths about a ‘tiny membrane’ create traditional social constructions for women as good wives and good mothers” and such myths only serve to control women’s sexuality (Christianson and Eriksson 108).

Loaded with patriarchal values, the hymen signifies much more than the mere existence of a membrane. In Lebanon (and many parts of the world), women are expected to have an intact hymen until their wedding night, also known as “the night of penetration” (“laylit al dukhla”) in Arab culture (El Kak, El Salibi, Yasmine, and Ghandour 155). The intact hymen represents a woman’s purity and chastity, which upholds her family honor and enhances her marriageability (El Kak et al 155). In Lebanon, the strong cultural ideals revolving around the hymen controls women’s bodily autonomy (El Kak et al 155).

Consequently, women, like the female patient from Lebanon in *Sex & Love Around the World*, grow a desire to protect their hymen, which, for them, also means protecting their virginity. A study conducted in Lebanon in 2012 titled “Hymen protection and the sexual practices, perceptions, and attitudes of female university students from Lebanon,” looks at the ways women participate in sexual acts while protecting their hymen. Researchers found that 39.3% of women reported participating in anal/oral sex to protect

their hymen (El Kak et al 155). The sociocultural values placed on the hymen, meant to restrict women's sexuality, coerces women to find a new means of submitting to the male pressures of heterosexual sex while keeping their hymen intact. For some women, engaging in oral or anal sex might violate religious prohibitions around sexuality, yet women find it more important to not engage in vaginal sex in order to protect their hymen. As the female patient makes clear, the hymen is so highly fetishized in her culture that it is understood more like a protected ideal rather than a part of her body.

While the term 'intact hymen' often signals virginity, what qualifies as a sign of virginity is disputed across various cultures. For example, the Spanish Roma people called Gitanos believe there is a grape, an uva, that contains yellowish liquid, called the honra (Blank 75). However, a description of this grape is not mentioned in any Western book of anatomy, nor do gynecologists identify the grape (Blank 75). The Gitanos believe the liquid can only be spilled once, when a woman loses her virginity on her wedding night and is worthy of celebration. This differs from the popular signs of virginity in Western culture – intact hymen and bleeding. Thus, there is no standard, objective evidence for signs of virginity that cuts across culture and time. The signs of virginity, including the hymen, are easily mythologized – they're ideals clinging to cultural values respective to a certain place and time.

Some virginity tests function on the basis that a hymen's physical existence, form, or appearance can indicate vaginal penetration. In a study that analyzed medical findings which support or refute allegations of sexual penetration, researchers Felicity Goodyear-Smith and Tannis Laidlaw conclude in their article, "What is an

‘Intact’ Hymen? A Critique of the Literature,” that, due to the natural variability in the size, shape, and appearance of hymens, “it is impossible to establish whether or not a hymen is ‘intact’ with respect to past sexual intercourse” (299). They also took into account that the hymen can be disrupted from non-sexual causes, such as tampon use, sporting activities, or undergoing a pelvic examination (Goodyear-Smith and Laidlaw 295-297). In societies where the hymen upholds virginity ideals, virginity tests that involve the examination of the hymen suggest that an ideal hymen – one intact, undisrupted, and unchangeable – must exist. This seems a mere fetishizing of the hymen that does not acknowledge the fact that hymens vary heavily in appearance. Without a standard for evidence, virginity should not be diagnosable through vaginal examination.

A hymen plays a mythological role in virginity tests as its ideals vary in accordance to culture and its anatomical existence cannot prove virginity – both of these notions eliminate its significance in diagnosing virginity on the basis of forensic evidence. The hymen’s real significance, rather, relies on social norms and traditions. In Lebanon, many women resort to hymenoplasty – the surgical repair of the hymen to appear intact – in order to restore their marriageability according to Lebanese social norms and traditions (Hajali 28). The intact hymen is a marriage prerequisite among Lebanese men. The implied goal of hymenoplasty is to return the hymen to a natural standard, yet that standard is not definitively established. V. Raveenthiran notes that “the appearance of a hymen is variously described as cribriform, eccentric septate, annular, crescentic, denticulate, infundibuliform, subseptus, microperforated, vertical and sculptatus” and to which of these “normal variations” the plastic surgeon is trying to emulate during surgery is not made clear (V. Raveenthiran

224-225). This is to say that hymenoplasty is an intense practice of reinforcing the patriarchal values behind the hymen, further perpetuating the myth of an intact hymen proving chastity, to control women's bodies and sexuality.

It is unethical to conduct virginity tests because it asks practitioners to look for socially-constructed, virginal ideals in bodies. Other than an intact hymen, virginity tests can observe other "signs" of virginity believed to be found by examining the body. However, all virginity tests look for signs of virginity, not virginity itself (Blank 77). Some virginity tests look at the size of breasts, throat size, or urination patterns that are established by culturally-specific gender norms in societies. A practice based on socially-constructed signs of evidence, such as the intact hymen, should not be part of the medical field, as such myths could easily be mistaken as medical knowledge. One could argue that virginity tests are ethical because of ethical relativism, "the view that moral standards are not objective but are relative to what individuals or cultures believe" (Vaughn 13). However, when forensic science can debunk the notion that hymens cannot indicate virginity, moral absolutism, "the belief that objective moral principles allow no exceptions or must be applied the same way in all cases and cultures" should override relativism (Vaughn 13). Trusting forensic evidence should be an objective, moral principle. Physicians should deny conducting virginity tests in support of the fact that virginity cannot be seen or measured, and let clients know it is not their place to conduct the test. This will be harder to do in societies where women's virginal status determines their social status, but in the medical sphere, a basis of forensic evidence should be at the root of all medical tests.

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*In-Between Spheres: Black Women's  
Exploitation of Small Spaces in Incidents in  
the Life of a Slave Girl and Uncle Tom's  
Cabin*

Rhayna V. Kramer '19



Nineteenth-century women's literature is almost invariably connected to the home and its associations with domestic behaviors. Though the concept of public and private spaces has existed in some form for most of human history, it seems that no period obsesses over this distinction, or at least publicizes it, more than this period. This general observation is consistent with the reality that, as production shifted away from the household economy to an increasingly industrialized one, the lines between the public and private sphere—and thus between men and women--became more rigidly defined. Conduct books and women's magazines reinforced these gendered ideals. In the United States, *The Godey's Lady's Book*, for example, featured domestic science articles entitled "How to Cook Potatoes," "House and Home: The Baby" (1887), and "Spring Cleaning with Godey Lady's Book," reminding women of their responsibilities toward creating peaceful, sacred domestic sanctuaries. In their now clearly-defined roles, women would impart to their husbands and children the moral strength that would arm them against the increasingly individualistic, hostile, and competitive world

of commerce (Clinton 37). Women's roles thus solidified, the private sphere became an established truth.

What, then, are we to make of an enslaved black woman, whose unique existence, both as a human performer of conventional household duties and as an object to be bought and sold in the slave market, positions her as an inhabitant of both the private *and* public spaces? (Green-Bartteet 67). What of the reality that the home, the most indisputable marker of safety and virtue in a hostile world, is the least safe for an enslaved woman, whose fears of sexual advances and physical abuses from slaveholders are a daily reality? The domestic contradictions of slavery--that a woman cannot be safe in her own home due to sexual exploitation and that, because of this, she cannot enjoy coveted feminine virtues, like chastity and homemaking--reveal that the celebrated "cult of womanhood" was never intended for black women. Black female characters in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are particularly aware of these contradictions. Faced with the unmet conditions of domestic sanctuary, some women respond defiantly by closing themselves off in small garrets, neglecting their masters, their household duties, and even their own children. It is often within these spaces--otherwise confining and restrictive--where black women find, ironically, freedom from their imperfect domestic situations and the ability to determine the outcomes of their lives.

In this essay, I agree with and attempt to build upon Miranda A. Green-Bartteet's characterization of the garret in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as an "interstitial space," a space that, unlike a home, is built incomplete and without intention. Subsequently, its construction places no domestic expectations on a woman, allowing her to use the

space however she sees fit. Though a garret obviously imposes physical restrictions on her movements, Linda Brent's defiant choice to stay there--instead of tending to her children and housework--indicates some rejection of domestic virtues--virtues not evenly applied to black women in the first place. This framework of empowering small spaces in *Incidents*, as I will separately argue, can also be further applied to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In both works, black women appropriate garret spaces to achieve bodily autonomy and control their own destinies, despite their enslaved conditions.

To appreciate in full the concept of an "interstitial space," we turn now to Green-Barteet's analysis, which outlines the space's demonstrated purpose and its relevance to Jacobs' *Incidents*. Put simply, an interstitial space is a "fully accessible walk-through space above a ceiling and beneath a floor" (54). A common feature of medical facilities since the mid-twentieth century, interstitial spaces "serve to house mechanical services that do not need to be accessed regularly" (54-55). Typically, the contents of these spaces are meant to be concealed completely. Taken together, the interstitial space's architectural "in-betweenness," concealed nature, and limited access can help us make sense of the garret in Jacobs' powerful narrative.

The garret where Linda Brent spends seven years of her life possesses similar features to those outlined above. First, like the modern interstitial space, the garret is a space "in between 'boards and the roof'" (Jacobs 127). Second, it is not meant to be accessed regularly, if at all. Linda says that the dimensions of the garret are only "nine feet long and seven feet wide... the highest part was three feet high" (Jacobs 127). In addition to its small size, it is a place where the "air is stifling; the darkness total," and is "never

occupied by any thing but rats and mice” (Jacobs 127). Clearly, this garret is not fit for human occupation. Finally, it is a place of complete concealment. Since few would know about or willingly occupy a space of suboptimal conditions, it is the perfect hiding place--no one would think to look there. Linda concludes,

Had the suspicion rested on my grandmother’s house, it would have been burned to the ground. But it was the last place they thought of. Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment. (130)

Beyond these descriptive characteristics, this particular garret profoundly lacks definition and demonstrated purpose. Unlike the modern interstitial space, which is built with the specified intent of storing items, Linda’s space is a “hastily built and impermanent structure.” It is “not supposed to exist” (Green-Bartteet 53). Moreover, it serves multiple purposes. As Green-Bartteet explains,

[Linda Brent] goes on to call the garret the “loophole of retreat,” her “place of concealment,” and “my den” throughout her narrative... [she] consciously positions the garret as a borderspace, one that exists betwixt and between other more clearly defined spaces. As [Brent] explains, the garret is essentially a makeshift space, which was built by simply laying boards “across the [ceiling joists]” of a storeroom. Further, “the board floor” is “loose,” suggesting that no nails have been used in the garret’s construction, a fact that is emphasized when [Brent] later writes that the boards shift as easily as she moves. (53)

The garret as somehow unintentional, incomplete, and multipurpose implies a space which lacks conformity to

prescribed physical and social norms. Its construction is a suggestion, not a rule. Unlike a home, which engenders clear domestic associations, this garret engenders no “singular or absolute spaces,” “spaces of reason or unreason [...] freedom or domination,”--no rigid binaries between public and private spaces (Green-Barteet 56). Having no absolutes, the garret is an *in-between* space, a space where one can be between identities or take on no identity at all. A woman, for example, does not carry the brand of housewife or a whore in this space--she can be whatever she wants. In this way, the interstitial space becomes a microcosm of an interstitial life.

When we consider a black woman who is also a slave, the garret is also a border space between freedom and slavery, where one can exercise some rights of a free person under the limitations of legal enslavement. Despite these limitations, the garret affords Linda Brent more autonomy over her life than she has ever experienced so far. As Green-Barteet explains,

[Jacobs] is neither one thing nor another--she is neither free nor enslaved, neither able to mother her children nor removed from their lives, neither subject to her master's tyranny nor completely safe from his threats. Jacobs is, however, more in control of her body and her life while in the garret than she has been at any other time of her life. (54)

These newfound lack of absolutes in Linda's life allow her to manipulate the garret space to however she sees fit in the moment. She describes the garret as at once a “small den” and a “loophole of retreat” by day and night (Jacobs 127-128). Whatever the space serves as, Linda's new living arrangement allows her to defiantly neglect the household duties she was expected to fulfill while at the Flints' house. As a “den,” the garret allows Linda to read,

sew, and write about her experiences on her own terms. The discomfort she experiences--“in a certain position near the aperture”--only adds to her defiance of traditional domestic spaces; her newfound hobbies, like her position, are somehow “unnatural” for a woman (Jacobs 129). Linda, herself, admits that this extreme discomfort is, nevertheless, “a great relief to the tedious monotony of my life” in the traditional domestic space (129). In addition to its function as a den, the garret also serves as Linda’s “loophole of retreat,” where Linda can assume the role of a wartime spy, keeping watch over her children from afar and tricking Dr. Flint through false communications of her whereabouts. In this way, she is able to control the events that will eventually lead to her--and her children’s--freedom from slavery

In controlling her own life, Linda does worry that, as a woman and a mother, her actions might be “selfish,” since, in hiding in her grandmother’s garret, she is deliberately separating herself from her children (Jacobs 147). Even her grandmother seems to imply that she is both selfish and a bad mother for leaving her children vulnerable to further exploitation on the plantation.

Mr. Sands called on my grandmother, and told her he wanted her to take the children to his house... [he] told her they were motherless; and she wanted to see them.

When he had gone, my grandmother came and asked what I would do. The question seemed a mockery. What *could* I do? They were Mr. Sands’s slaves, and their mother was a slave, whom he had represented to be dead. (151)

Yet, Linda justifies her actions by pointing out the hypocrisies of parenting under slavery, an institution which

affords no dignity to the sanctity of motherhood in the first place. This confounding realization is especially apparent when Linda considers giving up her daughter Ellen to a Northern white woman, who can arguably provide her with more opportunities than Linda, herself, could:

True, the prospect *seemed* fair; but I knew too well how lightly slaveholders held such ‘parental relations.’ If pecuniary troubles should come... my children might be thought of as a convenient means of raising funds... Never should I know peace till my children were emancipated with all due formalities of law. (Jacobs 74)

Overall, Linda’s time spent in the garret illuminates how slavery complicates celebrated tenets of traditional domesticity, such as housekeeping and virginity. Where housekeeping is concerned, not even the respectability of Brent’s grandmother’s house prevents the white lay officers in the story from breaching the sacred divide between the public and private sphere. They simmer and sneer at, rather than appreciate and admire, the elegant, quaint delicacy with which Linda’s grandmother has arranged her home:

An exclamation of surprise from some of the company put a stop to our conversation.

Some silver spoons which ornamented an old-fashioned buffet had just been discovered. My grandmother was in the habit of preserving fruit for many ladies in the town, and of preparing suppers for parties; consequently she had many jars of preserves... “Wal done! Don’t wonder de niggers want to kill all de white folks, when dey live on ‘sarves” [meaning preserves]. (Jacobs 77)

Slavery also complicates virginity. An unmarried woman should uphold her virginity at all costs--unless she can produce children whose sole purpose is to enrich the

livelihoods of the slave owners. Recognizing hypocrisy of her condition as woman and slave, Linda establishes her own dignity, not in the preservation of her virginity, but in the embrace of Mr. Sands. In this relationship, as Green-Barteet contends, she is “neither a wife nor a whore,” since her relationship is monogamous, but common law forbids slaves and free white men from marrying. In this sense, she is in between roles of wed and unwed.

In our discussion of *Incidents* thus far, it is important to keep in mind that Linda Brent does not defy conventional norms of domesticity because she particularly wants to, but because the constraints of her condition force her to do so. In actuality, Linda wants nothing more than to be a proper, married mother to her children “in a home of her own” (Jacobs 219). At the same time, given the plethora of examples above, even Linda might admit to the fact that her proto-interstitial space and her position in between spheres empowers her in ways that the traditional domestic space might never have offered her.

In-between spaces are also heavily applicable for a discussion of Cassy’s own autonomous attempts to control the outcome of her life in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In this discussion, we must make an important distinction between the garret in this novel and the one in *Incidents*. The garret in the Legree home in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* functions more as a fully-functioning attic than as the “makeshift space” the garret in *Incidents* appears to be. An examination into the detailed description of the Legree garret quickly reveals the intentionality of the structure:

The garret of the house that Legree occupied, like most other garrets, was a great, desolate space, dusty, hung with cobwebs, and littered with cast-off lumber. The opulent family that had inhabited the house in the days of its

splendor had imported a great deal of splendid furniture, some of which they had taken away with them, while some remained standing desolate in mouldering, unoccupied rooms, or stored away in this place. One or two immense packing-boxes, in which this furniture was brought, stood against the sides of the garret. There was a small window there, which let in, through its dingy, dusty panes, a scanty, uncertain light on the tall, high-backed chairs and dusty tables, that had once seen better days. (Stowe 408)

If we understand this garret as a fully-functioning attic used for a specified purpose, rather than as a makeshift space, then this complicates our conception of the garret as an interstitial space. Unlike Linda Brent's garret but like the modern interstitial space, an attic has the express, definite purpose of storage. Attics also tend to be larger in size, and thus easier to access than the makeshift garret of Jacobs' imagining. To this end, one might designate the attic to be someone's bedroom, and it would not be difficult to breach this space in the event that slave catchers are looking for a runaway. There *are* no overt domestic expectations of women associated with an attic, as it *can* serve as a multipurpose space. Nevertheless, the attic is a feature of the overall domestic space, and can entail the domestic expectations of women, depending on its designated purpose.

Despite these complications, this discussion has demonstrated how interstitiality does not necessarily have to be so much about the spaces themselves, but about the people who occupy them. Cassy, for whom the garret becomes a central component of her role in the plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is another example of the slave's interstitial life.

Born into a life of as much luxury and privilege she can muster while still being enslaved, Cassy, like Linda Brent, resides in a world of in-betweens. Her identity as a quadroon--being three-quarters white and one-quarter black--allows her to reap the some of the benefits of whiteness. As a child, Cassy is “kept dressed up like a doll, and company and visitors used to praise” her. She also learns the fine, decorous arts of music and French embroidery (Stowe 375). She later secures the love of a wealthy lawyer who gives her “a beautiful house, with servants, horses, and carriages, and furniture, and dresses” (376). By all accounts, Cassy has obtained the rightful status as wife and mistress of the domestic space.

Despite these advantages, her enslaved condition prevents her from legal recognition and dignity of interracial relationships. Like Linda, Cassy must navigate a complex status somewhere between a wife and a “whore.” Cassy chooses the former in the context of “common law”--or, not officially recognized, practices:

“I only wanted one thing--I did want him to *marry* me. I thought, if he loved me as he said he did, and if I was what he seemed to think I was, he would be willing to marry me and set me free. But he convinced me that it would be impossible; and he told me that, if we were only faithful to each other, it was marriage before God. If that is true, wasn't I that man's wife? Wasn't I faithful?” (376)

Yet, once again, slavery upholds no regard for the sanctity of marriage and family, and the financial self-interest of the slaveholder always takes precedence. Cassy is quickly sold off when her lover accrues gambling debts and falls in love with another woman.

Disheartened by slavery's harsh realities for the quadroon who does not quite assimilate into one world or

another, Cassy must utilize her in-between status as both dignified and denigrated to her own advantage. If she is to escape slavery, she must do so through trickery. One way she accomplishes this is through capitalizing on the Legrees' fear of superstition: "It had suddenly occurred to Cassy to make use of the superstitious excitability, which was so great in Legree, for the purpose of her liberation, and that of her fellow sufferer" (Stowe 408). Here, the garret will become an important aspect of Cassy's mischief.

In addition to its physical characteristics described above, the garret also contains an element of the supernatural, even gothic:

Altogether, it was a weird and ghostly place; but ghostly as it was, it wanted not in legends among the superstitious negroes, to increase its terrors. Some few years before, a negro woman, who had incurred Legree's displeasure, was confined there for several weeks. What passed there, we do not say; the negroes used to whisper darkly to each other; but it was known that the body of the unfortunate creature was one day taken down from there, and buried; and, after that, it was said that oaths and cursings, and the sound of violent blows, used to ring through the old garret, and mingled with wailings and groans of despair. Once, when Legree chanced to overhear something of this kind, he flew into a violent passion, and swore that the next one that told stories about that garret should have an opportunity of knowing what was there, for he would chain them up there for a week. (407-408)

Cassy knows that Legree, who is described as a godless yet overwhelmingly superstitious man, is easily frightened by sounds and legends of the garret: "The Christian is composed by the belief of a wise, all-ruling Father, whose

presence fills the void unknown with light and order, but to the main who has dethroned God, the spirit-land is, indeed... ‘a land of darkness and the shadow of death’” (409).

To this end, Cassy must position herself as some intermediary between the perceived spiritual realms, between the religious and non-religious, to spook and distract Legree so she can plan her escape. She employs servants to move furniture in her room, located directly under the garret, to create a “running and bustling” sound “with great zeal and confusion” to emulate ghostly sounds of the assumedly haunted garret (408). Cassy’s efforts are successful, and she is successfully able to spook Legree and exert her power over him.

Cassy’s actions are an incredible display of a woman’s autonomy in the face of an institution designed to prevent slave women from the effects of domestic submission. Legree once believed to have found for himself “a woman delicately bred” when he bought her, a woman he could “crush... without scruple, beneath the foot of his brutality.” However, as the text goes on to say, “as time, and debasing influences, and despair, hardened woman hood within her, and waked the fires of fiercer passions, she had become in a measure his mistress, and he alternately tyrannized over and dreaded her” (409-410). Clearly, slavery provides a unique opportunity for a woman to exert control over her oppressor, even in the midst of institutional subjugation.

The garret also plays an important role in Cassy’s “stragem” to escape slavery. Her master plan is described as “the final *coup d’etat*,” and the garret is the ultimate site of resistance (412). Cassy confers with Emmeline her plan to leave the house and make Sambo and Quimbo, some of Legrees most loyal slaves, to chase the two women into the

swamp, a place that is incredibly difficult to navigate. This is the site of delay as the two women run back to the house: “Every one will run out of the house to look after us, and then we’ll whip in at the back door, and up into the garret, where I’ve got a nice bed made up in one of the great boxes. We must stay in that garret a good while, for I tell you, he will raise heaven and earth after us... So let him hunt at his leisure” (413).

The fact that everyone, men and women included, dashes out of the private sphere and into the public sphere to catch these two women, while Cassy and Emmeline stay inside the domestic space is a very powerful image for a slave woman to challenge the ideals of the home. In this scenario, the home is the place of safety, but not a safety associated with conventional norms of domesticity in a woman. Cassy’s decision to inhabit both the public and private spheres, but ultimately reside in a private space that she utilizes for her own benefit highlights her interstitial life, and the interstitial lives of other slave women who have had to make tough decisions to secure their own life outcomes. Cassy and Linda are two of those women.

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