LEADING BY EXAMPLE:
ARIEL FELTON'S "A LETTER TO MY NIECE" AS A MODEL AND A WARNING

DION HAZELL

In her essay "A Letter to My Niece," Ariel Felton lays bare the unfair pressures and standards she faces as a Black woman. While she identifies the dominant white society as a source of these pressures, much of the pressure she feels was internalized. Beginning in childhood and continually throughout her life, Felton responds to "the world's view of [her] by apologizing and trying to correct what [she] saw as mistakes in [herself]." She discovers later in life—and in many ways, as she witnesses her niece, Thalia, grow up—that no one should have to apologize for or check their identity in order to be accepted by society. Felton feels it is imperative that Thalia learns this lesson, and it is why she has written her this letter. But how to most effectively convey this lesson to her niece?

Initially, it appears that Felton has opted for reverse psychology. She tells Thalia what *not* to do, likely in the hope that Thalia will do the opposite. Felton tells Thalia, "I still carried within me the same clean slate I once envied you for," and yet she challenges Thalia in much of her letter in order to inspire Thalia's defiance. What is the challenge? Don't be like me. Felton reminds her niece of an ideal period, the stage in life before all those pressures start to shape you: "Nobody was yet telling you who to be like, who not to end up like. The world had not yet told you who you were, who you could or should be. You just were." After that period, Felton spent much of her life altering her behavior to avoid stigma and resist being stereotyped. For an aunt who is offering advice to her niece, Felton certainly takes a risk when she writes, "if you were looking up to me all those years, Thalia, I hope you learned what *not* to do." Thalia must now choose if she will heed her aunt's example of what *not* to be—namely Ariel Felton—or make her own decisions as to whether her aunt is a worthy advisor.

In her letter to her niece, Felton makes the case for seeing her own life as a cautionary tale, and she includes evidence throughout to warn against her own example. Her lead, had she not changed, is one that should not be followed. As she details her reactions to the most degrading of racial slurs, she writes, "[A] nigger isn't smart, so I became Type-A obsessive over my grades and accomplishments. A nigger's hair is kinky, so I sobbed every day until your Granny finally relented and let me perm my hair. A nigger spoke a certain way; so I sounded like I was raised by the Brady Bunch." While there's nothing inherently wrong with getting good grades or speaking a particular way, Felton is stressing the less-than-desirable motivations for doing so: external pressures and expectations.

However, a sense of irony occurs to the reader as Felton criticizes herself and shares anecdotes from her life: Felton might actually be someone to be admired. The author

leaves enough room for readers, including Thalia, to see that there might be positive effects from her earlier choices. Perhaps Felton intends, with each move away from the associations of that racial slur, to broaden what it can mean to be Black, to claim for herself more freedom not only from white notions of Blackness, but also ultimately from her own *Black* notions of Blackness. What she initially portrays as self-repressive conformity reveals itself to be an attempt at defiance of restrictive stereotypes. This fits the overall character of her letter to Thalia, which aims to teach self-definition. Could it be that Felton does indeed see herself as an example to follow?

Felton uses her letter to reckon with her lifelong struggle against the N-word and the discomfort she herself experienced with any behavior associated with it. She tells Thalia that it was hard "to admit to you and to myself, but my opinions of black people, including your mother, followed this behavior." It is hard to admit because Felton simultaneously bemoans how she chose to counter being seen that way. But within the same paragraph, she praises her sister, Thalia's mother: "to her credit, I don't think your mother ever believed the story the world tried to tell her about herself." So why is it that when Felton rejects stereotypical and limiting beliefs, it is regrettable, but her sister's doing so is worthy of "credit?" While both sisters challenged the narrative about who a Black woman should be, Thalia's mother did it by being "aggressively confident and headstrong," whereas Felton "just wanted to fit in." Although she generally expresses regret about her attempts to fight stereotypes, Felton notes the positive aspect of "pride" that sometimes came with those choices, as well as the "fear" that her sister's choices sometimes caused her. By revealing her deeply conflicted feelings about the choices she made in her life, Felton attempts to teach Thalia not by outright instruction, but by highlighting the upside of defiance, a quality she sees in Thalia. If Felton was merely self-critiquing, it would primarily suggest that her judgement was flawed, making her advice less credible to Thalia. But by simultaneously acknowledging and questioning her past decisions, she might suggest to her niece that Felton is not only accomplished, but a bit of a rebel herself.

Felton is trying to impart a lesson of self-definition to Thalia: there can be pride, even when there is regret, but one has to make one's own choices. Felton would not want Thalia to be constrained by white society's notion of Blackness, but nor would she want Thalia constrained by Felton's own past biases. When explaining how both the white and Black perspectives weighed on her, Felton tellingly writes, "but there was, and maybe there always will be, a limit to how far I could go," when referring to how she distanced her identity from that of other Black people. Felton's use of the future tense—"maybe there always will be"—indicates that she continues to test the limits of how far she might be able to free herself from all imposing ideas of Black womanhood.

In what might be considered the climax of the letter, Felton compares her own running away from her true identity to Thalia's running away from her literal home. One dramatic night, Thalia frantically flees her house in the heat of an argument with

her mother, whereas Felton has been fleeing her own nature for most of her life. Ultimately, Felton argues that both she and Thalia should learn from each other "what *not* to do." She makes clear that what most resonated with her in Thalia's story "was the helplessness of that running . . . the pointlessness of it." Thalia is made to see that both running from a seemingly wrong place and running toward a seemingly right place can be futile.

Rather than run away or try to fit in, Felton had to grow into her knowledge of herself. Growing into that knowledge required her lived experience. So even if some elements of her character had been seen as too white, or were labeled too Black, she now knows that to risk being labeled is preferable to navigating an imposed identity and missing out on knowing herself in the process. Ultimately defining herself as someone whose personality incorporates elements of different cultural spheres, Felton is increasingly comfortable with her tendency to "overly pronounce [her] consonants" *and* the fact that she has a "country accent." She carries coconut oil in her purse to moisturize her Black skin, *and* she watches the quintessentially white rom-com *You've Got Mail.* She enjoys both the white essayist Joan Didion *and* the Black rapper Plies. What better example could Thalia have of not choosing either/or? Felton's ultimate challenge to her niece: Don't follow anyone else's path, *not even mine.*

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DEFINITIONS OF DIFFERENCE
IN AUDRE LORDE'S "AGE, RACE, CLASS, AND SEX"

CHRISTINE PIAZZA

In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde brings her readers' attention to the cost—both individually and communally—of ignoring the complexity of overlapping identities. In writing about the women's movement of the later twentieth century, Lorde spotlights the phenomenon of white women who "focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age" (116). Later in the essay, Lorde narrows her focus even further with the declaration, "Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" (117). As an example of "ignoring the differences of race between women," Lorde then cites women's studies courses that shy away from discussing the intersectionality of race and gender, with their instructors instead choosing to read only literature written by white women.

Yet, this example has a surprising feature. We might expect that, if pressed, the creators of these courses would justify their decision by saying, "Women are women; why does it matter if we read literature by white women or women of color?"—a response that would be consistent with Lorde's objection that these women are ignoring the differences of race. However, according to Lorde, the opposite excuse is given: those whom she accuses of ignoring racial differences are said to argue "that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot 'get into' them because they come out experiences that are 'too different'" (117). Presented with this contrast, readers may ask whether the real problem presented by Lorde is white women *ignoring* racial differences, or white women *magnifying* racial differences.

The key to understanding this tension is realizing that in this passage, Lorde uses the word "difference" to refer both to her own conception of difference as people's "actual complexities" and to a racist understanding of difference through "problematic but familiar stereotypes" (118). These two conceptions of difference could be called 'actual difference' and 'stereotypical difference.' Moreover, careful examination of Lorde's use of "difference" shows that recognizing actual difference requires a balancing act—seeing diversity in the context of a shared experience—whereas appeals to stereotypical difference deny all commonalities, even the shared experience of being human.

Early in the passage, Lorde signals the dual use of the word "difference" by flagging her reference to stereotypical difference with quotation marks. She signals stereotypical difference when describing how reading lists that lack women of color are defended, in part, because the teachers of those classes believe they "cannot 'get

into'" writing by women of color because those literatures "come out of experiences that are 'too different'" (117). In their most standard use, quotation marks literally indicate another voice than the author's; they can also characterize a phrase as non-standard or incorrect. Here, Lorde works with both of these uses of quotation marks to highlight the falsity of stereotypical difference and separate it from actual difference.

What, then, are the characteristics that define actual and stereotypical difference? Paradoxically, one of the distinguishing features of actual difference, according to Lorde, is that it encompasses a simultaneous recognition of points of similarity; every mention of actual difference in this passage is paired with a reference to some shared experience. In the first sentence, Lorde refers to "the differences of race between women," not simply "the differences of race" (117); her phrase balances a sense of actual differences with a reference to the shared state of being female. Later on, Lorde is yet more explicit about the necessity of this simultaneous awareness of similarity and difference, lamenting white women's "reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves" (118). Here, by joining "women" and "different" with the conjunction "and," Lorde places the need to be seen as fellow women on an equal footing with the need to be seen as different. Moreover, by making "women" the first conjunct, Lorde's phrasing suggests that recognizing the shared experience of womanhood is a prerequisite to understanding actual difference. Finally, Lorde deploys first-person plural pronouns to make the sense of a shared experience more visceral; she refers to the difference between women of color and white women as "the difference between us," a wording that adds emotional emphasis to the pattern of mentioning actual difference only in the context of a shared experience (118).

Ultimately, Lorde broadens the possibilities of shared experience to include any human commonality when she writes, "To examine Black women's literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as human—" (118). Two rhetorical features in this sentence particularly emphasize the inseparability of actual difference from similarity: the use of dashes and of not one, but four words signaling shared experience ("people," "individuals," "women," and "human"). The list of points of similarity "as individuals, as women, as human" is surrounded by dashes, and since this is the only use of dashes on the page, it creates a particularly striking visual effect which draws the reader's eye to this list. Elsewhere in the passage, Lorde has focused on shared womanhood as a basic similarity; here, she embeds the word "women" between the more general terms "individuals" and "human." This configuration evokes a Venn diagram wherein the set of "women" is completely surrounded by the larger set of "individuals/humans," thus visually encouraging readers to look for the most fundamental shared experience when confronting actual difference. Moreover, the sentence as a whole features multiple terms whose denotations overlap considerably, especially "people," "individuals," and "human"; thus, Lorde is using parallelism to underscore the pervasiveness of shared experiences. Each reprise of a word that signals common

humanity, like "people" or "individuals," renews the readers' awareness of this essential shared experience. Despite all this language of similarity, though, the sentence is in fact discussing how to grapple with actual difference, with people's "actual complexities"; thus, Lorde's careful phrasing reveals that actual difference can only be understood from the perspective of a basic shared experience.

By contrast, Lorde uncovers the lie of stereotypical difference, which presents a difference so absolute that it even denies shared humanity. In one of the most powerful logical appeals of the essay, Lorde contrasts "the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Moliere, Dostoyefsky [sic], and Aristophanes" with the claim that literatures of women of color "come out of experiences that are 'too different'" (117). In the first sentence, those who talk of "experiences that are 'too different'" are presumably referring to cultural differences, not explicitly denying shared human experience. Then, Lorde's logical rebuttal takes this language of "different experiences"—she even strengthens it to "vastly different experiences"—and shows that no one complains about the chasm of cultural differences between Aristophanes and a woman in 1980s America. Thus, Lorde uses *logos* to show that the complaint of stereotypical difference is not about mere cultural differences, but about something more insidious. Lorde reveals the real dogma of stereotypical difference when she prefaces the excuse of "experiences that are 'too different'" with the belief in "the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien'" to comprehend (117). The use of both "too different" and "too alien" is devastating. The denotations of both words overlap considerably—"alien" and "of a different nationality" are, strictly speaking, synonymous—but "alien" is heavy with the connotations of a non-human being, filling the reader's mind with images of expressionless Martians. This shift from "different" to "alien" reveals that the rhetoric of stereotypical difference is not about differences between fellow humans, but about supposed differences between dehumanized minority groups and the human believers in stereotypical difference. Believing in stereotypical difference is not recognizing diversity—it is denying humanity.

Thus, Lorde uses the same word—"difference"—to name two divergent understandings of difference: understanding actual difference means recognizing diversity alongside a basic shared experience such as shared womanhood or shared humanity, while appeals to stereotypical difference deny the humanity of marginalized groups. Recognizing the two uses of difference inherent in this passage leads to a new understanding of the problem Lorde diagnoses—it is neither simply ignoring difference nor simply magnifying difference, but an insidious combination of ignoring actual difference and believing in stereotypical difference. She writes, "As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become 'other,' the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (177). Thus, ignoring actual difference (in this case, white privilege) leads to believing in stereotypical difference. Lorde has also described how stereotypical difference is cited as an excuse to avoid

Black women's literature, which has the result of shielding white women from examining actual difference. Consequently, the framework of actual and stereotypical difference allows us to see that Lorde is revealing a vicious cycle: ignoring actual difference leads to belief in stereotypical difference, and belief in stereotypical difference then provides an excuse to ignore actual difference. Once readers understand this cycle, one wonders—can we do things differently?

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DOUGLASS'S DUAL IDENTITY:
A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGE

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By the conclusion of his famous address "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass draws stark dichotomies: Slavery is evil, calls for abolition are moral; white Northerners' silence strengthens slavery, their voices dismantle it; slavery defiles liberty and freedom, America embraces those ideals. The reader might even split the tone and content of Douglass's speech into two distinct portions: a restrained, praiseful beginning and a more urgent, accusatory end. And yet, throughout the address, Douglass also diverges from the use of dichotomies in order to convey his complicated relationship to his audience. He moves between seemingly identifying as one of them and viewing himself as their equal to dissociating from his audience and outlining the unjust differences between himself and them. He positions himself in a liminal space, as simultaneously an outsider and insider, an American and foreigner. Douglass establishes this dual identity early on to legitimize his arguments in the minds of his audience and prompt them to rethink their role in American society. As a formerly enslaved Black man speaking to power, he crafts a complex rhetorical strategy in order to prepare his largely white audience to hear his pointed, urgent, and perhaps unexpected criticisms of their beloved country.

One can see from his introduction how Douglass both groups himself with and distinguishes himself from his audience. He opens his speech with the greeting, "Mr. President, Friends and Fellow Citizens." By addressing his audience as "fellow citizens" rather than "citizens," he instantly forges a bond with them. Although, as a Black man, he is not a citizen under the law, Douglass refuses to other himself in this moment and claims American citizenship as his own. Thus, Douglass justifies his right to speak about America as an American. But Douglass follows that justification with the words of a humble outsider. He states, "That I am here to-day is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude," and continues, "I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together; and trusting to your patient and generous indulgence, I will proceed to lay them before you." Douglass performs the humility his audience likely expects from him, and his success hinges on the listeners' decision to relinquish their attention to him. Once his white audience is listening, Douglass promises to "lay" his ideas before them, as if to assure them that they will have the power to evaluate his ideas for themselves. At the same time, by erecting small yet clear linguistic divides between himself and his listeners—inserting "to me," for example—he suggests just how different his experience is from that of his white audience. Douglass subtly introduces into his speech the unequal power dynamics between himself and his audience without immediately mentioning race or slavery.

Douglass is less subtle about the deep distinctions between himself and his audience when he explains how the Fourth of July is theirs alone. "It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom," he says. "It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance. . . . This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life." By repeatedly saying "your," Douglass emphasizes how the gifts of the Declaration of Independence, such as "National Independence" and "political freedom," are bestowed solely on his white audience. The founding document fails to grant him liberty as a Black man ineligible for legal or official citizenship. Douglass further distances himself from his audience when he prefaces "minds" and "great deliverance" with "your" instead of "our." This deliberate choice points to the markedly different experiences, memories, and realities of Douglass and his audience. While the Fourth of July celebration seems to transport his audience back to a historical moment of pride, it leaves Douglass behind. His phrase "*your* national life" suggests that America's new life was not meant to benefit his.

After repeatedly distancing himself from his audience in regard to the nation's birthday, Douglass reaffirms his closeness to them as their fellow citizen: "I am glad, fellow-citizens, that your nation is so young." Interestingly, although he speaks to *fellow*-citizens, he still calls America "*your* nation." He assumes both the role of an American patriot who wants the best for *his* country and the role of a foreigner who can objectively observe *another's* nation. While Douglass's dual identity helps legitimize his claims about the Fourth of July for his audience, he subtly suggests that his white audience has forced this dual identity upon him. He was born and raised in America yet cannot fully call himself an American. He is living in America without a country and without a day of independence to call his own.

As his speech progresses, Douglass emboldens the directness of his language and further emphasizes his disassociation from his audience. He says, "Citizens, your fathers . . . succeeded; and to-day you reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly celebrate this anniversary." By drawing attention to his audience's successful fight for freedom, while he still fights for his own, Douglass places his audience in a separate category from himself; he no longer identifies as their "fellow-citizen." Unlike citizens of America, who "reap the fruits" of the War of Independence and gained their freedom, Douglass has been left unrewarded. Douglass insinuates that the "fathers" who fought the British to secure liberty only benefitted their descendants, who include Douglass's white audience. Although Douglass and his audience live in the same country, "your fathers" suggests that they belong to distinct families with distinct cultures, histories, and inheritances. By stating, "The freedom gained *is yours*," rather than, "Your freedom," Douglass assumes a forthright tone and directly signals to his audience that freedom belongs to them and only them. And by adding "and you," he marks a new degree of directness toward his audience.

Just before Douglass begins criticizing his audience outright in the second half of his speech, he seemingly downplays his audience's responsibility for America's status quo. Douglass says, "We fear the lesson" learned from Britain's attempt to control America "is wholly lost on our present ruler." Unlike earlier moments in which Douglass simply addresses the privileges that whites gained from the Fourth of July, here Douglass implies that it is the white people in power who are betraying the very values for which their ancestors fought by maintaining the institution of slavery. However, by placing "we" and "our present ruler" on opposing sides, Douglass seems to suggest that his white audience disagrees with the status quo and already agrees with his point. Similarly, Douglass states, "We seldom hit upon resolutions, drawn up in our day whose transparency is at all equal to" the resolution that led to the Declaration of Independence. Here, Douglass uses "we" and groups himself with his audience, appearing to accept blame for the country's inequality despite his complete lack of power in American society. In both instances, Douglass subtly changes his words to momentarily divert responsibility away from his audience. This shift might seem to soften Douglass's criticism of his audience's failure to abolish slavery.

On the contrary, Douglass is doing something extraordinary: He is grouping himself with his oppressors so that they might group themselves with him. At the same time, he is also separating himself from his oppressors so that they must decide if they will join him in the struggle. Douglass is always made to live in a liminal space, and he uses his rhetoric to make his audience live in a liminal space, as well. Douglass destabilizes his audience to make them all the more ready for his revolutionary claims to come. He says: "Fellow-citizens! I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie." Douglass no longer underplays his message when, by the end of his address, he breaks down the dichotomies in his audience's worldview, builds up their tolerance for criticism, and empowers them to exist in the ugly truths of their own inaction and their beloved nation.

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BEYOND ORIENTALISM:
EXCLUSION IN PRAISE

ETHAN WU

Beneath the veneer of his formal tone and analytical style, French literary critic Roland Barthes presents an altogether laudatory account of Japanese *Bunraku* puppetry in his book *Empire of Signs*. Over the course of three essays written after his visits to Japan in the late 1960s, Barthes guides his readers through a sensory experience of this foreign and exotic "spectacle," incessantly applauding *Bunraku*'s refreshing departures from Western theater throughout the vicarious, intercontinental journey he eagerly commentates (55). And indeed, Barthes establishes the bulk of his critical praise for *Bunraku* specifically in relation to its Western counterparts. For example, he casts the common Western practice of concealing "machinery, painting," and "the sources of light" as an ironic form of "artifice," given popular Western theater's avowed desire to maintain realism (61). In contrast, he commends the visibility of the three *Bunraku* puppeteers onstage, describing the transparency of their actions as an "aesthetic envelope of effectiveness"—i.e., a simultaneous display of "strength and subtlety" that is unique to the artform and symbolic of Japanese culture at large (62, 61).

At a glance, juxtapositions like these seem to move Barthes's essay beyond traditional Orientalist portrayals of the East, avoiding an unfortunate trap into which many of Barthes's artistic predecessors have fallen. Barthes appears to fully embrace his self-anointed role as not just scholar but champion of the East by reversing the patronizing and condescending attitudes of Orientalism. For instance, Barthes boldly portrays *Bunraku* as embodying the "qualities which the dreams of ancient theology granted to the redeemed body" (60). The association that he draws between *Bunraku* and spiritual redemption, a concept evocative of the Christian salvation that plainly appeals to his readership, characterizes Japanese (and, by generalization, Eastern) culture as one of purity and virtue—at least in the "Western" sense of these words. It is instead the West onto which Barthes applies the lenses of sexuality and moral corruption, the traditional tools Orientalists used in depicting the East: he acerbically deprecates the anthropomorphic Western puppet as "the phallic 'little thing' . . . fallen from the body to become a fetish" (59). And thus, within the authoritative brevity of Barthes's three essays, it appears that the image of a decadent East—for centuries seared into the collective Western consciousness—has been swiftly and deftly overturned.

However, such entrenched cultural and often racial dynamics are not so simple to erase; on a deeper level, the comparative style of Barthes's analysis never escapes the biases that Orientalist works are prone to exhibit, but instead perpetuates the East-West divide central to their formation. In developing his rhetoric for the elevation of

Bunraku, Barthes frames it and Western theater as antithetical and irreconcilable forms of art: one of transparency, the other of artifice; one of abstraction, the other of attempted (and failed) realism. This divide is only broadened by his deliberate choice of Punch and Judy as the face of Western puppetry; its crass, violent humor—diametrically opposed to *Bunraku*'s "fragility, discretion" and "abandonment of all triviality"—becomes a convenient straw man against which the supposed failures of Western theater can be hurled (60). This manufactured dichotomy is perhaps most clearly manifested in the titles of his latter two essays, "Animate/Inanimate" and "Inside/Outside": the specific phrasing of these titles reflects the mutual exclusion between the values supposedly embodied by the Western and Japanese theatrical traditions, thus draining any cultural estuary that had once, perhaps, existed between the two worlds (58, 61).

Barthes's ability to compellingly sustain this image of a cultural divide stems largely from his deliberate generalization of the two cultural spheres. For example, he casually slathers the modifier "Western" over all European and American theatrical traditions in an unreasonable assumption that they are, collectively, akin to his cherry-picked archetype of Punch and Judy in both style and form. The exception—a singular mention of "the Greek *choreia*" and "bourgeois opera"—is only cursorily made to highlight the far-reaching homogeneity of "Western" theater in its illusory nature, rather than to provide any evidence of the diversity of its origins (59). This blatant disregard for cultural variance expediently discharges Barthes from the responsibility of confronting any nuances or qualifications to his claim: rather than weave together a diversity of cultural traditions—each of which requires being tenderly molded and polished to fit into the multifaceted puzzle of his argument—Barthes manufactures the crude clusters of "East" and "West" which are much more easily jostled into place in his tableau of cultural antithesis.

Similarly, while Barthes uses *Bunraku* as a representation of broader cultural values like "impassivity" or "agility," he refers to Japan minimally throughout his essays (60). Functionally, this lack of identification leaves the culture behind *Bunraku* highly ambiguous—and neglects the cultural context his readers may need to meaningfully appreciate *Bunraku*'s unique characteristics. Given the Eurocentric norms of Western art criticism, many of Barthes's French- or English-speaking readers, if unfamiliar with the diversity of East Asian cultural traditions, might be wont to fall back on more familiar and misinformed notions of "the East" in the absence of explicit specification by the author. This tendency thereby allows Barthes to further shirk his authorial obligations to precise cultural representation as he touts the wondrous qualities of the now-Orientalized *Bunraku* puppetry.

The false East-West dichotomy sustained by Barthes could, perhaps, be considered innocuous (albeit ignorant) if these essays were merely descriptive, but through his active comparative critique—not just of the dramatic forms but of their underlying cultural values—the dichotomy inevitably fosters a climate of tribalism in his writing.

This climate, in turn, mutates his praise of *Bunraku* into a subtle but dangerous form of othering. These undertones are apparent in Barthes's choice of language when examining *Bunraku*'s cultural values. For example, his contrived fusion of the carnal with the intellectual in his characterization of the *Bunraku* doll as a "sensuous abstraction"—while seemingly a scholarly appreciation of its symbolic nuance—casts the art as an unnatural, and even inhuman, practice (60). Similarly, he later concludes that *Bunraku* "dismisses the concept which is hidden behind all animation of matter and which is, quite simply, 'the soul'" (60). While framed as a commendation, this statement evacuates from *Bunraku* the passion and individualism—the essences of humanity—ascribed to the soul in the Western tradition (60). Thus, the sense of detachment that defines *Bunraku*, at least in Barthes's account, forms the basis of a divide he inserts between his subject and his readers. To the latter, *Bunraku* is elevated as something foreign, placed just out of reach by Barthes's laudatory language; its abstract qualities become something readers cannot—or rather, are told that they cannot—ever empathize with or aspire to.

Ironically it is, in fact, Barthes's previous deprecation of Western puppetry that magnifies this sense of alienation. While Barthes compares Western theater to a "space of Sin," this "Sin" is, continuing with his Christian theological metaphor, ultimately *human* and thus comfortably familiar to Barthes's intended audience (61). Similarly, the frequent associations Barthes draws between Western puppetry and eroticization, though suggestive of moral corruption, cast the Western dramatic tradition as a warm, animate, and organic alternative to the cold and distant *Bunraku* (61). The existence of this alternative is powerful because it anchors the reader, providing a familiar and accessible experience to which to cling, regardless of its supposedly boorish nature. And especially under the paradigm Barthes establishes of mutual exclusion—i.e., that *Bunraku* is inherently incompatible with Western values—it is this sense of comfort with Western tradition that, when the false options of "East" and "West" are laid out in plain juxtaposition, discourages readers from exploring the cultural implications of *Bunraku* or embracing its drastically yet not exclusively different form.

It is unclear whether these effects were intentional, yet they undoubtedly loll in the depths of Barthes's opaque prose. And these enshrouded implications may present an intellectual danger, for while Barthes's writing takes a seemingly opposite approach from the blatant condescension and patronization of traditional Orientalism, the effect it produces is of an interestingly similar nature: that of misconception and alienation. This strange and subtle overlay of praise and exclusion may catch unsuspecting readers unaware, and in doing so work subliminally to prejudice or to misinform. Therefore, while the origins of these underlying dynamics may be due to subconscious biases or epochal attitudes—rendering tenuous, if not futile, a judgment of Barthes according to contemporary standards—acknowledging the existence of these interpretive tensions in Barthes's work nevertheless can provide a fresh reading of his essays: a reading cognizant of the cultural influences in motion and the historical factors at play.

This refined and nuanced perspective may reveal greater insights into not just the traditions of *Bunraku*, but also the continued and evolving traces of Orientalist thought in the modern, globalized era.

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PERSONAL OR POLITICAL?
HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE POWER OF COMING OUT

CHRISTINE PIAZZA

Today, he is one of America's most prominent LGBT political leaders, but in 2015 Pete Buttigieg was simply the privately gay mayor of a small Indiana city—until he announced his sexuality publicly in an op-ed in the *South Bend Tribune*. Overnight, he became the first openly gay elected official in Indiana, and the residents of South Bend had a lot to say about it. The day after his op-ed was published, the *South Bend Tribune* ran another article titled "Pete Buttigieg's announcement creates a buzz: Most say they support South Bend mayor coming out." In the midst of positive responses from other community leaders, though, one ambivalent voice stood out. Erin Blasko reported for the *Tribune*:

> Despite personal objections to homosexuality, Kelly Jones, the mayor's Republican opponent, applauded him.
> "Good for him for having the bits to come out of the closet, because not everyone is willing to come out," Jones said.
> Jones said her personal view on homosexuality is that it is a sin, "but . . . I have several family members and friends that are gay and I could personally care less about their sexuality."
> She described the issue as irrelevant to the ongoing mayoral race. (Blasko)

At first glance, this response is an odd combination of homophobia ("homosexuality . . . is a sin") and praise ("Jones . . . applauded him"), but, examined more closely, it can illuminate how heteronormativity works when confronted with queerness it cannot ignore.

What do we make of this statement in which Jones addresses her difference from Buttigieg? In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Re-defining Difference," Audre Lorde describes a three-pronged approach to dealing with difference, writing, "we have *all* been programmed to respond to human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate" (115). Certainly, given Jones' view that "homosexuality . . . is a sin," she is not trying to copy or adopt her opponent's orientation (qtd. in Blasko). Nevertheless, despite her "personal objections" and "personal view," Jones does not seem to be trying to destroy Mayor Pete's individual sexuality (Blasko). Indeed, rather than being obviously destructive, on the surface her comments range from neutral ("I personally could care less") to encouraging ("Good for him") (Blasko).

Can we say, then, that Jones is ignoring Mayor Pete's sexuality? Her belief that his orientation is "irrelevant to the ongoing mayoral race" makes this conclusion tempting, but Jones's comment in itself is only dismissing the potential political ramifications of Pete's queerness, not his queerness itself (Blasko). In fact, it is Buttigieg's supporters whose markedly vague language exposes them to the charge of ignoring his sexuality. For example, the city council leader celebrated Buttigieg's ability "to be who he is" while lamenting that "there are some people that might think of *it* as a negative" (Blasko, emphasis mine). The use of the pronoun "it" instead of its implied antecedent—possibly a phrase like "coming out," "being gay," "his orientation," or "his sexuality"—would seem trivial, except that this hesitation to name the issue at hand is repeated throughout Blasko's article. Taken out of context, almost every supportive quote in the article might just as well be referring to any other contentious social issue. In contrast, Jones's frank references to "com[ing] out of the closet," to her friends and family members "that are gay," and her views on their "sexuality" are unmistakably part of a discussion of gay rights. In fact, beyond one reference to the "LGBT community" from someone described as "an outspoken member of the LGBT community," Jones is the *only* person quoted in the article to use the words "gay," "sexuality," or "closet." Thus, one can hardly accuse Jones of ignoring the mayor's sexuality when her quote is one of the only statements, among those that Blasko includes in this article, that unambiguously names the issue at hand. Despite Lorde's claim that we deal with difference by copying, destroying, or ignoring it, Jones does not appear to be doing any of these.

However, Jones is sexualizing Buttigieg and thereby de-politicizing the act of coming out. While one certainly cannot fault Jones for using the words "gay" and "sexuality," the phrase "having the bits to come out" is unnecessarily sexual; "having the courage to come out" or "having the boldness to come out" would have conveyed the same sentiment, but Jones did not choose these more common expressions. Her odd reference to the mayor's genitals is particularly jarring when compared to the remarks of others quoted in Blasko's article, who apparently prefer vague references to "terrible barriers" and "divisive issues" rather than the simple word "gay." Furthermore, even compared to other sexual terms Jones could have used, "the bits" is particularly effective in sexualizing the act of coming out. If Jones had said she was glad Pete "had the balls" to come out, it would have passed as a common and crude idiom. However, "having the bits" is a sufficiently unusual phrase that it arrests the audience's attention, focusing their awareness on the unexpected word "bits." In fact, it is this surprising phrase which regrettably makes Jones's quote among the most memorable ones in the article. In this context, the word even carries homophobic connotations: "bits" is frequently used in the phrases "lady bits" or "naughty bits," which here evoke the tired tropes of gay men as feminine, promiscuous, or both. Thus, Jones's language makes the act of coming out a primarily sexual announcement, an act that has more to do with "bits" than with social change.

Moreover, directing her audience's attention towards Buttigieg's genitals is just one part of Jones's larger aim: directing her audience's attention away from Buttigieg's politics. Unlike Jones, the mayor himself clearly presented his coming-out essay as an act of political power, a small but necessary part of a journey toward a day when "all the relevant laws and court decisions will be seen as steps along the path to equality" (Buttigieg). But several features of Jones's rhetoric suggest her intention to rob Buttigieg of this political power. First, she explicitly dismisses any direct political ramification, describing her opponent's announcement as "irrelevant to the ongoing mayoral race" (Blasko). Moreover, she seeks to push queerness out of the political arena altogether by re-branding her own political beliefs about queerness as merely "personal": hence the references to Jones's "personal objections to homosexuality" and "personal view . . . that it is a sin" (Blasko). Essentially, by mislabeling her own political beliefs as personal, Jones is implying that these beliefs have no impact on the outside world (which means that they are immune from challenge and debate). Finally, Jones' experiences with family and friends who have come out is separated from her politics with a third repetition of the word "personal": "I personally could care less about their sexuality" (Blasko). Although Jones may seek to signal her acceptance, her separation of the personal and the political is also a denial that her gay friends can influence her politics by coming out. Thus Jones's response works to confine queerness in general, and coming out in particular, to the realm of the sexual, strictly personal, and apolitical.

We can better understand the effect of Jones's separation of the personal and the political in light of the views of feminist critic Alison Kafer. Although Kafer's book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* is focused primarily on the intersection of feminist and queer theory with disability studies, her beliefs regarding the effects of separating the personal and the political can be transferred to other identities. First, influenced by political theorist Chantal Mouffe, Kafer defines "political" in a sense that clearly shows all marginalized identities to be inextricably political: "To say that something is 'political' in this sense means that it is implicated in relations of power and that those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate" (Kafer 9). This definition of "political" highlights two important aspects of an identity like disability or sexual orientation. First, even seemingly personal interactions that are centered around this identity, like coming out or experiencing discrimination, are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of social oppression. On the one hand, Buttigieg embraces this understanding; in fact, he explicitly shows how his orientation is "implicated in relations of power" by framing his coming-out essay as part of a larger discussion of issues such as same-sex marriage, legal employment discrimination, and high rates of LGBT teen suicide (Buttigieg). On the other hand, Jones persistently refuses to see these "relations of power"; even when she acknowledges that "not everyone is willing to come out," she is still framing the issue in terms of individual willingness instead of looking at the power of

heteronormativity to keep people in the closet (Blasko). Thus, Jones ignores Kafer's call to look at how an identity is "political" when it is part of a broader pattern of power—a power which is not derived from individual relationships, but from the power which one group has over another group.

The second piece of Kafer's definition of political is even more important: a political identity is also one whose underlying relations of power "are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate" (Kafer 9). This builds on the first piece of Kafer's definition because social patterns of oppression can only be challenged once they are acknowledged as such. This second part of Kafer's definition means that when debate breaks out over an action such as coming out, this conversation challenges an entire structure of social hierarchy—"relations [of power], their assumptions, and their effects" (9). However, separating the political and the personal upholds the current power structures and leaves the marginalized at the whim of others' personal kindness or bigotry. Kafer writes: "attention is vital in a context in which, as Susan Schweik notes, disability-based discrimination and prejudice are often condemned not as markers of structural inequality but of cruelty or insensitivity" (10). Here, Kafer contrasts two approaches for understanding harm done to people with disabilities: either this prejudice is simply an isolated, personal flaw in the prejudiced person—or it is a symptom of something much broader, an oppressive system that has existed for millennia. The former, apolitical understanding of discrimination can be dangerous precisely because it masks larger, structural issues. The same analytic framework could be applied when examining Jones's words. In the preceding quote, Kafer discusses the alternative to classifying an identity as political; applying her analysis shows that Jones's apolitical stance actually protects structural inequality. By placing homophobia outside the political realm, Jones makes it immune from the kind of political attack which Buttigieg is trying to make. Thus, Jones's denial of the political aspects of Buttigieg's sexuality, her insistence on treating it as a purely personal matter, actually works to leave him—and all LGBT people—trapped in a framework of social injustice. If sexuality is simply a personal matter, then the LBGT community, rather than advocating for laws defending equality, must simply hope that people like Jones do not discriminate based on their "personal view on homosexuality."

While Buttigieg frames his coming out essay as a political act, Jones's language limits his announcement to a personal, even sexual, act. Applying Kafer's definition of "political" to sexual orientation shows that recognizing orientation as political is the only way to fight heteronormativity. Thus, Jones's efforts to sexualize the act of coming out and to separate the political and personal ramifications of being gay ultimately work to destroy queerness by stifling its political power.

In light of this analysis, perhaps we can see Jones's comments fitting into Lorde's three-part approach after all. When she was confronted with difference, I would argue that Jones did in fact seek to destroy it. Jones was not working to destroy Pete's individual sexuality, to force him to become straight—but, by separating the personal

from the political, she was working to destroy the power of the LGBT community as a group, an attempt to keep gay people forever subordinate. Jones's comments do not destroy difference on the individual level—they aim instead to destroy difference on a societal scale. Ultimately, the greatest political weapon of heteronormativity is its pretense of being merely personal, not political.

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THE ORGANIZED CRIME:
THE POPULAR PERFECTIONISM OF MOB FILMS

RALPH JOHNSTON

I t's not often that you find a democratic leader openly admitting to a penchant for tyranny. So it came as quite a surprise when Boris Johnson, after being asked to name his favorite movie moment, nonchalantly replied: the "multiple retribution scene in *The Godfather*" (qtd. in Groves and Doyle). 'Retribution' may be the wrong word. The sequence—usually dubbed the baptism scene—depicts a mob boss, Michael Corleone (played by Al Pacino), securing his underworld omnipotence by having his rivals murdered. The UK did not fail to miss the terrifying political implications of Johnson's choice: out-of-favor MPs must have been more than a tad worried that the Prime Minister would conduct his own vengeful string of administrative firings—and rightly so: Johnson may have been likening himself to Michael Corleone when he dismissed eleven ministers later that month (Swinford). Indeed, he would not have been the first political figure to make the comparison. According to Francis Ford Coppola, the director of *The Godfather*, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi both listed *The Godfather* as their favorite movie (Coppola). Nor would Johnson have been the last to take a tip from the Corleones: the current US administration, too, has sinister links to Coppola's mafia trilogy. In November 2019, prosecutors asked that scenes from *The Godfather: Part II* be played at the trial of Roger Stone, after claiming that the President's former advisor had been inspired to use the same dirty tricks the clip displays when he texted an associate to "Do a Frank Pentangeli" (Kilgannon). The rhetoric of the 'The Don' has been compared to that of Fredo Corleone ("Letters to the Editor"); Trump has been said to use "a vocabulary from *Goodfellas*" (Landler). Refusing to mince his words, Robert De Niro, who played the young Vito Corleone in *Part II*, has called Trump a "gangster president" (De Niro and Pacino).

Perhaps this shared obsession makes the leaders truly populist: they simply have the same movie tastes as the common people. A glance at some 'Top 100s' reveals that the paterfamilias of the mafia genre—the first two *Godfather*s along with Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*—are among some of the best-loved movies ever made: on *Empire*'s greatest films list, *The Godfather* ranked first with *Goodfellas* coming in sixth place and *The Godfather Part II* in twelfth ("The 100 Greatest Movies"). Yes, the list does have populist undertones (*Star Wars: Episode V* is in second place) but this only reinforces the notion that mob films continue to be exceedingly well-liked in the public eye—and hugely influential. In his book, *The Gangster Film: Fatal Success in American Cinema*, Ron Wilson cites a study conducted from 1996 to 2002 which found that, from the release of *The Godfather* in 1972 to 2002, close to three hundred films had been produced that portrayed Italians as criminals—an average of nine a year (Wilson 81).

In Wilson's words, not only does this suggest a "bias concerning Italian stereotypes in gangster films," but it indicates "that a standard barometer for these depictions is one film in particular—*The Godfather*" (81). That study was concluded nineteen years ago, but little has changed in the popularity of either the genre or *The Godfather*. Screenings of the *Godfather*s and *Goodfellas* are a regular feature at film festivals (*Part II* screened to a packed house at the New York Film Festival in September 2019); a new documentary called *Shooting The Mafia* was released in November 2019 after playing at the Sundance Film Festival; Martin Scorsese's mob hit *The Irishman* was watched by twenty-six million households during its first week on Netflix (Spangler). It is Scorsese's fifth film in what could be called his extended universe of the American underworld: from *Mean Streets* to *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, and *The Departed*.

The demand for big-screen mafiosi is proven not only by the production of good mob films but by the production of bad ones, too. The trailer for one such cinematic embarrassment, *Mob Town*, was recently released—the title a warning in itself of the abundance of stock stereotypes and laughable clichés that it promises to offer. Then there was 2018's astonishingly awful *Gotti*, which stars John Travolta as the former head of the Gambino crime family. *Gotti*, like *Mob Town*, has a rare "0%" score on the critical aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes*. It has just one word as the critics' consensus: "Fuhgeddaboudit"—a parody of the film's gaudy, vernacularized vision of crime ("Gotti (2018)"). And yet it is this same glossy hyperbole that highlights the central contradiction of the mafia genre: the fact that these films—which have been scorched onto the American imagination to the extent of becoming clichés—are about criminals. Crime has become a cliché, and a popular one at that. These are bad people: the very characters who audiences all over the world have been taught to despise and lock up. You would not think the public (even less, our leaders) would want these crime films at a time when factual veracity and political justice are more important than ever—ideals that contrast with the unabashedly fictionalized criminal groups that have warped how we see Italian-Americans. Moreover, there is a striking contrast between the longevity of mob films and the 'fatigue' that seems to be collecting around long-running film series. Think Star Wars and Marvel; remember when, in November 2019, Martin Scorsese wrote in *The New York Times* that he was tired of the "sameness of today's franchise pictures" (Scorsese). Mob movies do not receive this criticism, but why? Why are these films still popular?

One explanation is that these films are violent. Jack Shadoian espouses this view, saying in *Dreams & Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film* that the "gangster/crime film is a genre like pornography and the horror film" because it "exposes our deepest psychic urges" (Shadoian 3). According to this view, gangsters enable us to sate our criminal aspirations without breaking any laws. This is the idea of catharsis, which can be used to explain cinema's obsession with another breed of criminals: serial killers. As the author of *Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World's Most Savage Murderers* Scott Bonn opines in a BBC article, serial killers are "almost like a catharsis

for the worst of us, a lightning rod for our darkest thoughts, like the sin-eaters in medieval times who would take away the sins of others" (qtd. in Bond). The article adduces the morbid popularity of 'murderabilia'—the collectible paraphernalia of serial killers—on online auction houses as an example of this "catharsis". But this point of view becomes complicated when examined further. Just return to the man who made catharsis famous: Aristotle. Writing about tragedy, Aristotle says in his *Poetics* that a truly tragic plot "should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens" (*Poetics* 22). This "pity" in turn elicits a catharsis or "purification of such emotions" (*Poetics* 10). Although the exact meaning of this phrase is debated (it is the only time Aristotle uses the word *katharsis* in the *Poetics*), a predominant interpretation is the one given by Scott Bonn: catharsis is a way "for the worst of us" to "take away" these sins. Grisly spectacles, in this view, are nothing more than moral warnings. It is the fear of suffering the same fate as the victim which makes a person "shudder" (*Poetics* 22). Using Bonn's catharsis logic, people should not be attracted to these killers: they should be scared of them.

The same can be said for mob films. If people were 'cleansed' by a mob film's violence, an audience would leave the theatre shaking their heads, forced into a morally ascetic existence, having been warned off wrongdoing; with mafia movies at the lectern, crime would be despised. But the opposite seems to have happened: the tropes in these films have become clichés. Further, if crime movies were cathartic, if they did tap into our subconscious and spook us, they would necessarily be relatable. But, as proven by the *Gotti*s and *Mob Town*s, mob movies have become decidedly unrelatable and ever more hyperbolized in a long bloodline of cinematic tradition. Mob movies are entirely dependent on their fictionality, which goes alongside their exciting vision of crime; the popularity of the mafia genre cannot be boiled down to catharsis, because mafia films tend never to be cathartic.

Instead of being purifying, mob films are simply satisfying—a satisfaction attained by reaffirming structure and order. One experiences the same satisfaction reading or watching an Agatha Christie murder mystery: the most enjoyable moment is the great dénouement when the audience finally discovers whodunnit. Joan Acocella writes in her New Yorker piece "Queen of Crime" that there have been sundry "explanations for Christie's popularity and for the general enthusiasm for the detective novel in her time." But, according to Acocella, "all these arguments are the same": ultimately, she writes, "the appeal of the detective story is the restoration of order" (Acocella). Though detective fiction relies on the restoration of moral and judicial order—as thriller writer David Baldacci says, "evil is punished, and the good guys mostly win, after solving the puzzle" (qtd. in Hannah)—in art, one can also find satisfaction in the restoration of any order, even, surprisingly, one that is morally wrong.

The heist film is proof of this. The bank robbery is a scene of necessarily pre-planned action, of choreographed illegality. For this reason, the heist is extremely

satisfying—as proven by the online popularity of bank robbery scenes from films such as *The Dark Knight*, *The Town*, *Heat* or the *Ocean* films. We expect satisfaction; this becomes even clearer when the stick-up is *not* successful. And there is no better on-screen bungle of a burglary than Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon*. Lumet's 1975 film re-enacts the true story of a failed bank robbery from August 1972, starring Al Pacino as John Wojtowicz and John Cazale as 'Sal' Naturile (both actors in the full swing of *Godfather* fame). The film is purposefully frustrating. By refusing to portray the perfectionist methodology of a heist, Lumet shows that reality is decidedly not cut and dried. The present cannot be pre-planned. That is why people watch crime films. For a crime film is all about the risky but *successful* realization of a plan. A film is itself an edited and rehearsed medium which sandpapers the messiness of the present day into a structured and finite form. The popularity of movie crime lies in its logical escape from life. And nothing is more different, nothing more logical than the movie mafia.

Take *The Godfather*'s famous phrase as an example: "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse." It reflects a complete assurance in the future: the mobsters' bitingly systematic game of action and immediate reaction. The mafia genre is a perfectionist: like murder mysteries and heist movies, it offers audiences a satisfying re-establishment of order. It is an order based around the first organization: family. "A man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man," says Don Corleone in the first *Godfather*. Mob films, as Ron Wilson has shown, come down to the concept of "la famiglia"— the family that is constructed around loves and loyalties (89). In Wilson's words, the "concept of la famiglia . . . marks a distinct shift away from previous images in gangster cinema. Earlier representations of the gangster as either racketeer or outlaw emphasized his individualism . . . However, with regard to the Mafioso, there is a communal aspect to the idea of family that marks a symbiotic relationship between him and others" (Wilson 89). A similar concept is outlined by Aristotle: not in the *Poetics*, but in the *Politics*. Part of this work is devoted to an analysis of the relationship between family (*oikos*) and city (*polis*). The two are, on one level, intertwined—"every state consists of households" (*Politics* 62)—but there is also a difference between them: whereas the *polis* depends on unreliable, voluntary obedience, the *oikos* is an eternal and natural order that is bound by blood (Shields). The state may have, as Aristotle put it, a "natural priority over the household" (*Politics* 60), but "priority" doesn't always make the household obey. The mafia film is a modern update on this theme. But, rather than reconciling family and state, it tears them apart: the *oikos* order is restored to center stage.

The mob film epitomizes the restoration of familial order. It also epitomizes the restoration of *all* order. Chris Messenger is correct when he writes in *'The Godfather' and American Culture* that the attraction lies in the fact that "[m]obsters have everything you don't: power, money, women, cars, security, and most of all, a certain leverage" (12). The "money" and the "women" may be part of it, but the true appeal is that "certain leverage." As Robert de Niro said in a 2019 interview with the BBC's Graham

Norton, the appeal of the gangster underworld is that these characters "have their own laws": it was "the idea that this culture had more respect and more structure". It is, perhaps, not a surprise that *The Godfather* trilogy took off in the early 1970s, with the Vietnam War, race riots, and Watergate all on the boil. With little moral clarity, transparency, or "structure" in government at the time, mob films were the perfect tonic.

Nor is it a surprise that John Wojtowicz, who planned the robbery depicted in *Dog Day Afternoon*, took his co-conspirators to see the first *Godfather* before the attempted heist. As he recalled in a recent short film, Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* (2000), Wojtowicz chose *The Godfather* because he thought it would "inspire the troops." Indeed, the typewritten note which Wojtowicz had planned to give to the bank manager by way of introduction—"This is a hold-up"!—ended with the *Godfather* quote: "This is an offer you can't refuse" (Federal Bureau of Investigation 35). "The Boys" (as the robbers called themselves) expected their robbery to be successful because they had been imbued with the step-by-step, extra-legal rationality of the Mafiosi. The same can be said for all '70s audiences, who saw in these films a tidy and harmonious system based around a hierarchy that's decidedly organic and terrifyingly authoritarian. This is what has caused the genre's popularity and why the films continue to be so attractive to modern-day audiences, at a time when, once more, the White House is becoming increasingly unstable.

The bitter irony, however, is that this instability has been caused by the very same desire to re-establish order. The apparent links between *The Godfather* films with Trump and Johnson are hardly surprising: the logicality of the mob film would go hand in hand with popular demagoguery—the leaders who garner support by promising to restore 'law and order.' And all too often are these cod-dons elected; and all too quickly does their rhetoric give way to despotism, a statesman's homage to the mob underworld. For, in the paranoid eyes of a tyrant, the "multiple retribution killings at the end of *The Godfather*" may seem like the same political restoration once promised, while the significance of "la famiglia" may be taken to mean blatant nepotism. Thus, whilst the mob genre can provide audiences with a glimmer of excitement and structure within a crumbling body politic, be warned: these films can, to some, also reflect a tyrannical desire for pin-pointed perfectionism.

The mob film is one of the most popular genres in American cinema history. Since its early days, filmmakers have been eager to put backstreet immorality on the big screen. It has spawned great movies and less-than-great ones, but ultimately all crime movies have strived not for catharsis, but for satisfaction by way of organization. These are organized crimes that appeal to all who seek some kind of order, proffering audiences a two- to four-hour slot (the mafiosi are not known for their brevity) to ditch the messiness of the present as we gaze on a blueprint from absolute hindsight. Time becomes meaningless in this confident vision—a lens so dependable it has slipped into cliché. It is a totalitarian, undeniably patriarchal assurance in every cog of

society. And we envy them for that. Because, though these wise guys may not be particularly lawful, they sure know how to get a job done.

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ON CORONAVIRUS, CAMBODIA, AND CONFLICT: GRAPPLING WITH THE USE OF WAR METAPHORS TO DESCRIBE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

JEFFREY KHAU

It was March 13th, 2020, the day before I vacated my dorm in light of Columbia's strong recommendation to leave campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As I was hurriedly packing all the belongings I could salvage into my suitcase, my parents called. During our conversation, my mother said that the pandemic chillingly reminded her of living through the fall and forced evacuation of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, by the communist organization Khmer Rouge and its genocidal rule. My father shared the same sentiment; while in a conference call, he likened the pandemic to the war, leaving the rest of the virtual room stunned in silence.

From that evening on, even when I arrived home in California the following day, I could not help but re-run their words in my head. My parents, both Cambodian refugees, are no strangers to war. They lived through the Cambodian Civil War (1967-1975), which was defined by the Chinese Communist Party-backed Khmer Rouge's guerrilla warfare and U.S. secret carpet bombings in support of the pro-American governmental forces (Longley). They survived the following tyranny of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, which killed upwards of two million people by forced labor, mass executions, torture, and famine during its four years-long genocide, before embarking on the perilous mine-filled trek out of the country to the refugee camps on the Thai border (from which my father and mother were respectively flown to America and France as refugees) amidst the Khmer Rouge's collapse in 1979 due to the Vietnamese invasion (Longley). War defined their childhood, but does it also define those living through the COVID-19 pandemic, including myself? I write this essay at the end of the spring 2020 semester, and so far, the COVID-19 pandemic's death toll worldwide is over 335,000 and over 95,000 in the US (COVID-19 Dashboard) and counting, already more than the 58,220 American deaths recorded in the Vietnam War (Shumaker). While the grim loss of life due to the COVID-19 pandemic is staggering and unprecedented, is it right to characterize it as a war?

On closer examination, there are legitimate and salient connections between warfare and today's pandemic. Max Rose, U.S. House Representative for New York's 11th Congressional district and a Purple Heart veteran, paints an analogy to his service during the War in Afghanistan in a phone interview with *Politico*'s Michael Kruse. Rose explains that the pandemic "reminds me in some ways of when I was in Afghanistan. Whenever you left the wire, you had to be hyper-, hyper-aware that an IED could be anywhere . . . But I do believe that if people leave their homes now, they're feeling this oddly similar sense—that the virus could be anywhere" (Kruse). Here, Rose links an army base to the home and compares IEDs (improvised explosive devices) to

coronavirus. The former pair share the role as safe bases of refuge insulating someone from the latter pair of invisible sources of danger, namely IEDs hidden in the ground or microscopic pathogens on a door handle. The unquestionable anxiety and fear that an undetectable threat elicits are thus normal. In fact, those sentiments, needed to gauge the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, can better condition our responses. Khudejah Ali, a doctoral candidate and researcher on disease communication and fake news at the University of Miami's School of Communication, mentioned in a *Time* article that "a moderate level of fear-arousing sensationalism" along with information about symptoms and protection can "become a powerful and actionable health communication message, and result in wide sharing and engagement across populations" (Garza). Consequently, comparing the COVID-19 pandemic to war, highlighting its gravitas, can promote vigilance and urgent changes in individual's behavior for society's good and solidarity.

However, this knowledge of the potential benefits of war metaphors fails to explain my seemingly contradictory reactions of nodding in agreement when hearing my parents link the pandemic to their experiences in Cambodia and of raising my eyebrows in doubt when Donald Trump branded himself as "a wartime President" (Bennett and Berenson) in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps, as a nineteen-year-old college student from California's Bay Area and a son of refugees, I am unfairly inclined to dismiss anything that Trump says due to political bias. But I am not alone in questioning President Trump's response to the pandemic. According to Steven Greenberg, the lead pollster for an April 2020 Siena College Research Institute poll conducted in the state of New York, New York Republicans and "self-identified conservatives" trust Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo more than President Trump on "reopening the state and its economy," with a 57-34% and 56-36% advantage for the governor among those two groups, respectively (Greenberg). Given that the majority of even New York Republicans evidently distrust the leader of their own party, a native New Yorker, on his COVID-19 response, political and geographic bias are non-factors.

Maybe I felt that those who went through war are the only ones who could make war metaphors. However, there are well-meaning civilian doctors throughout the country utilizing war metaphors to inspire and strengthen the resolve of their colleagues and patients in the face of the pandemic. For instance, Dr. Craig Smith, the head of surgery at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/CUIMC, references pivotal American battles from the Civil War to Iraq War in a daily memo to his colleagues, calling their fight against COVID-19 "our Gettysburg, our Somme, our Iwo Jima, our Khe Sanh, our Fallujah" (Feuer). *The Wall Street Journal* deemed him "the pandemic's most powerful writer," and like his colleague Dr. Isaac George, I found that "Dr. Smith is able to depict the realism of the situation so that anyone, even non-medical people, can understand" (Cohen). Many sentiments associated with war—endurance, hope, determination—are universal to the human experience and indeed belong in the

hospital room. Consequently, war rhetoric alone, political affiliation, and whether or not the user has experienced war are all not reasons for why many find certain uses of war metaphors alarming. What makes some war metaphors inspiring and others threatening must be more complex.

War metaphors, especially when they are conflated with medical imagery, are often manipulated to extend the power of a ruler and the appeal of his ideology, and to justify the suffering and submission of that ruler's constituents. The literary critic Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain*, warns that easily corruptible language of force "can even be intentionally enlisted for the opposite purposes, invoked not to coax pain into visibility but to push it into further invisibility, invoked not to assist in the elimination of pain but to assist in its infliction, invoked not to extend culture . . . but to dismantle that culture" (13). While I believe that the misdeeds of Trump's response to COVID-19 pale in comparison to the atrocities of war and totalitarian rule committed in 1970s Cambodia, both of these episodes in history demonstrate the manipulation of reality to satisfy a leader's oppressive rule, which comes in the three distinct yet linked mechanisms facilitated by war metaphors that Scarry identifies: to turn attention away from pain, to inflict pain, and to destroy civilization, the ultimate effect of pain. That uncanny parallel of the dehumanization of the sick and the pained by demagoguery is the reason my parents connected their childhood to today's COVID-19 pandemic.

Like any metaphor that fails to perfectly frame the meaning of a target, war imagery distracts us from the less familiar and comfortable truths regarding the pandemic. Instead, it too often disturbingly shifts unfounded blame onto victims of disease away from the mistakes of those responsible for protecting said population. In *Illness as Metaphor; and, AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag asserts that war metaphors inescapably blame the patient: when disease is considered a war, the pathogens within a patient are seen as "an alien 'other,' as enemies are in modern war; and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims" (99). Victim-blaming is indeed rampant in today's COVID-19 pandemic, and it feeds into the underlying racism against minorities. CDC data from its COVID-NET surveillance program showed that black people made up 33.1% of hospitalizations in the four-week period studied, while forming only 18% of the program's catchment population (Garg et al.). While systemic racism, the resulting inequality, and the lack of immediate federal response are responsible for this statistic, in which "black people receive inferior care from hospitals and doctors" and "are less likely to be insured," many politicians like Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana "blame the choices made by black people, or poverty, or obesity—but not racism" (Kendi). As Sontag argues, war metaphors are indeed a form of myth that turns patients into either heroes or wrongdoers, in both cases condemning patients as irredeemable (102). By taking advantage of war metaphors,

governments misdirect attention from their mistakes, excuse their negligence, and cynically redirect any blame to the groups that suffer the most.

What are these shortcomings that the Trump administration seeks to hide? The U.S. suffers a lack of testing kits, in that it "tested about 11,000 people during the first seven weeks of the outbreak—roughly as many as South Korea is testing each day" (Oprysko). Likewise, healthcare workers are concerned about the "shortages of PPE," "shortages of ventilators," and "a lack of drugs needed for patient care" (McCammon). However, Trump, when asked about this meek and delayed response to COVID-19, proclaimed, "I don't take responsibility at all" (Oprysko). In his view, "nobody could have ever seen something like this [COVID-19] coming," as the virus is an invisible, "hidden enemy" ("Remarks by President Trump"). By characterizing the virus as a calculating, stealthy soldier capable of temporarily outsmarting the American government, Trump further absolves himself of blame. Instead of his administration's lack of urgency and preparation in dealing with the pandemic—failing to protect healthcare workers, set up testing sites, and provide adequate relief for people most affected by the virus—Trump attributes the dire loss of medical and economic well-being that America has suffered so far to the virus being "tough and smart" (Moore). Given that "military metaphors contribute to the stigmatizing of . . . those who are ill" (Sontag 99), such language dangerously implies that victims of COVID-19, disproportionally people of color, are not as "tough and smart" as the virus or as those who do not get infected. War metaphors do not simply shift blame and hide mistakes. They also divide society, casting certain groups as inferior based on social markers.

By rendering pain invisible with distractions propagated by war imagery, leaders are then able to impose unwarranted hurt on groups of people deemed dangerous to their ideological view on what constitutes a pure, homogeneous, and healthy society. This abuse of power is seemingly justified by the perceived otherness and inferiority of the target. Unfortunately, Trump is already utilizing this next level of oppression in an effort to maintain his power. President Trump's use of the misnomer of "the Chinese virus" (Bennett and Berenson) and his bellicose characterization as a "wartime president" have dangerously incited anti-Asian American hate crime incidents. "More than 1,500 reports of anti-Asian hate incidents since mid-March" were received by the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (Campbell and Ellerbeck). By stirring anti-Chinese sentiment, Trump hopes to energize his base to propel him to victory in this year's presidential election, especially given that he has waged a protectionist trade war against China and has cast his opponent Joe Biden as soft on China, claiming that "China and other countries will take our country" if an allegedly lethargic "Sleepy Joe" Biden becomes president (Mason and Spetalnick). Compounding racist "tropes that have associated Asian Americans with illness and the consumption of 'weird' foods" since the 1800s, Trump's scapegoating wrongly instigates the public display of anti-Asian American sentiment, with verbal and physical pain inflicted on innocent

persons, such as the "family at a grocery store [who were] spat on and accused of being responsible for the coronavirus" (Zhou).[1]

The above strategies of victim-blaming and scapegoating that Trump utilizes are nothing new. In the contexts of weaker congressional oversight, as in Nixon's America (Burr and Kimball 105), or rule by fear and starvation, as in the Khmer Rouge's Cambodia, the conflation of medical and war imagery during the Cold War was used to rhetorically endorse the killings of millions in the name of rooting out perceived enemies, maintaining ideological purity—be that of democratic capitalism or autocratic communism—and consolidating the ruler's power (Leopold 9; Locard 188). The communist regimes and the capitalist Western nations sought to cast the other as alien. In *Under the Radar: Cancer and the Cold War*, Ellen Leopold notes that "Cold War propaganda did not hesitate to use cancer," linking together ideology and disease with the phrase "cancer of communism," in which there was "no 'human face' that might tether the disease to lived experience" (8). This dehumanization of ordinary citizens living in countries ruled by Communists, reducing them from people to a tumor, must have contributed to Nixon's reasoning for bombing Cambodia. Nixon's Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, believed that "military usefulness was secondary to the psychological principle of 'always keeping the enemy guessing,' which was, of course, the uncertainty effect inherent in Nixon's Madman Theory" (Burr and Kimball 104). Such so-called psychological warfare does not just kill the enemy's morale. In this case, it also resulted in the "range of 50,000 to 150,000 deaths" (Kiernan, "The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969-1973" 32), provoking previously apolitical villagers to join the Khmer Rouge (9). The euphemism of psychological warfare exemplifies Scarry's claim that "while the central activity of war is injuring . . . the fact of injuring tends to be absent from strategic and political descriptions of war" (12). Psychological translates to non-physical, deceitfully suggesting that its namesake type of warfare involves no physical harm and is thus morally acceptable. Sontag's thoughts on the cancer treatment of chemotherapy, considered "chemical warfare" where "nearly any damage to the body is justified if it saves the patient's life" (65), readily apply here: no matter how many innocent people die, the "cancer of communism" must be eradicated.

Unlike the Nixon and Trump administrations, which function as part of the structure of American democracy, the Khmer Rouge made use of medically-infused war metaphors as part of its justification for the ultimate goal of "the suspension of civilization," where the two phases of human action, "making-up (mental imaging) and making-real (endowing the mental object with a material or verbal form)," were annihilated (Scarry 21). This resulted in not just the mass killings of millions but also a forced attempt to destroy whatever culture Cambodia had prior. In a step further than Cold War America, which killed to stymie Communism's spread, the Khmer Rouge sought "the unmaking" (Scarry 22) of the entire country. According to David Chandler, the Khmer Rouge was "the purest and most thoroughgoing Marxist-

Leninist movement" (qtd. in Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime* 26). The family structure was shattered, with families being forcibly separated and children being manipulated to spy on adults for the Khmer Rouge (Locard 142). Those with "the disease of the old society" were urged "to take a dose of Lenin as medication" (Locard 188). Cambodians suspected of adhering to the ways of the prior society, also known as "those who imagine they are ill," (Locard 188) namely "professors, public servants, students, petty bourgeois, traders, national and comprador capitalists," (Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime* 99) were constantly at risk of torture and execution. Deemed "tapeworms gnawing out the bowels of society" (Locard 171) by the Khmer Rouge, one such singled-out social group was Buddhist monks, who consequently "disappeared from 90 to 95 percent" (Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime* 100). The Khmer Rouge weaponized hunger, calling it "the most effective disease" (Locard 289) to extinguish personal identity and exact control. By abusing metaphors imbued with military and medical tropes to portray their tyrannical rule as necessary for "healing" a supposedly impure, diseased society to its liking, the Khmer Rouge actively destroyed any form—intellectual and emotional—of individual expression (Chan 25). Arn Chorn-Pond, a Khmer Rouge survivor, describes how the regime forbade emotion, even in the face of death: "They would kill us if we reacted . . . if we cried, or showed that we cared about the victims. . . . So I had to shut it all off" (qtd. in Chan 25). Rather than simply dismissing or administering pain, the Khmer Rouge made it simultaneously omnipresent and inexpressible, erasing memories of the society prior, thus silencing the slightest outcry of resistance and conditioning the people to follow the only ideology that they would remember and feel: its "utopic" vision.

Given that the war metaphor has been used by both benevolent individuals to boost morale needed in society's campaign against COVID-19 and by demagogues to divide and conquer society, should we still use such a potentially dangerous form of expression? While there are individuals with enough tact to make them empowering like Dr. Smith, I believe that a less corruptible and less maintenance-heavy metaphor would better serve us. The journey metaphor is one such alternative, as suggested by Dr. Nie, a biomedical ethics professor at the University of Otago (Nie et al. 9). As I told my parents about it, I could see their faces relax, and my dad began to reminisce on how "the first five years in the U.S. was one of the happiest times" in his life, even though his large family lived crowded in a tiny apartment and relied on food stamps. Like how my parents faced peril during their journey out of Cambodia to Thailand and then to the U.S., all Americans are now facing the real uncertainty that COVID-19 poses to our medical and economic well-being. However, unlike the war metaphor, journey imagery is "devoid of confrontational references," such as gunfights, and instead looks forward "to new positive opportunities" (Nie et al. 9). At the same time that Nie's imagery resonates with my family's history, images of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Statue of Liberty, symbols of my first and second homes, also blaze into my mind. The former was constructed during the Great Depression, and the latter

was a gift from France symbolizing the universal values of freedom, sanctuary, and justice. They have weathered nature, from California earthquakes to Hurricane Sandy (Pawlowski). Likewise, I am optimistic that the infrastructure being forged in response to this pandemic will provide the foundation for a resilient future, where monumental creations protect, heal, and empower more. I do not know the date of when I will return to New York. However, I do know that the time of resumed normalcy for all Americans will come as we remain considerate of one another's health, persevere day-to-day, and hold faith in the growing glimmers of hope.

NOTE

1. After I wrote this essay, Li Zhou's article "How the Coronavirus Is Surfacing America's Deep-Seated Anti-Asian Biases" was updated in 2021 to reflect the continued rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. The first quotation that I draw from Zhou remained the same in the updated version; the second quotation, which contains the anecdote about a hate crime against a family in a grocery store, was replaced with a different anecdote in the updated version.

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BREACHING THE CAMOUFLAGE CEILING

VICTOR GARNICA

Today, there have been more veteran deaths by suicide than U.S. casualties from both the Vietnam War and the War on Terror combined. According to the [2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report](#), over 78,000 veterans have committed suicide since 2005, while approximately 65,000 U.S. troops died during the War on Terror and Vietnam War. Even more troubling, veterans' suicides have been on an incline since 2016. Unless the government acts quickly, we will ultimately lose the war on suicide.

President Trump, who tends to address problems with money, increased the Veteran Affairs' spending to a massive $200 billion last year—the largest VA budget in history in part, as an attempt to combat the climbing veteran suicide rate. While this was commendable, it was also misguided, since [Secretary of Veteran Affairs Robert Wilkie had acknowledged that most veterans committing suicide were not enrolled in the VA](#). This troubling situation has remained unchanged thanks to the Trump administration's lack of marketing and veteran outreach. Despite having a $6.2 million budget to market the VA's crisis hotline in 2018, Trump's administration had [spent a mere $57,000](#) on this project by September (less than 1% of that budget). Between 2017 and 2018, when President's Trump first VA secretary was employed, the [VA's social media posting decreased by two thirds,](#) and a year passed without television or radio ads. This dangerous oversight means too many veterans have missed a direct connection to resources.

As it stands, veterans are forced to navigate a maze of red tape to receive free healthcare. Exactly how free that care will be is dependent on income level, disability rating, and military service history. Upon separating from service, veterans have one year to file a claim for disability benefits related to illnesses they incurred during or were aggravated by their service. To receive covered care, the veteran schedules a compensation and pension exam, typically for several months out. Afterward, the results are sent to the VA regional office to determine the veteran's disability rating. This protracted process is easily disrupted by scheduling conflicts or improperly filling out forms, further limiting veterans' access to life-saving resources. If President Trump truly wants to make an impact, rather than merely increasing the VA's budget without implementing oversight on expenditures, he should create an automatic enrollment for veterans into Veteran Affairs healthcare.

Many Americans are under the impression that veterans are automatically enrolled in the VA healthcare system upon separation from service. In reality, many veterans decide not to apply for benefits. Reasons vary, but a primary one is the mindset that since "all of their limbs work," they do not want to clog up the system for those who

need it most. Unfortunately, this mindset often does not take into account the psychological trauma experienced during service.

Even veterans who do apply for VA healthcare may fail to meet the mandatory 50% disability requirement to receive medication without a burdensome co-pay. The VA disability rating system uses a method known as "whole person theory," in which multiple disabilities cannot exceed 100%. According to this system, if you have 30% disability for mental health and 20% for a leg injury, for example, the total based on the VA's combined rating table is a disability percentage of 44% rather than 50%. This overly complicated rating system prevents veterans from receiving life-saving resources such as free mental health appointments, free medication, and increased disability compensation.

Whether it is the moral dilemma of applying or the hurdle of jumping through hoops to reach a magic disability rating, veterans battling psychological and physical issues on their own may turn to quicker "fixes"—alcohol, drugs, and potentially suicide. All these issues could be resolved by an automatic enrollment program.

A recent suicide particularly highlights the urgent need for this change: Colonel Jim Turner, frustrated with the difficulty of receiving care at the VA, ended his life in a VA parking lot. Found in his car among his medical records was a note from Turner: "I bet if you look at the 22 suicides a day, you will see VA screwed up in 90%," he wrote. "I did 20+ years, had PTSD and still had to pay over $1,000 a month healthcare."

Colonel Turner's story illustrates how important it is to provide automatic enrollment in VA healthcare after leaving service. If a Colonel serving over twenty years with a diagnosis of PTSD is required to pay significant co-pays for care, what chance does a lance corporal with only four years of service have at receiving affordable healthcare for ailments accrued while serving their country?

Despite the current prevention efforts and increased budget of the VA, veteran suicides continue to climb. While there is no single factor that causes veteran suicide, one thing is clear: if veterans cannot turn to the VA for help, then they may have nowhere to turn. The VA should be the buffer between veterans and the civilian world. By creating mandatory healthcare enrollment for veterans, and holding the VA accountable for the programs and marketing of resources, we can change the battleground. As Dr. Richard Doss, the former VA Clinical Psychologist and Suicide Prevention Program Manager, has stated, it is time we stop asking veterans, "Who did you kill?" but rather, "How did you heal?"

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