

BREXITS & BORDERS



The Digital Literature Review



The Digital Literature Review is a journal showcasing undergraduate student work in literature and cultural studies. The journal is produced by undergraduate students at Ball State University who are involved in *The Digital Literature Review* immersive learning project. Our goal is to provide a forum where undergraduate students can showcase their research projects and disseminate their valuable contributions to ongoing academic conversations.

The Digital Literature Review is published annually in the spring. The deadline for submissions is in early January. We welcome original articles relating to each year's theme. Articles should range from 2500-5000 words; every article is reviewed by undergraduate students on the journal's editorial team. Notification of initial decision is in February. All authors receive constructive feedback concerning submissions.

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Mind the Gap: An Analysis of the Construction and Cultural Function of Borders in Media

Grace Babcock, Cara Walsh, Cali Fehr, Aurora Hibbert,
Sam Scoma, Calvin Sheinfeld, *Digital Literature Review Editorial Team*



Borders confine and divide; they keep “us” in and “them” out—what was fruitful coexistence yesterday could become a turbulent division tomorrow. Yet the borders raised up out of these shifting relationships remain subject to the constraints of the people who build them, the places and realms they divide, and, ultimately, time itself. Just as a physical wall may be built brick-by-brick, a border is raised gradually, often secretly, as the temperature of the sociopolitical climate rises. These physical walls are often built from the bricks of metaphysical borders, laid on the foundation of power and fortified by majority acceptance of a border’s reality.

A prototypical example of a border both physical and metaphysical is Brexit, the United Kingdom’s vote to withdraw from the European Union in 2016. The repercussions of Brexit are still echoing throughout the world, just as how Brexit itself took decades to develop. As in the case of Northern Ireland, Brexit drew new lines over ancient maps. These revised borders were enforced by those in power, their force exerted over those who walked where fences now lie. In her essay “Fences: A Brexit Diary,” Zadie Smith reveals first-hand how perceptions of social attitudes create a veil that can hide conflicting views, especially from those living within the same community. She notices how Brexit revealed not only the split in political views in her community, but the flawed democratic system that spurred Britain’s departure. Although the question of whether ‘to leave or stay’ was posed as a binary, the network of consequences that would ensue prompted complex reasoning among citizens. Two years later, borders that have been rising slowly now stand jagged and sharp in the forefront of a political climate wrought with fear. At the time of writing, the world watches Russia dispute the borders of Ukraine, still reeling from the outbreak of a global pandemic where friend and enemy; life and death; hope and reality itself are thinly veiled.

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Psychologically, humans are social creatures who possess a deep-rooted desire to protect our kind. In the modern world's sea of ever-changing diversity, however, everyone must constantly seek out ways to differentiate between friend and foe. Therefore, we establish an increasing number of physical borders every day to divide groups which possess distinct social traits. Prison yards separate law-abiders and law-breakers, Lima's Wall of Shame carves out the rich and poor neighborhoods, Belfast's Peace Walls separate Catholics and Protestants.



Belfast's Wall of Separation serves as a physical border between Catholics and Protestants (image via Grace Babcock)



Lima's Wall of Shame contains the poor community (left) to keep them from mixing with the rich community (right) (Robinson)

Yet oftentimes, citizens cross these borders by uniting through a common identity. China's Great Wall once kept out invading nomads but quickly became a walkable symbol of regional pride, while East and West Berlin came together to tear down the Berlin Wall. As identity fluctuates, borders come in and out of relevance; they are built and destroyed in a constant battle to define identity.

But not all borders are so easily identified—metaphysical borders also determine who belongs within a group and who is worthy of protection, such as race, nationality, sexuality, religion, and identity. They can invisibly divide one's internal life from their external, their real feelings from their overt expression. Borders are simultaneously concrete and abstract, inter-and-intrapersonal, social and individual.

Many pieces of literature focus on challenging a character's sense of identity, either to strengthen their sense of self-worth or to rebuild their selfhood entirely. This phenomenon occurs in countless ways, from inward reflection to peer-led awakenings, from minor accidents to world upheavals. Real and fictional characters across both geography and history traverse borders in both physical and mental space in order to overcome confining, border-like circumstances and discover what lies across the fence.

It is because of the diverse, continuously shifting nature of borders across time,

regional space, and personal experience that the *Digital Literature Review* felt compelled to explore them. When considering how borders continue to affect global sociopolitical relationships, our team began to centrally question how we can best define our observation of and connection to our own experience of culture, those of our authors, and those detailed in texts. The theoretical framework under which we operated was outlined by Homi K. Bhabha in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*. Our frame of reference for captivating culture became a multifaceted exploration of the “past and present, inside and outside” of any of our conceptions of what culture “meant” (Bhabha 2). This edition of our journal attempts to understand how the construction, destruction, and redefinition of the borders around us (established both physically and through the media we consume) reflect the “cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation;” it is our version of a project that attempts to encapsulate “ambivalencies and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction” (Bhabha 3; 27). *The Digital Literature Review* wanted to provide another space to create cultural conversations between texts, between authors, and between critical perspectives.

In doing so, then, we must confront the real dangers that strict border-making has on global politics and on human life. In Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, she utilizes a mixture of Spanish and English to reveal how culture can divide and limit self-identity. She examines how culture has both expanded and confined her own identity as a lesbian Chicano, and illustrates her struggle to break out of a cultural narrative that rejects her sexuality, her ambition, and her mixed racial background. Anzaldúa takes the position that the conscious and unconscious fear of rejection creates feelings of unease with the inner self, the parts of the soul that are deemed unsavory, which she refers to as the “Shadow-Beast” (Anzaldúa 38). She discusses growing up in America and experiencing prejudice against Spanish and her accent, uncovering how Chicano Spanish, a dialect which she calls a “border-tongue,” was a part of her expression of culture and heritage (Anzaldúa 77). Similarly, in her speech “Grievability and Resistance,” feminist theorist Judith Butler reminds her audience of the necessity to bring “intellectual resources to bear” on the damage that artificially constructed borders across Europe, and to consider how borders like those which separate countries are “determined and interpreted.” Butler states that the enforcement of borders and the cementation of isolationist policies continue to redefine “who is considered living;” borders, then, take on a “lethal power” to dictate who is assigned dignity and who is not. In many of our selected essays, there is a marked recentralization of human dignity and a deep exploration of the many “forms by which grievability is asserted” by refugees, by survivors, and by the artists who encapsulate these experiences (Butler, “Grievability and Resistance”).

One of the biggest barriers for the expression of selfhood, autonomy, and culture

are those constructed by the institutions of the global community and authors themselves. The threats to refugees outlined in Butler's speech are made manifest in Riley Ellis's essay "Stranger Danger: the Imperialist Tendencies of Peacemakers." Ellis discusses how abusive patterns of peacekeeping organizations, namely the United Nations, affect the creation and enforcement of physical borders. Through her analysis of the novels *Girl at War* by Sara Nović and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, Ellis details the experiences of three unique victims of war. She illustrates how peacekeeping institutions like the United Nations reinforce geographical borders and endanger the people on either side, often stripping them of their humanity in exchange for the enforcement of their policy. Ellis cultivates an in-depth look into imperialism to explain how the peacekeeping organizations' invasion of privacy and repeated violation of human rights in war-torn countries leads to desperate, often treacherous border crossings like those shown in Nović's and Hamid's texts.

Delving further into the discussion of the social institutions that provoke protagonists to cross institutional borders, author Erin McKee continues analyzing Nović and Hamid's novels in her essay "Currency and Border Crossings: the Role of Social Class in *Exit West* and *Girl at War*." McKee details how access to money correlates with access to and through borders. Her essay picks up the economic threads woven through Ellis's discussion of geographical borders, but focuses further on how immigration is primarily hindered or bolstered by the institution of social class. Finally, McKee argues that even when people such as the refugees in *Girl at War* and *Exit West* successfully cross geographical borders, they are still bound by physical borders which encircle them. Social class limits access to currency, which McKee argues reinforces physical borders like food security, xenophobic racism, and other barriers low-income immigrants face on either side of the geographic borders between their countries.

Class and financial stability are often weaponized by border agents and wielded against the most vulnerable. Labor, the primary asset of the working class, is rarely protected by profit-driven capitalists and frequently contributes to the abuse of employees. The government of the UK, with its decision to secede from the European Union, made physical the preexisting economic and social borders between demographic groups. As explored in Natalie Fulghum's essay, "My Neighbor is Lesser: A Look At Xenophobic Social Borders That Would Lead To Brexit," the underlying, dangerous xenophobia hurt recent migrant families and festered in the UK before the government's official decision to "Brexit." Through her analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Steven Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*, Fulghum illustrates the multiple ways that xenophobic ideology violates immigrants' sense of bodily autonomy and often dehumanizes them to capitalize off of the labor they produce without guilt. Work becomes more essential than personhood, while the borders that slice through Britain's population continue to divide its population into those who "fit"

and those who do not.

Access to reliable transportation, too, is an inherent luxury of middle-to-upper class life. The two road narratives included in *The Digital Literature Review* simultaneously provide an exploration of moving through, across, and over regional space while detailing the effects that these travels have on the arc of the narrative's characters. Like the works which preceded it, Cassidy Forbing's essay, "An Exploration of the Ford Within *The Remains of the Day*," details the way social and economic class affect the perception individual characters have of one another. Stevens, an English butler hired in service of a new-money American entrepreneur, navigates both the countryside of his homeland and the social expectations of the evolving elite class as he drives across England in an expensive Ford and encounters new acquaintances and old friends. In Eden Fowler's analysis of the multiple borders in the film *Little Miss Sunshine*, the vehicle the Hoover family uses to cross state lines is far less glamorous: a barely-functional Volkswagen van. As the family struggles (both financially and logistically) to get their daughter Olive to her dream beauty pageant, each member experiences embarrassment, discomfort, companionship, and contentment at different points throughout their story. Both Stevens and the Hoovers experience substantial individual development as they move across their native territories and transgress both physical and emotional borders; they gain an understanding of their own personal experience, their connections with those they meet and love, and finally their place in the world that surrounds them.

At this point, the editors of the *Digital Literature Review* noticed a distinct evolution of argumentative focus away from a discussion of the constructions, institutions, and physical borders that fracture our society and towards those which explore the effects of metaphysical, psychological, or social borders. The throughline, however, was evidently the fact that the borders identified by our authors still had similar effects on the narrative outcomes and character trajectories in-text. In her essay "Dreams, Doors, and Death: Exploring Liminal Space and Mortality in *Exit West* and *The Farming of Bones*," Grace Babcock explores the ways in which constructed space can affect growth. However, Babcock explores not physical spaces, but rather the liminal spaces present in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Hamid's *Exit West* and their contrasting effects on emotional healing. It is the crossing into these intangible spaces that Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones* and Nadia and Saeed in *Exit West* are confronted with the borders they construct within themselves. Brigid Maguire similarly centers her discussion on the novel's exploration of mortality. Rather than turn her attention to the internal borders discussed by Babcock, Maguire focuses on the other moments in the texts that mirror the border of death for Liesel and Amabelle. Death, as the character that appears in *The Book Thief*, and death, as the concept and the border between life and the absence of it, interact with the main characters of *The Book*

Thief and *The Farming of Bones* in intimate, heartbreaking ways. These essays do not navigate geographical space, but detail borders' effects on the characters' own internal lives, lived experience, and responses to traumatic events.

Metaphysical borders are complicated still through Olivia Grenier's analysis of the multitude of ways that language and culture define the ways that both authors and readers understand the experiences of a narrative's characters. In Grenier's essay, "Confronting Potential Cultural Barriers in Translated Works," she discusses the impact of the linguistic and cultural translation present in the short stories "No Name Woman" and "Woman Hollering Creek," by Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros. Grenier notes that translation occurs when Cisneros provides both English and Spanish phrases in her writing to make it accessible for the monolingual reader while Kingston retells the story of her aunt living in China for an audience unfamiliar with Chinese social expectations. Grenier's analysis digs into the question of whether the continued crossing of the border of translation is one that benefits the reader and respects the culture of the author. In discussing the impact of translation on literature, readers are introduced to a metaphysical border that is not so finite as the border of death discussed in the previous papers. Rather, we interact with a border that can be crossed and recrossed repeatedly for different purposes and to different effects.

Cultural expectations have perhaps the most influence on the construction of social borders. Kingston's exploration of behavioral expectations as dictators of gender performance are further examined throughout the conclusion of this edition of the *Digital Literature Review*. Specifically, Media and popular culture shackle and restrain identity by laying out limits on how different genders should behave. Specifically, superhero film culture continues to engage itself in a battle to depict toxic masculinity as either favorable or disdainful through the character arcs of popular superheroes and supervillains.

In the *DLR*'s penultimate essay, "Borders of Masculinity: The Hero's Journey in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," Cara Walsh argues that the MCU illustrates masculinity as a border to emotional and character growth in relation to the hero's journey. Walsh bases her argument on the MCU's three foundational heroes—Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor—to analyze the ways in which toxic masculinity manifests in their identities to create roadblocks for their personal lives and progression along the hero's journey. Walsh claims that sociocultural notions of masculinity influence not only their self identity but also the way in which they attempt to fulfill the hero archetype. Though Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor demonstrate these effects in ways distinct to their character, the conflicts they face are rooted in toxic masculinity and halt their growth as heroes. Sam Scoma's essay, "It's All About the Punch(line): The Crossing of Masculinity's Border as Portrayed in Todd Phillips's *Joker*" analyzes the character arc of awkward, isolationist party clown Arthur Fleck. Fleck initially has no access to social status, wealth, or confidence due to his unmasculine

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appearance and temperament, but is able to gain social acclaim, newfound happiness, and confidence once he adopts the toxic masculine traits of physical violence, emotional suppression, and sexual dominance. Scoma argues that young men who are still developing their identity see themselves in Fleck the underdog, and are thus susceptible to mirroring his toxic behaviors to gain similar social acclaim. Both Walsh and Scoma's essays rely on the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, a hierarchical social structure which allows men who adopt harmful traits to hold the most power in society. This theory emphasizes the social act of grooming men, which can occur through watching films and participating in pop culture.

The world of literature is rife with examples of borders, both physical and metaphysical. These works featured in the following journal are ordered intentionally to guide the audience through the ways in which our institutions, our perceptions, our relationships, our language, and our culture simultaneously construct intimidating barriers and provide avenues for personal and collective growth. We encourage both personal reflection and critical engagement with these essays, and aim to provide the space for the analysis which identifies the dangers, the luxuries, and the lasting effects of the many borders which influence identities. The turn of each page, the click of each link, and the inspiration behind each assertion is a border-crossing itself; we urge you to recognize, to notice, and to consider the borders which influence your own understanding of this work.

Thank you, and see you on the other side,

Grace Babcock, Cali Fehr, Aurora Hibbert, Sam Scoma, Calvin Sheinfeld, and Cara Walsh.

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Stranger Danger: The Imperialist Tendencies of Peacemakers

Riley Ellis, *Ball State University*

Sara Nović's *Girl at War*, a realist novel concerned with Ana Jurić's journey through the Yugoslavian Civil War, and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, a magical realist novel detailing the lives of Nadia and Saeed during a civil war, are two different takes on one's life within a warzone. While Nović explores identities and borders within the history of the former Yugoslavia, Hamid brings modern issues including violence, surveillance, and borders into a hypothetical world. Nović and Hamid highlight hypocrisies within peace organizations, as well as a lack of accountability for abuses committed against citizens living within warzones. Rather than alleviating devastation within areas in conflict, peace organizations appear to add to the violence. With an established exploration of the globalization present in Hamid's *Exit West* and nationalism present in Nović's *Girl at War*, we can expand and

investigate the portrayal of third-party peace organizations, such as the United Nations, independent agents, and others. While observing these organizations' tactics concerning the guarding of borders and their supposedly protective measures within countries, one can examine them as bodies that self-govern, gatekeep safety, and bypass borders, all of which are distinguishing characteristics of imperialist tendencies vis-à-vis the control and authority they have exerted within foreign states.

Peace-building organizations are recognized as good, pure, benevolent saviors that travel around the world to help those in need. A negative concept such as imperialism would not ordinarily be associated with a peace-building organization like the United Nations, but the conversation has begun to change as more accusations of UN human rights abuses come to light. Most recently, an

independent panel reported “83 allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse” associated with the WHO’s presence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo due to the 2018 to 2020 Ebola outbreak (Westendorf). The abuses occurring within the Congo are not the first associated with UN organizations. Since about 2000, many UN peacekeeping operations have been discovered to have “sexually abused and exploited local women and children” (Westendorf). Such organizations have been “structurally unable and arguably unwilling to effectively prevent or punish sexual exploitation and abuse by its personnel,” as seen in the Congo where there were no official reports or investigations filed before the media caught wind of the abuse (Westendorf). The actions of the U.N. personnel prompt questions regarding its ability to make or keep peace across borders around the world. How can such violent actions cultivate a peaceful environment, most especially given the apparent lack of accountability within the organization? How can a disordered organization halt chaos within another territory?

Both Sara Nović’s *Girl at War*, a realist novel, and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, a magical realist novel, depict the impact of war, border crossings, and peacekeeping organizations on individuals living within tumultuous territories. In *Girl at War*, Nović establishes a loss of faith between war-impacted individuals and international peace organizations, most specifically the UN, by portraying abuses committed by peacekeepers and growing frustrations directed at said organizations by the public. Furthermore, Hamid illustrates the effects of a peacekeeping organization’s temporary assistance and how such temporary measures lead to distrust, exploitation, and violence. While the conversation about UN misconduct is only just beginning, Nović and Hamid’s novels represent the foreboding undertones of imperialist behavior by highlighting peace organizations’ abuse of power and authority at border crossings between and within war-torn countries.

To analyze the United Nations and other peacekeeping bodies as having imperialist tendencies, I will primarily use Marxist sociologist Isaac Christiansen’s definition of imperialism in the twenty-first century. Christiansen determines that imperialism acts “as a nationalistic geopolitical expression of capital” where core countries reallocate “land, labor, and resources necessary to produce commodities,” therein “[subjugating] the interests of peripheral client states” (338). In a modern sense, imperialism solely requires the elimination of a nation’s authority over its natural and human resources through the establishment of a foreign power within the territory. Regarding this definition, the United Nations and other peacekeeping organizations will operate as foreign powers that displace the authority of the peripheral states. Furthermore, the United Nations’ goal will be understood as “the maintenance of international peace and security,” which the organization accomplishes through conflict prevention and mediation (“Maintain International Peace”). Regarding

Girl at War and *Exit West*, the behavior at the center of this discussion will be the attempts, or lack thereof, of peacemakers to curate an environment for sustainable peace as both Nović and Hamid examine implications of different abuses that occur at the hands of peacekeepers.

Nović first introduces the United Nations and challenges the organization's fulfillment of its intended goals when the main character, Ana Jurić, presents her story in front of UN delegates. Upon walking up to the UN buildings, Ana notes that "over the years [she had] lost faith in the UN" seeing as how "their interventions, in [her] country and across the globe, were tepid at best" (Nović 96). While Nović establishes that Ana previously had faith in the UN, the organization's lack of substantial action ruined any such beliefs. Ana continues her reflection by "imagin[ing] the delegates ...discussing the body count of [her] parents and friends and determining that yes, something would have to be done to keep up appearances, but that it would be best to stay out of such a messy conflict" (Nović 98). Ana's narrative asserts that the UN does not intervene in conflicts to help civilians, but rather "to keep up appearances." Despite the UN's intended purpose of helping parties in conflict make peace, the organization would prefer to refrain from engaging in real conflict. Through Ana's interactions with UN delegates, Nović establishes the UN as a controversial organization and begins a discussion concerning the continuity between peace organizations' intentions and their behaviors.

Similarly, the UN and other peace organizations' lack of action against China regarding the ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims is illustrative of such critical descriptions. In March 2021, the United Nations acknowledged the allegation that, in China, abusive working and living conditions were forcefully inflicted upon Uyghur Muslims ("Rights Experts Concerned"). However, instead of taking any direct action, the organization responded solely by "respectfully urg[ing] the Government [of China] to immediately cease any such measures that are not fully compliant with international law, norms, and standards relating to human rights" ("Rights Experts Concerned"). Even with an increased number of humanitarian experts begging for China's government to be held accountable for their human rights violations, there is a lack of real interference within China (Richardson). The UN's consistent calls for the Government of China to act and begin investigations are nothing more than empty actions meant "to keep up appearances," as Nović dictates (98). Because the UN considers China a permanent member, China can use its authority to undermine the intentions of the UN and maintain its reputation in the international system ("Current Members"). While the UN has yet to intervene in China, Nović and the world's ever-present understanding that it could illustrates that a peace organization's power extends beyond physical borders.

After introducing the United Nations, Nović develops a disconnect between the organization's intentions and its employees' behavior. When Ana gives her presentation at the UN, she determines that "the UN delegates ...would be thirsty for gore" (Nović 100). Nović contrasts Ana's conclusions concerning the UN's desire to avoid messy conflict with the affirmation that the delegates "would be thirsty for gore." Kapka Kassabova of *The Guardian* describes Nović's UN workers as "criminally well-meaning" in that there is a great divide between their inaction and their potentially good intentions. At this moment, Nović appears to establish a border between the UN as an international peace organization and its employees. This border signifies that, even with peace-driven intentions, their actions do not follow these aims, which leaves the opportunity for human rights violations and power imbalances that resemble imperial outreach.

Nović's observations are congruent with the number of abuses committed by individual UN employees outside of organizational direction. As of March 2017, an Associated Press investigation found roughly "2,000 allegations of sexual abuse or exploitation" against UN peacekeepers and staff (Daigle and Dodds). Despite finding employment at an organization dedicated to maintaining peace around the world, UN employees appear to lack the desire, dedication, and wellbeing necessary for such a meaningful and challenging initiative as the UN's. Moreover, this contrast between violence and ambivalence is further emphasized when Ana spots two boys in the room, thus prompting her to wonder whether Sharon, the UN peacekeeper who worked with Ana, "had recruited them, too, or if they were someone else's project" (Nović 101). Nović's use of the word "project" dehumanizes not only the presenters but their experiences as well. UN peacekeepers do not see Ana or the boys as people that went through incredibly traumatic experiences, but rather as mascots meant to uplift their pitches for humanitarian committees. The dehumanization of civilians living through war, seen through abuse and belittling rhetoric, minimizes the importance of both the civilians and their histories while creating an environment in which the peace organization can place its will above others involved. Peace organizations, as depicted by Nović, can be understood to "subjugat[e] the interests of peripheral client states," not necessarily through the literal extermination of the conflicting country's human resources, but rather through deprivation of human qualities and respect for the country's human resources (Christiansen 338).

The bureaucratic detachment Nović describes is not unique to the UN's peacekeeping efforts, as reports of UN bureaucratic struggles have emerged for years. In March of 2016, "a former president of the General Assembly was charged by the US attorney for the Southern District of New York with tax evasion after corruptly receiving \$1.3 million in bribes" (Baumann 462). Furthermore, the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo

was recognized as failing to “comply with applicable human rights standards in response to the adverse health condition caused by lead contamination of the [internally displaced persons] camps” (Baumann 462). What is significant about these investigations, along with many others concerning UN malpractice, is that they were initiated by the Secretary-General and other internal agencies associated with the UN (Baumann 462). The sole presence of internal handling creates a lack of external accountability and enforcement, which can lead to a lack of genuine accountability. In response to the negative reports of the UN’s work culture and bureaucracy, the UN posted a blog that launched a bottom-up procedure for culture changes within the UN (Javan). The current Chief Secretary-General Antonio Guterres aims to focus on the mission rather than the bureaucracy while also “vow[ing] to boost the UN’s culture of accountability” (Javan). However, many argue that, because “organizations are led from the top,” if the UN truly wants to change and become more efficient and accountable, “it must be from the top” (Bannock and Kweifio-Okai; Baumann 469). The lack of responsibility for real change by United Nations executives means that the organization itself may not be truly committed to change, thus leaving room for the bureaucratic errors that cultivate an environment tolerant of abuse.

In addition to the UN’s bureaucratic struggles, the structures for holding peacekeeping operations accountable have failed in several ways. Not only have UN peacekeepers been found guilty of sexual abuse, exploitation, and spreading diseases but they have also been found guilty of “inaction in the face of genocide” and other crimes against humanity that have led many to demand increased accountability regarding peacekeeping mandates (Bosco; Di Razza 1-2). Today, the lack of clear and concrete regulations and procedures has led to many failures to protect citizens within conflicting regions (Bosco; Cooper; Di Razza 2-10). The internal procedures for accountability currently rely on the UN Charter, performance management, ethical standards, and several other documents (Di Razza 3). Furthermore, the legal accountability of UN staff is limited because of the immunity privileges of the UN (Di Razza 6-8). While the immunity can be lifted, there are still additional difficulties in the prosecution process because of “limited evidence, limited access to victims, and variations in criminal codes and legal interpretations and approaches from country to country” (Di Razza 7). A lack of clear direction, legal accountability, and internal and external transparency has cultivated a space where varying performances of peacekeepers are passable within the UN (Bosco; Di Razza 1-13). The UN’s bureaucratic struggles concerning direction and legal responsibility perpetuate peacekeepers’ negligence and abuse provided by the lack of structural accountability.

In contrast to Nović’s bolder introduction of the peacekeepers, Mohsin Hamid introduces the independent agents in *Exit West* through whispers across main characters

Nadia and Saeed's home. Hamid uses a subtle and uncertain introduction, therein establishing a trepidatious relationship between the agents, characters, and the audience. As the civil war in Nadia and Saeed's home begins to progress, "rumors began to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere" and "some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors" (Hamid 72). With the increasing reports of violence, these rumors began to fester within Nadia and Saeed's minds, leading them to seek out the agents who operate the doors that allow for relatively safe border crossings. When Nadia and Saeed first meet their agent, "[t]hey did not hear the agent approaching," and were even unsure of whether or not "he had been there all along" (Hamid 89). In their efforts to understand whom they were working with, the pair determined that the agent's demeanor reminded them of either "a poet or a psychopath" (Hamid 89). However, any understanding of kindness or assurance of decency that one may find with "a poet" is disavowed when the agent refused to elaborate on instructions, given that they "[were] not a request" (Hamid 89). At this moment, Nadia and Saeed lose any inkling of control within their interactions with the agent. Because of their desperation to find safety amidst the civil war, the agent becomes aware that the pair is willing to do anything. With this understanding between the three characters, there is a blatant power imbalance that leaves Nadia and Saeed at the agent's will. This power imbalance stems from a similar dehumanization that Nović depicts within Ana's experience of being labeled as a project by UN delegates. Both authors use dehumanization to illustrate that peace organizations create metaphysical borders based on authority to separate themselves from those whom they are helping.

Hamid's description of the power imbalance between the agent and Nadia and Saeed, created through the possession and disposition of goods and means, reflects real-world transactional relationships between peacekeepers and civilians. In a report published by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, in the period between 2008 and 2013, about 480 instances of UN peacekeepers sexually abusing Haitian and Liberian women and children in exchange for resources were reported ("UN Peacekeepers"). The report further dictates that these transactional abuses are not new to peacekeeping but are rather common (Chandler; "UN Peacekeepers"). UN peacekeepers can—and do—withhold resources with an understanding that the desperate, hungry, and poor civilians they are meant to serve are willing to do anything to better their situations. As Dean Spade and Craig Willse, associate professors at Seattle University and George Mason University respectively, discuss in their article concerning "Sex, Gender, and War in an Age of Multicultural Imperialism," imperialism uses "sexual, gender, and family norms as technologies of intervention and violence" (7). By manipulating and surpassing cultural norms concerning sex and gender, both peacekeepers and Hamid's agents create an uncertain environment in which they have

power while the civilians are kept guessing and submissive. Nadia and Saeed are not familiar with the agents or their intentions, thus making them vulnerable to unpredictable behavior (Hamid 90). These vulnerabilities provide the agents the opportunity to exploit and harass the pair. The agents do not commit sexual violence in the same way the UN peacekeepers did against Haitian and Liberian civilians, but they do challenge gender and family norms by demanding Nadia remove her headscarf while nearly engaging in physical contact (Hamid 89). Within Hamid's depiction of Nadia and Saeed's interactions with the agents, he reflects imperial behavior through the use and abuse of sex and gender by peacekeeping organizations. By blatantly crossing the metaphysical border of a region's cultural norms, the peacekeepers illustrate their chauvinism and imperialist power by placing their organization above the authority and values of the peripheral state.

Sara Nović further describes how physical resources are used by peacekeeping organizations to subjugate the citizens living within territories in conflict. While recollecting the UN's interactions with civilians and Serbian nationalist fighters, Ana describes a lack of peacekeepers' presence and how the Serbian soldiers "stole the aid meant for civilians," concluding that "[i]f you drop the food and leave, you're just feeding your enemy" (Nović 104). While the UN and other peacekeeping organizations cannot be everywhere at once, there were nearby areas that had surplus amounts of peacekeepers (Nović 274). Since there were other locations with far higher concentrations of people, one can understand that there were enough peacekeepers to have some in Ana's village. Furthermore, while no one in the village had seen any peacekeepers, there was a certain UN presence within the community illustrated through the armored trucks that delivered aid (Nović 225). Ana also explains how the Serbian soldiers would not kill all the villagers to ensure the continuation of UN and NATO food deliveries (Nović 224). In one understanding of imperialism, Robert Biel describes the imperial tactic where the oppressed are used "as agents in their own oppression," which can be seen with the soldiers' control over the other villagers through the food supply (86). By "drop[ping] the food and leav[ing]," the UN allowed the villagers to be victims of further oppression, thus increasing the civilians' vulnerability and dependence on UN aid (Nović 104). By furthering the villagers' oppression, the UN creates a larger border between the civilians and the outside world, for there are fewer opportunities to escape or find more advantageous circumstances.

Physical resources as aid are critical in conflicting zones where citizens may struggle to find their next meal, but they can cause harm long term. While speaking about the UN World Food Program, WFP, Deepmala Mahla who works with Mercy Corps and WFP has discussed how food drops are "only an immediate rather than long-term answer" that pose the danger of falling "perpetually into a cycle of more and more relief" (Cole). Without

prolonged assistance that serves as a supplement for food programs and other aid to lead countries to be self-supporting, conflicting countries become dependent on the UN for survival. The countries are forced into subordinate positions in which they are subjected to the authority of the UN, and if the countries do not abide by the UN's authority, then they risk losing their established assistance, and therein their survival as a country.

Hamid further explores the role of peacekeepers in relation to goods through the lens of monetary resources and the elitist position of peacekeepers standing guard at the doors. Rather than physical goods, the peacekeepers within *Exit West* control opportunities and circumstances by blocking doors, or physical borders, that lead to desirable places (Hamid 115). The agent's gatekeeping leads many to fear the moment when "hunger force[s] them back through one of the doors that led to undesirable places" (Hamid 115). As more people traveled to an area, the camps became more expensive, meaning that, without enough money to pay off guards, many lost their access to shelter and other physical resources. With a lack of resources, people also lost the ability to find newer, better opportunities, which only served to enforce a cyclical pattern of less-than-optimal circumstances (Hamid 118). Christiansen engages with this devastating cyclical pattern by detailing how imperialism "shift[s] ...wealth and resources upward" by using redistributive mechanisms that benefit the wealthy (341-342). With Christiansen's understanding of the relation between imperialist powers and the flow of resources, Hamid's depiction of peacekeepers' efforts to gatekeep opportunity is indicative of imperial behaviors. Peacekeepers shift money and opportunities to populations that are already wealthy, therein making the general population dependent on any and every resource provided to them as aid.

While there are no portals for the UN to block like Hamid's peacekeepers, newfound opportunities and discussions are often stunted by the UN's permanent occupation, even when many developing nations support the efforts. For example, as recently as March 2021, "richer members of the World Trade Organization," an agency of the UN, "block[ed] a push by over 80 developing countries ...to waive patent rights in an effort to boost production of COVID-19 vaccines for poor nations" ("Rich, Developing Nations"). These wealthy countries used their position, power, and wealth to ensure the prioritization of capital within their own industries. Rather than supporting an initiative that held the backing of many UN member countries and had the potential to benefit the globe, the permanent countries acted solely out of their own self-interest. In this instance, the UN participates in Christiansen's idea of imperialism being "conceived of as a nationalistic geopolitical expression of capital ...by which capital from core countries appropriates the ...resources necessary to produce commodities and subjugates the interests of peripheral client states to those of capitalist in the metropolis," or those of the imperial power (338). The UN acted

as an outlet for powerful core countries to withhold the information needed to produce the vaccines, which therein suppressed the interests of the peripheral states. Hamid's portrayal of peacekeepers and their manner of controlling circumstances reflects how the UN has blocked opportunities and therein suppressed foreign interests as a way to exert imperial-like power.

Nović and Hamid's depictions of peacekeeping organizations in their respective novels, *Girl at War* and *Exit West*, illustrate the imperialist tendencies of peacekeeping organizations through corruption and abuse. While traditionally one may think of a singular nation, large in size and population, in relation to imperialism, it is significant to understand that an imperial power "is defined solely by its cultural diversity and flexible borders," as noted by Yuval Noah Harari in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (190). Nović and Hamid's depiction of guarded borders, lack of aid, lack of accountability, dehumanization, power imbalances, manufactured dependence, and more reflect real-life events and atrocities and are illustrative of imperialist tendencies within peacekeeping organizations. At their core, these actions stem from a body, or core country, displacing the interests of another for their own through the means of "land, labor, and resources" (Christiansen 338). These peacekeeping organizations, as depicted by Nović and Hamid, use physical and metaphysical borders to exert control over various populations through the containment and oppression of entrances and exits, opportunities, resources, and cultural norms. These controlling efforts displace the authority and will of "peripheral client states," while simultaneously violating the very nature of what a peacekeeping organization is meant to be. Through the understanding that even a well-known, highly respected peace organization can become an abuser, perhaps other large, powerful organizations within different pieces of literature can be examined for abusive behavior. Literature is an accessible resource that has extensive outreach to the public, meaning that authors can expose wrongdoings throughout the world and everyday life and educate the public in an intimate and expansive manner.

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Currency and Border Crossings: The Role of Social Class in *Exit West* and *Girl at War*

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Girl at War by Sara Nović and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid both tell the stories of characters in war-torn countries that are trying to survive day by day. In these novels, there are many physical and intangible borders that impact the main characters' lives in significant ways. Ana Jurić from *Girl at War* is a Croatian girl from the former Yugoslavia who lives in poverty in the midst of a civil war at just 10 years old. *Exit West* follows young, working-class couple Saeed and Nadia from an unspecified country who are experiencing a violent war within the streets of their city while also trying to navigate their forming romantic relationship. Although *Exit West* differs significantly from *Girl at War* due to its elements of magical realism, the two novels are very similar in that they both show that money can be used to cross borders. Class borders and the importance of money to go from one place to another play a key role in these

novels and in the main characters' lives. A lack of money also creates a border for these characters in many ways. In addition, Ana, Saeed, and Nadia are all moving westward throughout their journeys out of their countries; borders become more restrictive and more dependent on money to cross. This paper will focus on comparing the experiences of Ana Jurić from *Girl at War* and Saeed and Nadia from *Exit West* and how these characters use money to cross borders and escape the traumatic living conditions of their home countries, how the lack of money impacts their lives and ability to cross borders, and the connection between the western world and the importance of money in border crossings. Furthermore, *Girl at War* and *Exit West* both suggest that resources and opportunities should be more accessible to everyone, not just the affluent, and that wealth distribution would secure the well-being of the working class.

Currency is an essential passageway through which to cross everyday borders, and social class is one of the most substantial borders between groups of people in our society. Those with money have access to the tools necessary to live a fruitful and happy life, whereas those with less money do not have as much access and live in a cutthroat world in which they must work very hard to survive. For people seeking a better life outside of their country, this is especially true. *Girl at War* by Sara Nović and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid are two texts that exemplify how social class impacts one's ability to migrate and have access to basic needs. The novel *Girl at War* follows Ana Jurić, a Croatian girl from Zagreb, who lives through the trauma of civil war in former Yugoslavia at just 10 years old. Eventually, Ana immigrates to America after her parents are killed, but faces barriers along the way. There are many instances where money is needed to cross a border, whether it's a border of hunger or a physical border.

Likewise, the characters in *Exit West* also struggle with class borders. The novel follows young, working-class couple Saeed and Nadia from an unknown country, who are experiencing a violent war within the streets of their city while also trying to navigate their forming romantic relationship. Unlike *Girl at War*, *Exit West* contains elements of magical realism; in Saeed and Nadia's world there are magical, one-way doors that allow for a person to teleport to a distant place in the world. Although this world has magical elements, there are still borders for marginalized groups to gain access to these doors to escape war torn areas.

These novels tell very different stories, but they are similar because both display how currency plays a role in immigration and the necessity of immigration reform to ensure that impoverished people can migrate out of countries on the brink of disaster or war. The main characters in *Exit West* and *Girl at War* both face borders to seeking refuge in other countries due to their financial circumstances and must find alternative and often illegal methods of escaping. After comparing the experiences of the characters in *Exit West* and *Girl at War*, it is easy to see that social class is one of the largest determining factors in one's ability to cross a border.

One of the first encounters with class borders in Nović's *Girl at War* is the struggle of Ana's family to gain access to basic necessities. Ana describes how her parents cannot afford much and often go hungry:

My mother sent me to the butcher with a wad of new dinar and instructions to buy a bag of bones, and I watched as she made soup from the flavor of meat. She ladled out ever-shrinking portions, sometimes skipping meals completely herself ...After dinner I was never full. (Nović 56)

Ana also wears hand-me-down clothing from her neighbors because they cannot afford

anything else. This is an example of how currency is used to cross a border: money pays for food, clothing, sanitary products, and much more. When one cannot afford such items due to their financial circumstances, it not only puts a strain on their physical health, but also their mental health and motivation. If someone goes hungry or is unable to clothe and clean themselves, this puts a border between them and their health, which impacts their ability to keep working and afford basic necessities, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to overcome.

As her family grapples with the problem of putting food on the table, there is also the matter of Ana's younger sister Rahela becoming very ill; the family must send her to America through a charity called MediMission as they struggle to get medical care in their own country. Although the main reason the Jurić family might not have access to resources such as food, clothing, and healthcare is the civil war that tore through their city, the border of class is still an issue. If Ana's family had more money, they likely would have been able to get out of Yugoslavia and seek refuge in another country. However, Ana's father applied for visas to America, but they were unfortunately denied. This is also a demonstration of how there needs to be serious immigration reform in many nations to ensure that there are fair opportunities for everyone to seek a better life in a different country. If this does not happen, social class will continue to be a border for impoverished people who need to immigrate.

Ana's family traveled from their home in Zagreb to Sarajevo in order to deliver Rahela to MediMission. Since the Jurić family is denied access to visas to travel with Rahela to America, she is separated from her loved ones and must stay with a foster family. On their trip back to Zagreb, Ana's family is stopped by some Serbian soldiers. During this stop, Ana's parents are killed by these men. It is never revealed why their visas were denied, but again it begs the question of, if they had more money, would they have been granted access to visas and thus to safety? If there were immigration policies in place in America to help refugees, would things have turned out differently? Would the Jurić family have been able to go on and live better lives in America? In her essay "Borders of Class: Migration and Citizenship in the Capitalist State", author Lea Ypi states, "[T]he inconveniences of assembling paperwork, waiting for a response, living with enormous uncertainty, and all of the other familiar troubles associated with immigration bureaucracy are unevenly distributed across the immigrant population" (143). Ana's family is just one example of those impacted by the discriminatory practices of immigration systems that favor wealthy immigrants over poor ones. A significant problem in *Girl at War* is being unable to leave despite a desperate need to, but as Ypi states, borders are easy to cross for some, and impossible for others (142). Those who do not have as much money face more borders when trying to migrate, while

wealthy immigrants have an easier and quicker visa processing procedure.

As the war continues around them, Petar, Ana's godfather, decides it would be best for Ana to go live in America with the foster parents that had taken in Rahela. However, the border of class stands in the way of Ana getting a better life for herself. All the legal routes through which Ana could go to America are unavailable:

Petar contacted MediMission, who offered a terse response that family reunification cases were not within the scope of their work ...Then he considered refugee status, but there wasn't an American embassy in Croatia yet. The consulate in Belgrade was running a looping voice mail that apologized for the wait time and said, due to the high volume of inquiries, they were working through a backlog of applications at this time. (Nović 266-267)

Again, if Ana's family had more money, perhaps they would have been able to get visas earlier or might have connections to get the family to safety. However, crossing this financial border was practically impossible, and not crossing the border could be a matter of life and death. Therefore, legal migration routes were no longer on the table. However, these illegal routes still cost money, demonstrating how it is necessary to have money in order to cross many types of borders.

One of the illegal routes that Petar can afford to take is to buy fake documents for Ana. Petar's friend helps make a fake American visa and Yugoslavian passport for Ana, since hers was lost. Petar then risks his life to take Ana to Otočac to meet with a United Nations Peacekeeper, who is set to take her to the airport in Frankfurt, Germany. On the trip to Otočac, Petar gives Ana an envelope with dinar, a currency used in former Yugoslavia, and tells her: "You'll find that powerful men can often be persuaded. At least they can here. I don't know about America" (Nović 273). Currency plays a huge role in this scene because bribery is a valid way to go from one side of a border to another. Wealth equals power, and wealth inequality has allowed the rich to seize opportunities, sometimes through bribery, while the impoverished do not have that option. There are many takeaways from *Girl at War*, but most significant is how class borders and wealth inequality impact quality of life, immigration, and other notable opportunities.

Much like in *Girl at War*, Hamid's *Exit West* depicts the same phenomenon of people coming to the realization that a war is worsening and there's a desperate need to leave, but not everyone has access to the resources necessary to make their escape. The beauty of *Exit West* is its unconventional way to get out of a country; however, much like in the non-magical world, access is denied to marginalized groups of people. There are magical one-way doors to get to better places, but the best places that everyone wants to go to are typically heavily guarded once the knowledge of their destinations has spread. According to Ypi,

“Borders have always been (and will continue to be) open for some and closed for others. They are open if you are white, educated, and middle and upper class; they are closed (or much less open) if you are not” (142). Saeed and Nadia face many borders to migrate seeing that they are not wealthy and not white.

As Saeed and Nadia start forming their romantic relationship, they notice that people are disappearing around them at work:

At Saeed’s office work was slow even though three of his fellow employees had stopped showing up ...visas, which had long been near-impossible, were now truly impossible for non-wealthy people to secure, and journeys on passenger planes and ships were therefore out of the question ...At Nadia’s workplace it was much the same, with the added intrigue that came from her boss and her boss’s boss being among those rumored to have fled abroad. (Hamid 52-53)

Much like in *Girl at War*, the characters in *Exit West* notice that the desire to leave the country has heightened. Those who have more money, such as the C-level executives at Nadia’s workplace, have been able to make their way out of the country, but many working-class citizens applying for visas are unable to secure them due to their social class. In her essay, “Borders of Class: Migration and Citizenship in the Capitalist State,” Ypi talks about the advantages that wealthy immigrants have over non-wealthy ones:

[U]nder the U.K.’s Tier (Investor) visa program, those with the ability to invest two million pounds in the United Kingdom can come and stay in the country for more than three years, and those who invest ten million pounds may apply for indefinite leave to remain after only two years of residence (compared to five years for those who have reason to naturalize because of family ties). (Ypi 143)

Again, visas are not accessible to those seeking refuge unless they are of a higher social class. This issue shows how non-wealthy immigrants face more borders because immigrants are often only seen as valuable if they have something to offer the host country, such as money or labor.

Saeed and Nadia get desperate in their search for ways to exit their city. The couple risk their lives to meet a man who called himself an agent and claims to be able to find doorways that are not already occupied by militants. He requires payment for his services, which resembles how bribery functions as a passageway much like in *Girl at War*. While they wait for the agent to contact them, Saeed and Nadia continue to struggle in their living conditions. They no longer have electricity in their building and have to use the bathroom outside. This is another example of how there are borders to gain access to basic resources for those with less money. Saeed and Nadia meet the agent at a converted house, fearing for their lives, as the agent could have sold them out to militants. Much like how Petar has

to risk his life to get Ana out of Croatia, Saeed and Nadia have to risk their lives in order to gain access to safe living conditions, while the wealthy bypass borders with relative ease. To Saeed and Nadia's relief, they are able to get through the door and arrive on the Greek island of Mykonos, yet they still face borders as poor immigrants trying to survive in a country they have never been to before.

As Saeed and Nadia continue to move west, they run into borders to receive help as struggling refugees. This is largely due to the fact that impoverished immigrants are not welcomed by the native people of many places such as the United Kingdom. The couple travels through another door and arrives in an empty mansion in London. As they explore their surroundings, more people start to appear in the house through the door. However, when a housekeeper comes to the mansion and sees that it is occupied by people, she calls the police (Hamid 127). From then on, London natives and authorities are on a mission to remove migrants from the city. The instant response of trying to rid the city of poor migrants shows how much of a distaste there is for immigrants in need. There is no response from the government showing empathy or asking how these people might need help. The impoverished immigrants are seen as a threat, especially since they are occupying a space owned by affluent people. No one stops to question why migrants were forced into this position to begin with. This puts a border between the migrants and their ability to have access to basic needs, resulting in the need to forage for resources.

It is rumored that millions of migrants have come into the city and occupied many empty homes and spaces. Although police show up to where Saeed and Nadia are staying, the couple remain there along with others who came through the magical door because there is nowhere else they can go, and London is a good place to search for food and other necessities. One night, when Saeed and Nadia are returning to the mansion, they find themselves up against an angry nativist mob that is intent on harming those they perceive as migrants. After the altercation, Nadia's eye is swollen shut from the bruising and Saeed has a bloody, busted lip (Hamid 134). Three people die that night from rioters across the city, and soon the authorities cut electricity as an attack on the immigrants. Hamid begins to describe the border between the dark and light sides of London. The affluent are on the light side and the impoverished immigrants are on the dark side without electricity (Hamid 141). Saeed and Nadia wonder what life is like in light London as the border between them and the wealthy grows wider. Garbage begins to pile up on their side of the city and the trains keep running but do not make stops in dark London. This section of *Exit West* depicts how poor immigrants are segregated and dehumanized because they are seeking help and resources.

Later, Saeed and Nadia find themselves in worker camps for migrants in which they do labor clearing terrain and building infrastructure, in exchange for housing (Hamid 169).

Saeed finds himself working in a road crew, and he admires his foreman, a knowledgeable and experienced native man. He seems to tolerate migrants and Saeed believes the foreman likes him, but when Saeed decides to thank the foreman for everything he is doing for the migrants, the foreman says nothing (Hamid 179). In capitalist nations, one's labor and wealth are the only things worthwhile, and the white, affluent people and politicians would rather blame poor, nonwhite immigrants for the drain on resources rather than taking responsibility for the wealth inequality taking place in their country. This does not excuse the xenophobia and bigotry of nativists, but it shows how poor nativists have fallen victim to propaganda that is extremely harmful and only benefits the rich, who continue to exploit the labor of both natives and immigrants. For example, in her essay "Borders of Class: Migration and Citizenship in the Capitalist State," Ypi states:

Animosity will fall predominantly on those with lower skills and lower incomes who are more likely to make use of a range of such state-subsidized services. After all, Arab or Russian millionaires living in London typically visit private clinics, send their children to expensive private schools, and make no claims to, say, public housing. Thus, the kind of competition that leads to resentment is typically between poor working-class natives and poor immigrants. (144)

The way in which Saeed's coworker reacts to his comment depicts this resentment that Ypi describes. Although Saeed and other migrants are not responsible for the lack of funding going into state-subsidized services, the blame is shifted to them in order to create a border between poor, working-class natives and poor immigrants.

Exit West was published in February of 2017, less than a year after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Although there were many reasons why people might have voted to leave, conservative politicians advocated for the UK to have more control over immigration and borders. In her piece "Fences: A Brexit Diary," Zadie Smith notes that when the class and age breakdown of voters came out, there were many working-class citizens that identified with the populist party, which is for stricter borders and immigration policies (25). There is no doubt that tensions were high among immigrant and native populations around the time this novel was released. Although *Exit West* is fictional, it was inspired by real life borders.

In the book *Selected Studies in International Migration and Immigrant Incorporation*, there is a section titled "The Function of Labour Immigration in Western European Capitalism" by Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack (21). This section contains discourse about how immigrants are a source of labor for host countries to exploit and how Western European countries have used racism and nationalism to divide the working class:

...the employment of immigrant workers has an important socio-political function

for capitalism: by creating a split between immigrant and indigenous workers along national and racial lines and offering better conditions and status to indigenous workers, it is possible to give large sections of the working class the consciousness of a labour aristocracy. (Castles and Kosack 24)

Both the renowned German philosopher Karl Marx and the German revolutionary Friedrich Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, which outlined the idea of a labor aristocracy in their work (Brown and Fee 1248; Castles and Kosack 22). A labor aristocracy is when capitalists try to erode class consciousness by separating the values of the working class. By giving some members of the working class more privileges, it convinces the impoverished to align themselves with capitalist values (Castles and Kosack 23). By creating this border between members of the working class, such as pitting nativists against immigrants, a corrupt system can flourish. In *Exit West*, it is important to consider this concept when examining why London nativists are so against poor immigrants coming into their country. They have been taught that these immigrants are a drain on their resources when in reality there are people who choose to hoard their wealth rather than share it, which is a far more insidious threat than people seeking refuge.

This concept of creating a border between the working class can also be applied to *Girl at War* which is based on the events of the Bosnian War (1992-1995) which caused the fracturing of Yugoslavia. Although this war involved ethnic conflicts between Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, the events that led up to the war involved class tensions that erupted following a destabilization of their country. In the 1980s, Yugoslavia's economy began to decline after the death of the President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) offered to loan the country money; however, mandatory economic reforms were to be put in place in exchange. Nick Beams notes this in "IMF 'Shock Therapy' and the Recolonisation of the Balkans":

The International Monetary Fund [then] took over economic policy, implementing a number of all too familiar shock therapies: devaluation, a wage freeze, and price decontrol....As the economy contracted from this shock, revenues to the central government declined, triggering pressure from the IMF to raise taxes to balance the budget....These centrifugal forces began to tear apart at the federation, with the richer provinces of Croatia and Slovenia objecting to being drained of resources by the poorer provinces...Yugoslavia broke into pieces as ethnic and religious rivalries were reasserted in an attempt to control the rapidly shrinking pool of resources. (10-11)

Girl at War and *Exit West* both depict the class tension that can occur when resources are withheld from people who need them and how fear mongering can lead to violence. Often conflicts like these appear to only involve ethnicity or immigration; however, they also often

also incorporate largely overlooked economic issues and class borders at play.

Unfortunately, borders like these are extremely normalized in the world. One's wealth determines their value as a human being, and it is a hard concept to unlearn because of the borders of class created in our society. In *Exit West*, Nadia even tells Saeed that she understands why the London nativists are frightened and frustrated:

“Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.”

“Millions arrived in our country,” Saeed replied. “When there were wars nearby.”

“That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose.”

(Hamid 164)

Nadia's perspective in this conversation with Saeed displays how easy it is for someone to internalize this propaganda about immigrants. In *Exit West*, eventually immigrants in London are provided with accommodations. Although it was probably not the best solution nor was it ideal for Saeed and Nadia to live in worker camps, it was an opportunity for immigrants to seek refuge and form a life for themselves. The United Kingdom always had the resources to do this. However, it is very telling how the first reaction from nativists was to find a way to eliminate immigrant presence through whatever means necessary either through deportation or violence. Poor individuals are seen as a threat and drain on resources while affluent immigrants have value to a host country. This phenomenon is very dehumanizing, and puts unnecessary borders in place for people who are in desperate need of help.

Although the characters in *Exit West* and *Girl at War* go on to live better lives, class borders and their effects continue to impact the world. Money is like a ticket to cross borders, and without that ticket, basic necessities are difficult to access. The reality is that there are people looking for a better life who cannot get it because they do not have the money to migrate elsewhere. The border between rich and poor immigrants is one of the biggest issues that *Exit West* and *Girl at War* both address. Unfortunately, anti-immigration advocacy by many far-right politicians has led to catastrophic consequences for poor immigrants. Without equal wealth distribution and immigration reform in many countries, like the United States and the United Kingdom, money will continue to be a border for immigrants to migrate somewhere they can make better lives for themselves.

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My Neighbor is Lesser: A Look at Xenophobic Social Borders That Would Lead to Brexit

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When thinking about Brexit, it is important to dive into the preexisting social borders among those who lived in pre-Brexit Britain. These social borders are represented in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*. These works not only convey these social divisions between neighbors, but also reveal the cultural circumstances that led up to the vote for Brexit. In this essay, I highlight how these texts work to do just that.

To this day, people argue whether Britain leaving the EU in 2016 was a fix for the greater commonwealth or if it was a power grab for white British citizens. Brexit started with debates about taxes, trade, and how there was a need for more jobs. In 2016, British parliament argued that Britain leaving the EU would allow more control of their country and over the people allowed to live in it. This concept would later be known as “Brexit.” With the decision to leave, Britain was faced with angry residents who felt this was a racist

and prejudiced bias toward the working class. At the time, most immigrants were motivated to move to the UK because of a need for work (“Migrants in the UK”). This working class felt that Brexit was unfair to those who moved to Britain from other countries in the EU and saw it as an attack on those who already experienced the unimaginable trials of working life. Many argue that this passing of Brexit justifies the xenophobic social structures that white British citizens envisioned. However, there were already xenophobic prejudices in pre-Brexit Britain. Authors like Kazuo Ishiguro and filmmakers like Steven Frears have used their platforms to depict this brutal treatment of immigrants in pre-Brexit Britain. Borders between neighbors were emphasized in Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go* as the main character, Kathy, comes to terms with the dehumanizing treatment clones like herself endure from naturally born humans. In her world, she is an organic resource that is destined to have her organs donated to British citizens. Based on the clones's treatment, Kathy knows

no other way to live her short life other than to prepare for her donations. Steven Frears's film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, depicts immigrants in pre-Brexit Britain in the same dehumanizing way. The main character, Okwe, observes the way immigrants are expected to either work difficult conditions or sell their organs to the black market. These characters, much like those in Ishiguro's novel, are seen as organic bodies who serve no purpose beyond being organ donations. British texts, like Steven Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, showed how pre-Brexit xenophobic attitudes and social borders towards immigrants contributed to Brexit.

In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go*, he uses his characters poor living situations to convey the way immigrants and non-white citizens faced ignorant prejudice in Britain. Ishiguro's main character, Kathy, grows up at a special school with other clones called Hailsham. Kathy and the other students are kept away from naturally born children in Britain; therefore, the world outside of their school is a scary yet exciting new world. When an immigrant moves, there is a similar excitement to what the clones felt when it comes to living in a new country. However, this excitement can turn to fear when confronted with the dehumanizing living conditions immigrants face when they must live in what white Europeans leave for them. These living conditions are represented in Ishiguro's novel. Once the kids are old enough to leave Hailsham, they are sent to a place called the Cottages. Here, the clones have "big boxy heaters" and houses with "trails of mud" everywhere (Ishiguro 117). These houses are then left to the students' care, thus leaving these children to care and provide for themselves without support during their first time in a foreign place. Although Kathy claims "I'm making it sound pretty bad...none of us minded the discomforts," she still admits to her worry and feelings of abandonment (Ishiguro 117). Even the old man, Keffers, who has been sent monitor the clones, is described as "sighing and shaking his head disgustedly" when seeing their lives at the Cottages (Ishiguro 116). Keffers isn't just disgusted with how the clones live, but with the clones in general. He never once questions his own part at the Cottages and how these students were simply dropped off to figure things out on their own. The clones represent immigrants in Britain by living in those familiar dehumanizing circumstances and being judged for it. The clones, like immigrants, have been left to fend for themselves in trying times. And the relationship that Keffers and the clones have represents that ignorant prejudice that citizens convey and Brexit would soon justify.

Josie Gill's article "Written on the Fact: Race and Expression in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," also talks about the way the clones represent immigrants and the predetermined attitudes citizens have toward them. Gill's article focuses on the way the clones' lives are similar to the mistreatment immigrants encounter. Whether it is their living

conditions, their jobs, or the lack of respect they get from their neighbors, Gill pinpoints these connections. She points out that the clones' lives reflect, "the gap between expectation and reality that has often characterized the immigrant" (Gill 850). The aspirations Ishiguro's clones have when dreaming of jobs and families in the "real world" is just like the idea that immigrants have had when believing they will live "better lives" in Britain. However, Ishiguro's idea to use clones instead of immigrants is to show that the removal of race "does not remove the material conditions of race or racism" (Gill 850). Instead, the "denial of race results in "racism without race," making racism and the social inequalities that feed into it more difficult to identify" (Gill 850). In other words, Gill believes that Ishiguro purposefully chose to not bring race into the novel so that he could emphasize the racist idea that immigrants are uncivilized or dirty. When in fact, it is simply the poor living conditions that have been left to them that causes such stereotypes. As white Europeans began to believe this stereotype, the social barrier between citizens and non-citizens in Britain grew. Thus, when looking at the characters of Ishiguro's novel, one can pinpoint a similar and symbolic social border characters have between the clones and those who are naturally born.

Clones in Ishiguro's novel are also depicted as biological resources to convey the way treatment of non-citizens has always been to benefit the British population. When the clones of Ishiguro's novel find out they were made to donate their organs for others, they aren't surprised. In fact, their teacher, Miss Lucy, seems more disturbed by the idea than they are. She explains to Kathy and her classmates that, "your lives are set out for you" (Ishiguro 81). This indicates that the world outside of Hailsham is aware of their existence, but chooses to ignore the students. Miss Lucy, unlike the rest of the world, finds herself getting to know these students. Therefore, she is able to think of her students as more than biological resources. However, these interactions make her regret the treatment her students must endure. Another time that a teacher from Hailsham can be seen regretting the treatment of these students is when Kathy and Tommy go to see Miss Emily. She reveals to her students that Hailsham was a school created to prove the existence of souls in clones. However, despite the proof collected and the evident natural, emotional lives these students have lived, they are still told they must donate their organs. Miss Emily regrettably tells them, "I can see...that it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game" (Ishiguro 266). This comment is a reflection on the lives immigrants faced in pre-Brexit British society. They were not welcomed by their neighbors and often ignored. However, they were still expected to work those poorly paid jobs for the benefit of white British citizens and to pretend the border between them was not because one is human and the other considered a tool.

Josie Gill's article also talks about the way the clones are supposed to represent immigrants as nothing more than able and abusable bodies. She explains how the clones

of Ishiguro's novel are created to "serve the needs of the 'normal' population..." to reflect the "exploitation of nonwhite workers, who are often reduced simply to bodies that carry out various forms of undesirable and poorly paid labor" (848). Just like a sweatshop might abuse the use of immigrant workers, the clones are reduced to nothing more than a resource. And the lack of the characters' races being mentioned only shows the way race is a social construct and not a biological one. Gill mentions this by explaining, "bodies do not provide or add to an understanding of character" (854). Instead, the clone's bodies, no matter the color or biology, are able enough to give their organs. Immigrants, who are looked down upon because they look like immigrants, still possess able and worthy bodies, just like the clones. They can work hard jobs and do anything that white citizens can. It is simply that fact that immigrants are immigrants that bring about a question of value on those lives in pre-Brexit Britain. Hence, we have yet another example of how a social barrier has been created to not only make citizens feel superior to immigrants, but for citizens to take advantage of those who have no choice but to do the hard work.

Similarly, Stephen Frears's film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, also conveys his characters as biological resources for British citizens. Much like *Never Let Me Go*, Frears's film addresses how illegal immigrants in Britain function to support the social structures of Britain. In the film, Okwe, the main protagonist, is trying to live an unnoticeable life in London. However, throughout the film, his position as an immigrant becomes an issue for his plan. The first time we are introduced to anything from his past is when Okwe is asked by his boss to examine him for a sexually-transmitted disease. Okwe, who doesn't even want to address his past for the audience, protests doing this. His boss exclaims, "but you're a doctor!" Okwe responds, "I'm a driver," as he gives in to his boss's wishes (Frears).



Okwe is asked by his boss to examine him for STDs.

Not long after this, Okwe finds himself having to examine three more men in the same situation for his boss. This goes to show how Okwe's skills are to be exploited more and more for British society if he wants to stay hidden. This same situation is paralleled when Okwe finds and helps the infected immigrant in his hotel manager's office. When the man refuses to go to the hospital, Okwe helps treat him and impresses his boss, Sneaky Juan. However, this one act of kindness leads to Juan asking questions for his own benefit. He prods Okwe for information on his past, saying, "you never told me where you're from. Or even, how come you're in this beautiful country"(Frears). This sentence, though worded innocently, is spoken with a threatening tone. Juan knows Okwe is an immigrant, and uses his morals to convince him to do illegal surgeries for him. Okwe, refusing at first to agree, only finds himself trapped and tempted to do as Juan pleases in order to keep his friends and himself safe. Thus, this shows how the abuse of immigrant bodies was prominent and expected even before Brexit was introduced and depicts a moral border that Okwe struggles to cross.



Okwe is confronted by Sneaky Juan, who tells him about the illegal surgeries that take place in the hotel at night.

Vincent Rodriguez Ortega's criticism of the film, "Surgical Passports, the EU and *Dirty Pretty Things*: Rethinking European Identity Through Popular Cinema," also address the use of immigrant bodies for the benefit of British society leading to the perceived social superiority of British citizens and their vote for Brexit. Ortega begins by talking about the opening scene of the film where Okwe is working as a cab driver from those at the airport.

One of Okwe's first comments in the film is, "I'm here to pick up people who have been let down by the system" (Frears). This comment sets up the subject of the film. Ortega describes Okwe's actions in this scene as representing how "illegal social bodies function as necessary support mechanisms for the social structures that deem their status as unlawful. In other words, they are an institutionally repressed and yet practically indispensable component of the EU" (Ortega 23). Ortega claims that immigrants are needed in British society. However, immigrants are on the side of the social border that are to be perceived as abused tools that can be discarded when no longer needed. Not only is this situation depicted in Okwe's experiences, but it is also depicted through Okwe's love interest Senay's own as she experiences the trials that immigrants must face to live in Britain. The first time we see Senay being abused is when, in order to keep herself hidden, she must give her boss oral sex. Although this goes against her religion and morals, she feels, unlike Okwe, that she has no choice and obeys. Later, when she claims she is willing to do anything to obtain citizenship, she finds herself blackmailed and forced into having sex with Sneaky Juan. Ortega claims



Okwe and Senay walk out of the hotel together having shared their traumatic experiences with Sneaky Juan.

that to obtain any form of legitimacy in British society, Senay had to "uncover the multi-layered social and economic networks immigrants must negotiate and subvert to achieve their purposes" (Ortega 24). Just like Okwe, Senay finds herself trapped in a dehumanizing situation that forces her to work for British society. Not only is she used as cheap work,

but she is abused in the way that she is a woman and an immigrant. In the end, whether it is Okwe, Senay, or some other immigrant, “their existence becomes intimately linked to the profit-driven networks” (Ortega 24). Thus, immigrants are left with little self-worth other than as a resource for legal citizens. This film depicts a border between citizens and non-citizens in the EU. This border between people would solidify the superiority felt by citizens over immigrants and would eventually lead to the belief that Brexit was needed to keep these people separate.

Many British writers have noticed the dehumanization of immigrants even before Brexit was introduced. Whether it is depicted through a sci-fi novel, or an uncomfortable film, these writers have been attempting to spread their concern. Britain leaving the EU was something that could be predicted when looking at these works of literature because the social borders were already there. There was already discrimination among races and complaints about a lack of jobs. And yet, there was still an abuse of immigrants in order to continue cheap and fast profits. The treatment of non-citizens has, and continues to, involve prejudice, hatred, and a lack of compassion. To look at your neighbor and feel a superiority because of your looks has only threatened to further the divide among people. Xenophobic attitudes continue to drive people away from one another. Ishiguro and Frears’s works help to show the denying audience that there is a social barrier that immigrants cannot ignore. There has been, and still is, a border between neighbors that exists because of a reach for power. Brexit was simply the consequence of when this social hierarchy became prominent enough to believe in the U.K’s superiority over the rest of the EU.

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An Exploration of the Ford Within *The Remains of the Day*

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Vehicles cross borders every day, carting people and objects across time and space. Vehicles also propel people across mental borders, taking the act of moving across time and space and making it tangible and real to those it moves. In this essay, I will investigate the prominence of the Ford within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, taking into consideration the previous yet minimal scholarship already completed, and break down the symbolism of mobility and the lack of it, wealth and status, and freedom that the Ford exudes in this text. In doing this, the Ford's obvious prominence parallels America's own upcoming prominence in Britain and influences not only Stevens's own story, but a historic narrative as well, as it mentally, physically, and metaphorically crosses borders. Looking at this specific vehicle in this specific text can help others see the

usability of writing vehicles as characters, characters that can cart people across both physical and metaphysical borders. text can help others see the usability of writing vehicles as characters, characters that can cart people across both physical and metaphysical borders.

Vehicles, both in real life and in literature, are seen as agents to move people from one place to another, both physically and metaphorically. A vehicle within literature is not an uncommon happenstance in the 20th and 21st century; vehicles have become a part of life, so it makes sense to include them in literature. It is the symbolism that the vehicle gives to advance the plot, give context, and add depth to a text that matters. Which brings us to Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 Man Booker prize-winning novel, *The Remains of the Day*. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the*

Day tells the story of an old English butler by the name of Stevens and his motoring trip across the country. He takes his new American employer, Mr. Farraday's, Ford to visit his old friend, Miss Kenton. The Ford is the vehicle of the text, both carting Mr. Stevens around the country and functioning as the vehicle that moves the plot forward. In a novel that is founded in British culture, why is an American vehicle, specifically a Ford, the vehicle used to advance the plot both physically and metaphorically? I will investigate the prominence of the Ford within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, taking into consideration the previous, yet minimal, scholarship already done, and breaking down the symbolism of mobility and the lack of it, wealth and status, and freedom that the Ford exudes in this text. Doing this, we will see how the Ford's obvious prominence parallels America's own upcoming prominence in Britain and influences not only Stevens's own story, but also a historic narrative as it mentally, physically, and metaphorically crosses borders.

Mobility

Obviously, any vehicle can be seen as a symbol of mobility in any text. What is interesting about the Ford in *The Remains of the Day* is that not only does the Ford physically move Stevens from one side of the country to the other, but the Ford is what moves the plot forward, crossing borders both physically and metaphysically. Within the first short chapter of *The Remains of the Day*, the audience quickly learns of the expedition that Stevens is about to venture onto: "An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr. Farraday's Ford...[It] will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days" (Ishiguro 3). Mr. Farraday is Stevens's new-money *and* American employer. He is the one who encourages Stevens to go cross-country to visit his friend, offering both his own vehicle and even to "foot the bill for the gas" (Ishiguro 4). However, Stevens takes this opportunity with a grain of salt, believing that his employer's generosity is due to his American sensibilities and his failure to understand professional British standards. Chuchueh Cheng's article titled "Cosmopolitan Alterity: America as the Mutual Alien of Britain and Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels" explores Ishiguro's various novels and how America is the alien "other" within them all. Cheng observes that "employment under an American businessman unsettles Stevens's belief that professionalism entails absolute loyalty because the new situation obliges him to abandon his previous commitments" (237). Nevertheless, Stevens goes on his journey, crossing borders, grateful for his employer's generosity.

The first day of Stevens's motoring trip is successful. He compares his leaving Darlington Hall with that of first setting sail on a ship, feeling the unknown, fear, and anxiety:

[E]ventually, the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. I have heard people describe the moment, when setting sail in a ship, when one finally loses sight of the land. I imagine the experience of unease mixed with exhilaration often described in connection with this moment is very similar to what I felt in the Ford as the surroundings grew strange around me...The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm—a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into wilderness. (Ishiguro 23-24)

Stevens's first time in years leaving Darlington Hall is all thanks to Mr. Farraday's Ford and the surrounding outdoors surprises him because he has not left that property in so long. The scenery is not the only thing that Stevens is shocked by, but also his own realizations about himself that he has while on his trip. As Stevens motors along, the audience learns of his past at Darlington Hall through his meta-thoughts over the span of the trip. Stevens shyly discloses, "But I see I am becoming preoccupied with these memories and this is perhaps a little foolish. This present trip represents, after all, a rare opportunity for me to savour to the full the many splendors of the English countryside, and I know I shall greatly regret it later if I allow myself to become unduly diverted" (Ishiguro 67). Although Stevens is aware of his "foolish" memories resurfacing, he continues to spill his darkest thoughts and secrets with the audience. The motoring trip allows Stevens to cross boundaries within his own mind, exploring emotions and vulnerability like he never has before. Without going on this trip, Stevens would have never made revelations about his past. The Ford not only moves Stevens from town-to-town, but also gives Stevens the mental space to think about and reconsider the choices he has made in his life. By "avoiding almost entirely the major roads" in the Ford, Stevens also avoids the major roads he has typically taken in his thought process, allowing for the "backroads" of his thoughts to flourish and give him something new to ponder (Ishiguro 67). On his second day of motoring, after a little hiccup with the Ford, Stevens finds time to walk around the beautiful landscape of England and confesses, "It is no doubt the quiet of these surroundings that has enabled me to ponder all the more thoroughly these thoughts which have entered my mind over this past half-hour or so" (Ishiguro 121). Again, this trip has given Stevens the mental space, without the clouding of morals and propriety that happens in Darlington Hall, to think over the decisions of his past. At the end of the novel, and the end of Stevens's motoring trip, there is a new light in Stevens's beliefs of his profession and the world in general. The audience sees that Stevens has a new perception of his American employer, and is even willing to practice the techniques of bantering to please him. In his article titled "The End of (Anthony)

Eden: Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Midcentury Anglo-American Tensions," John McCombe ascertains that it is through Farraday's classic Ford that "has finally set Stevens in motion, both through his brief reunion with Miss Kenton and in his desire to think less about the ghosts of the past" (96). Without the mobility that the Ford provides as a vehicle, Stevens would not have been able to come to these new conclusions in his life.

Lack of Mobility

The lack of mobility from the Ford is just as important as its mobility in *The Remains of the Day*. Multiple times throughout the text, the Ford breaks down for various reasons, usually halting Stevens from continuing on his journey. The first time the audience sees an issue with the Ford is when Stevens is on day two of his trip, just outside the border of Dorset, when he exclaims, "it was then I had become aware of the heated smell emanating from the car engine. The thought that I had done some damage to my employer's Ford was, of course, most alarming and I had quickly brought the vehicle to a halt" (Ishiguro 117). Stevens, for fear of breaking his employer's prestigious Ford, pulls into the nearest house to see if he can find help from the house's owner. The man obliges to help Stevens, saying "Water, guv. You need some water in your radiator" (Ishiguro 118). After inspecting the Ford, the man confides to Stevens that he thinks of him to be one of those "top-notch butlers" from one of the "big posh houses," mostly because of the condition and prestige that the Ford gives (Ishiguro 119). The man then tells Stevens to visit a pond just outside where he is stationed, and this where Stevens has time for silent reflection. Without the Ford being out of water, Stevens would have never obtained the opportunity to check out Mortimer's Pond and allow himself the time and space to reflect. Again, the Ford allows Stevens the chance to cross mental borders within himself, borders that Stevens always chose to keep guarded and to never be crossed.

On the third day of motoring, the Ford has yet another hiccup. In fear, Stevens prays that the Ford breaking down is not another radiator problem; however, "the Ford was not damaged, simply out of fuel" (Ishiguro 161). Without any gas and with the Ford sitting patiently at the top of a hill, Stevens makes his way down a hill into the village of Moscombe, near Tavistock, Devon and finds the Taylors. The Taylors and their guests made quite a scene for Stevens, regarding his position higher than it actually is. The Taylors and their guests tell Stevens that they are surprised and honored for someone with "the likes of yourself" had come and visit their small village (Ishiguro 182). Stevens, therefore, blurs the border line of what an actual gentleman is, and what one simply looks like. After spending some time with the Taylors and their intruding neighbors, Stevens is back on the road with a Dr. Carlisle to fill up his tank with gas. Stevens still fears there is some deeper trouble

afflicting the Ford but then his anxieties “were laid to rest when I tried the ignition and heard the engine come to life with a healthy murmur” (Ishiguro 211). This stop again calls Stevens for reflection, permitting him to turn “over certain recollections of the past,” specifically his treatment towards Miss Kenton (Ishiguro 211). Although, physically, the Ford breaks down multiple times, there is purpose for the mishap, allowing time and space for Stevens to reflect upon his life. Thus, the Ford moves the plot of *The Remains of the Day* forward.

Wealth/Status

It is evident that Mr. Farraday’s Ford in *The Remains of the Day* exemplifies wealth, status, and class. As detailed in the previous section, various people have complimented Stevens vicariously through the Ford. The first instance of this is when Stevens comes to his first stop at Salisbury, where “the landlady, a woman of around forty or so, appears to regard [him] as a rather grand visitor on account of Mr. Farraday’s Ford and the high quality of [his] suit” (Ishiguro 26). The man who helped fix the Ford’s radiator, too, holds Stevens up to a high status, calling him a “posh-geezer” (Ishiguro 119). It is important to note here that Ishiguro has other vehicles within *The Remains of the Day*, and calls them by proper name, too. The man who helped Stevens had a Bentley outside of his house, a nicely-made British car, yet compliments Stevens on his American Ford. John McCombe ascertains that “the Ford has become an emblem of social prestige as well as a measure of America’s global economic predominance” (88). The Ford, an American vehicle, is the car that is being complimented in a way adjacent to gentility and status, even when British cars are present. The Ford breaks borders of class, destigmatizing the greatness of British products while also granting a servant the chance to be treated as a royal gentleman.

On Stevens’s third day, when he is at the Taylors’s, everyone in his general vicinity is in awe of him. Not only are they honored to be housing “the likes” of himself, but try their best to impress him. Everyone around the town has heard about his journey, and knows about the Ford being parked at the top of the hill. In Mr. Harry Smith’s conversation with Stevens, he says that the Ford is an “absolute beauty” and that it “put the car Mr. Lindsay used to drive completely in the shade!” (Ishiguro 183). Again, the Ford is being compared to the other vehicles in the novel, and is always the most impressive one. Mr. Taylor, the man who has allowed Stevens to lodge with him says “You can tell a true gentleman from a false one that’s just dressed in finery. Take yourself, sir. It’s not just the cut of your clothes, nor is it even the fine way you’ve got of speaking. There’s something else that marks you out as a gentleman. Hard to put your fingers on, but it’s plain to see that’s got eyes” (Ishiguro 185). What could be the final piece that makes Stevens a gentleman, other than the Ford? His dress and his speech aids him to be regarded highly, but as Mr. Taylor points out, that is not

only it. There is something more that allows Stevens to present himself as a higher status. It is the Ford that makes Stevens look like a “posh-geezer.”

The irony, though, is that it is the American Ford that symbolizes Stevens’s status in this novel, yet Stevens himself believes that Americans do not have the same genuine dignity as British people. Cheng speaks on how Stevens’s way of talking about the Americans within the novel is in an othering way; “Whenever [Stevens] uses ‘American’ as an adjective, he intends it to be an antonym of ‘English’” (232). Cheng then goes on to say, “when remarking that only an ‘American gentleman’ would enjoy ‘bantering’, he uses ‘American’ to stress the strangeness of Americans” (233). This American otherness is visibly present throughout the novel and so is the assumption that America equals wealth and an up-and-coming status; both of these statements ring true.

After spending an evening at the Taylors’s, Stevens and Dr. Carlisle, who is one of the more esteemed men living in Moscombe, find gas and make the trek towards the Ford at the top of the hill. It would not be surprising for a small village to make a fuss over a foreign and seemingly new car in the 1950s in Britain, but the fact of the matter is that everyone comments on the vehicle, even Dr. Carlisle. It is true that Dr. Carlisle calls Stevens’s bluff and recognizes him as manservant, perhaps because he is a man of higher status himself. He knows the true differences between a gentleman and a servant. Everyone else, on the other hand, does not have that experience nor knowledge to make that distinction. Still, Dr. Carlisle does not blame Stevens for the name that he has seemingly made for himself, even when Stevens tries explaining himself: “Oh, no need to explain, old fellow. I can quite see how it happened. I mean to say, you are a pretty impressive specimen. The likes of the people here, they’re bound to take you for at least a lord or a duke.’ The doctor gave a hearty laugh. ‘It must do one good to be mistaken for a lord every now and then’” (Ishiguro 208). Like the man who helped Stevens fill his radiator with water, Dr. Carlisle also owns a British car, this time a Rover. Again, we can see how the American Ford is the vehicle that gets complimented and crosses the borders of class, wealth, and status, even though British cars are in production and in abundance in England.

Freedom

Freedom can be interpreted in various different ways, especially within *The Remains of the Day*. The Ford symbolizes freedom because it not only allows Stevens to be on the open road, away from Darlington Hall, but also symbolizes the freedom of Stevens understanding and accepting his past. More specifically, the freedom the Ford exemplifies additionally underscores the prominence of America in Britain, and overall, the world, during the time period *The Remains of the Day* takes place. It is this point—the Ford being equal to America—

that many scholars have written about when talking about the Ford's prominence in *The Remains of the Day*.

It is interesting to think about Stevens's relationship to America. Though there is significant change in the way that Stevens views America and Americans by the end of the novel, at the beginning, there is uncertainty. For instance, at the very beginning, Stevens cannot come to believe that Mr. Farraday would offer him his Ford to travel the country in, let alone "foot the bill for the gas." Stevens, pondering Mr. Farraday's kindness as an employer, tells the audience "As you might expect, I did not take Mr. Farraday's suggestion at all seriously that afternoon, regarding it as just another instance of an American gentleman's unfamiliarity with what was and what was not commonly done in England" (Ishiguro 4). At the novel's start, the audience learns that Stevens has a difficult relationship with his employer, because Stevens is not accustomed to America's professional culture. One of the biggest struggles Stevens has is the idea of bantering with his employer. This fear and unfamiliarity of bantering persists throughout much of the novel. Stevens comes back to the dilemma many times to enlighten his audience with new techniques that he has learned for it. On the third day of his journey, Stevens makes a lodging stop outside of Taunton, Somerset, and practices his bantering with the villagers he lodges with (Ishiguro 130). However, it is not until well into the novel where Stevens begins to accept this new professional culture that his American employer has bestowed upon him. The last paragraph in *The Remains of the Day* is this:

It occurs to me, furthermore, that bantering is hardly an unreasonable duty for an employer to expect a professional to perform. I have of course already devoted much time to develop bantering skills, but it is possible I have never previously approached the task with the commitment I might have done. Perhaps, then, when I return to Darlington Hall tomorrow—Mr. Farraday will not himself be back for a further week—I will begin practicing with renewed effort. I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him.
(Ishiguro 245)

It is a compelling choice for both Ishiguro and Stevens to end *The Remains of the Day* with this paragraph on bantering. Other than the fact that it rounds out the novel—the beginning, too, mentions this issue of bantering—this paragraph leaves the readers with one final call to America. Compared to the beginning, Stevens has grown and changed throughout his journey in the Ford across the country. Previously not understanding and resenting his American employer and his bantering techniques, Stevens now has a renewed effort to want to please and surprise his new boss. In a sense, Stevens has crossed the boundary of uncertainty and unfamiliarity and into an area with more vulnerability with his employer.

McCombe describes the comparisons of Stevens and Britain by saying, “by the end of the 1950’s, a cultural (and political) détente between Britain and the US emerged, and by the end of *Remains*, Stevens also seems to rethink his antipathy toward America (and Americans)” (96). Perhaps this is because Stevens has learned the new role that America is now playing globally and, after taking the Ford cross-country, has accepted it. Belau and Cameron, in an article about the uncanny dialect within *The Remains of the Day*, assert that Ishiguro “shows how imperialism has a way of catching up with England,” prefiguring “the Americanization of British culture,” and showing how “the British are slowly becoming threatened by American encroachment. Stevens’s drive through England itself is made possible by way of his new master’s American-made Ford automobile” (77-78).

In the 1950s, America began to emerge as the superstar country, superseding Britain for the first time ever. In an interview about *The Remains of the Day* with Allan Vorda, Kazuo Ishiguro describes what Britain was like when he was writing this novel: “There was an awareness that Britain was a more international place, a more cosmopolitan place, but it wasn’t the center of the world. It was kind of a slightly peripheral, albeit still quite wealthy, country. It started to be aware of its place within the context of the whole international scene” (134). Even before then, when World War II was in full swing, America switched from global assistance to self-interest, leaving Britain to drown by herself in the midst of war. Aside from the Ford, we can see America’s self-interest peeking through in *The Remains of the Day*, specifically with the American senator Lewis who visits Lord Darlington. Lewis tries to sabotage the dinner and the supposed interpersonal relations that Lord Darlington was trying to make, but comes to no avail. Being the only American in a room full of Europeans, Lewis is called out for his antics, “My only question concerning Mr. Lewis is this. To what extent does his abominable behaviors exemplify the attitude of the present American administration?... Such a gentleman capable of the levels of deceit he has displayed over these past days should not be relied upon to provide a truthful reply” (Ishiguro 101). This quote suggests that America, in whole, is the perpetrator of all the bad events happening in Europe. It also infers that most Europeans, especially in the setting of such a place like Darlington Hall, have a negative association with America/Americans. Putting that in conversation with Tomo Hattori’s quote, “*The Remains of the Day* is not so much about the relations between the colonizer and the colonized as much as the relations between different levels within the imperial social hierarchy” furthers the confusion as to if America is the enemy or the friend in *The Remains of the Day* (277).

Placing the question of America as either friend or foe aside, the fact of the matter still stands: America is replacing Britain in all her glory. The Ford embodies the impending doom over Britain that America is going to take its power away. It is always

in the background of the novel. Sometimes the Ford, like America's influence, makes a grand appearance, other times it sneaks into the narrative to remind you it is still there, still waiting, and still the first choice. Ian Davidson makes the claim that the "cultural and aesthetic concepts of automobility become inextricably linked to the materiality of the petroleum driven car with implications that include global territorial disputes and world economies as well as the ecological impact of the production of cars and their use" (472). Vehicles symbolize more than freedom; they symbolize the new-world order of production and capital in the face of freedom. The Ford within *The Remains of the Day*, an ever-present image, signifies America in the 20th century. Even Ishiguro, in his interview with Allan Vorda, confesses, "it has gotten to the point that some people say America culture is invading or taking over everywhere you go in the world" (Vorda 183). The Ford as a metaphor for America, symbolizing Stevens's freedom of being on an open road, crossing boundaries and borders, finally facing and accepting his past.

Conclusion

Investigating the Ford within Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* sheds light on the historic cultural significance that Ford has within the world. A constant force, driving not only Stevens, but the plot forward, the Ford symbolizes mobility, the lack thereof, wealth and status, and freedom, or more synonymously, America. By reading into the text and most of the instances the Ford is mentioned, we can see just how prevalent the Ford's ability is to cross borders not only locationally, but also mentally for Stevens. While other scholarships only briefly mention the Ford within *The Remains of the Day*, the vehicle deserves more credit in the overall reading and understanding of text, and vehicle imagery as a whole. And maybe the next time you go on a vacation, one that crosses borders, you too, will be able to come across a mental clearing.

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Considering Societal, Psychological, and Geographical Borders in Dayton & Faris's 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine*

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When considering borders and boundaries, our initial interpretation often responds with a recognition of the geographical borders which divide and organize our world. However, often overlooked are the psychological and societal borders experienced by individuals and the ways in which these kinds of boundaries define our lives. Borders and boundaries of all forms are encountered in the 2006 road movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, directed by Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. As Ann Brigham notes, “Road stories themselves are plotted around unsettling processes: the crossing of borders, the courting and conquering of distance, the reinvention of identity, and the access, negotiation, and disruption of spaces” (8). This essay will consider the complex borders navigated by the Hoover family as they journey from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Redondo Bay, California

in search of the *Little Miss Sunshine* beauty pageant. As a road narrative, the film covers extensive geographical distance, emblemized by the yellow VW campervan the Hoover family travels in. But the Hoovers are a family of misfits, all experiencing their own psychological barriers and suffering under the societal boundaries of social class hierarchy and patriarchy. Thus, as a film embedded in mobility, this essay will also consider the ways in which boundaries are transgressed as well as responding to the resilience exhibited by individuals when faced with challenging circumstances.

There is little doubt of the vital and complex significance of borders in the 21st century. In a time of political unrest, national intolerance and suspicion, and increasing migration, the contradictory existence of geographical boundaries is emphasized. As Marc Silberman and his fellow authors explain, “The contradictory yet simultaneous functions of walls,

borders and boundaries – to divide and connect, to exclude and include, to shield and constrain – are fundamental to all cultures” (1). These kinds of barriers exist simultaneously with other borders, like the mental and social boundaries which establish our perceptions of the world and the relationships we construct. Our lives are determined by borders and boundaries, and yet perhaps less salient in our minds are the societal and psychological borders sub-consciously defining the choices we make and the opportunities with which we are presented.

In Dayton and Faris’s 2006 film *Little Miss Sunshine*, the characters from the Hoover family encounter borders on many levels, from the borders created by social class hierarchies, to the psychological boundaries that are perpetuated from within the family dynamic. Thus, when the Hoover family take to the road in quest of seven-year-old Olive Hoover’s *Little Miss Sunshine* beauty pageant, the characters cross both geographical and metaphorical borders, and overcome the many boundaries placed before them. These border crossings become imperative in the personal development of these characters, as by the end of the film, each family member is reaffirmed of their purpose and place in the world. Simultaneously, the collective impact of these border crossings is demonstrated in the strengthened familial unity of the Hoover family. The crossings this essay will analyze designate *Little Miss Sunshine* as a film about defiance, growth, and overcoming adversity.

As a road narrative, *Little Miss Sunshine* is, by proxy, a film about the traversing of borders and boundaries. From the outset, the journey even in theory poses numerous challenges about who will participate in the trip, what vehicle will be used, and the resources needed for this kind of travel. In a tense scene at the beginning of the film, the family debate how to navigate and overcome the various borders placed before them. The financial requirements of flying from Albuquerque to California ensure that road travel is the necessary mode of transport. However, it is the requirement that the entire family of six participate in the journey – Grandpa Edwin helped Olive rehearse, Frank is on suicide watch, Dwayne is too young to be left home alone, and Sheryl “can’t drive a shift” – which ensures that the iconic yellow VW campervan is the vehicle of choice (Dayton and Faris). Once on the road, the hurdles the Hoover family encounter on their journey only multiply. From very early on in the film, the old campervan is a source of precarity with its engine, horn, and door breaking at various periods and thus preventing Olive from reaching the beauty pageant. Even as the family reaches California, the location presented in *Little Miss Sunshine* deeply contrasts traditional interpretations of the state as one of freedom and opportunity. Dayton and Farris present an environment polluted with freeway network links as concrete bridges cut across the open sky. This overwhelming man-made infrastructure encourages a return to Silberman et al’s ideas of the contradictory nature of borders. These highways are

intended for travel and connection and yet appear intimidating and hostile.



California Freeway Network.



Richard drives through the barrier to the beauty pageant hotel car park.

Further, when the Hoovers near their destination of Redondo Beach, the beauty pageant hotel is illustrated again as a site of hostility. The difficulty of finding the hotel, leading to Richard driving the van along footpaths, through chain barriers, and even breaking through the car park entrance barriers again symbolizes the both mental and physical borders crossed in order to reach the pageant. However, it is the traversing of these boundaries which in many ways breaks down the borders the family members have created between one another and creates a sense of family unity absent at the beginning of the film. The family's solution to the broken van – to push start the vehicle and then run and jump in while the van moves – actually acts as a distinctly positive, bonding experience for the family.

Dayton and Faris illustrate this in Frank's elated reaction to the successful operation:
"No one gets left behind! Outstanding soldier, outstanding!"



Family joy after successfully push-starting the bus. (See full scene [here](#).)

Here we observe Frank's first experience of joy in the film, an emotional state far from his own struggle with depression and a consequential suicide attempt. *Little Miss Sunshine* thus indicates the distinct sense of achievement when borders are crossed and boundaries are ruptured. The push-starting of the car throughout the film then forms a cinematic motif of bonding and connection between the family, but also of the physical struggle between individuals and the limitations placed on them seemingly by fate.

These borders also illustrate that the family are in many ways resigned to circumstances beyond their control, but also that as a family of misfits, they are predisposed to facing additional boundaries in life. These are characters struggling to find their place in the world, to be valued and to be respected. As Jill Dolan articulates, "Olive intuitively feels her own confusion and incipient despair at the choices that land in our laps, whether or not we want them there, at the vagaries of life over which we have so little control, biologically or politically" (1). Thus, the following will focus on the borders encountered by three out of six main characters in the film: Dwayne, Frank, and Olive.

Dwayne

Dwayne Hoover, a mute-by-choice teenager, is Sheryl's son from a previous marriage. As a character, he is socially awkward and extremely isolated, perhaps as a result of the fragile genetic bond he shares with his family. He is detached from his step-father Richard and step-grandfather Edwin, and, to an extent, from his half-sister, Olive. Interestingly, he

experiences an almost instant connection with Uncle Frank, a family member who perhaps feels more stable and central within a traditional family to Dwayne.



Dwayne's notepad.

Dwayne undeniably constructs a border between himself and others. His adolescence ensures he pushes away his family and his refusal to maintain relationships with others, as he states “All I ask is that you leave me alone” (Dayton and Faris). As Finamore illustrates, “Dwayne seems to typify the plight of the contemporary angst-ridden adolescent” (124). But it is the non-verbal border created by Dwayne which ensures his isolation from the world. He takes a vow of silence to prove his discipline until he achieves his dream of becoming a fighter pilot. His refusal to verbally communicate ensures a boundary between himself and others. Dwayne instead relies on the non-conventional method of communication: writing short responses on a notepad. This method is thus inherently restrictive and ensures that Dwayne’s ability to convey language and emotion is limited. Dwayne is a victim of the borders of his own creation.

Dwayne’s vow of silence is essential in ensuring the audience’s recognition of how critical his dream of flying jets is to his character. Thus, there is a sudden, devastating moment of realization when it is revealed that Dwayne will not be able to fly. In the scene, Frank, Olive, and Dwayne read a pamphlet with vision tests, one of which is a color blindness test. It soon becomes clear that Dwayne is color blind, and Frank instantly realizes “You can’t fly jets if you’re color blind.” Dayton and Faris employ a hand-held camera in the scene, mimicking the shaking, nauseating motion of the bus. Additionally, the scene takes place shortly after the van’s horn has broken, ensuring that the infuriating, whining

horn sound illustrates hysteria. Dwayne experiences a psychological breakdown in the van, banging against the doors and ceiling in an attempt to escape the confines of the bus. Color-blindness becomes a completely unpreventable border between Dwayne and his dreams.



Dwayne's breakdown scene. (See full scene [here.](#))

But *Little Miss Sunshine* is a film about navigating boundaries and the refusal to be confined by the borders placed in our paths. After his breakdown, Dwayne becomes more open, mostly as a result of increased articulation, thus creating a stronger connection with his family and deeper understanding of the great lengths individuals will go to for the ones they love. In turn, he becomes less isolated and actively includes himself in the family. In fact, it is in the scene following Dwayne's emotional breakdown that we witness the first

instance in which he experiences physical contact with another character, when Olive hugs him. The emotional and physical border he experiences between himself and the coldness of the world is fractured by the warm touch of his little sister.



Olive comforts Dwayne.

Frank

Like Dwayne, Frank Ginsburg is also a character who experiences isolation and constructs barriers between himself and others. Frank, a disgraced and heartbroken academic, joins the Hoover family to enable his sister, Sheryl, to take care of him after his suicide attempt. Frank is thus restrained by the psychological borders of mental illness, but is also stigmatized due to his sexuality, and, in a way, due to his academic status which at first impedes him in relating to others. But, as someone who has attempted suicide, Frank loses consent over the boundaries around him. When he enters the Hoover household, he is not allowed to be left alone and has to share a bedroom with Dwayne. As Sheryl reminds him, “Leave the door open, that’s important” (Dayton and Faris). The physical boundary of the door is ruptured, and Frank loses access to his dignity and any agency over his privacy. This is only heightened when the family endeavors on their road trip, where it seems every waking minute is spent in the close vicinity of Richard, Edwin, Sheryl, Dwayne and Olive on the bus. The close proximity of others to Frank forces the boundaries he has built between himself and others to ebb away. Frank quickly gains a new lease on life, like in the euphoric moments when the van is hurtling down the highway and the family all manage to jump in on time. Further, it is in the final parts of the film, when the Hoovers finally reach the pageant, that we see Frank as the first of the family to jump out of the van (with the door comically falling off in his hand) and run into the pageant hotel for Olive. Here, we witness

Frank's sense of purpose and the determination he possesses to reach the goal of the road trip. As a character, Frank has undergone a significant development on the road journey and crossed the internalized borders of heartbreak and self-deprecation.



Frank races to the pageant.

Olive

One character provides the motivation behind all the miles, all the motels, and the many borders crossed on the Hoover's road journey: Olive Hoover. Olive, the adored daughter, granddaughter, sister, and niece is the centring, collective point of the family. However, Olive also faces borders in her attempts to achieve her dream of becoming a beauty pageant winner. Aside from the narrative borders experienced on the road, Olive is also restrained by the borders of girlhood, with issues of self-image and bodily insecurity heightened to extremes within the beauty pageant environment. These societal borders which prevent Olive from establishing and maintaining a strong sense of self and self-image are only consolidated by her father Richard's damaging words of advice relating to his daughter's body. When the Hoovers stop at a diner for breakfast, Olive orders waffles and ice cream. Richard responds:

“Olive, can I tell you a little something about ice cream? Well, ice cream is made from cream, which comes from cow's milk, and cream has a lot of fat in it...Well, when you eat ice cream the fat in the ice cream becomes fat in your body...So, if you eat a lot of ice cream, you might become fat, and if you don't, you're going to stay nice and skinny sweetie.” (Dayton and Faris)

Richard employs damaging rhetoric on an impressionable and vulnerable seven-year-old girl,

ensuring lifelong questioning of her relationship with food and her body. As Alison Happel and Jennifer Esposito explain, “It appears Richard is trying to help discipline Olive’s body so that she performs a femininity that is sanctioned by the dominant culture” (6). She will constantly be confined by her father’s words and come to view her body and appetite as a barrier between her and success and love. Thankfully, the rest of the family are quick to deconstruct this harmful rhetoric, as Sheryl states “It’s ok to be skinny, and it’s ok to be fat if that’s what you want to be. Whatever you want, it’s ok.” (Dayton and Faris)



Olive orders waffles and ice cream at the diner. (See full scene [here](#).)

At the *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant, we see Olive struggling to place herself within this uncharted territory. She struggles to maintain the sense of self she previously possessed when viewing the other child contestants, whose physical figures sit in a liminal space between children, glamour models, and Barbie dolls. Olive begins to perceive her body within the beauty pageant gaze which, attuned to the male gaze, perpetuates a view that the female body should be regulated to a certain standard, which Olive’s pre-pubescent body obviously does not.



Olive judges her figure in the mirror at the beauty pageant.

Furthermore, when Olive dances, she becomes again confined by the profoundly complex and ludicrous boundaries of beauty pageantry, where young girls are sexualized within the realm of objectification but rejected when they are seen to take agency over their own bodily expression. As Dolan notes, “Olive dances with enthusiasm and joy, unaware that her moves borrow from a sexual vocabulary that signifies the sexual commodification and availability of women, particularly, for a male gaze” (1).

Despite their best efforts, Olive also faces borders as a result of her family dynamic. Regardless of the extreme lengths they go to in order to help Olive reach the *Little Miss Sunshine* pageant, there is no denying that the Hoovers could never fully cross over into the bizarre and ostentatious world of pageantry. Olive is both restrained and encouraged by the overbearing advice of her father, but even Richard realizes his overly simplified advice that “there’s two kinds of people in this world, there’s winners and there’s losers. Okay, you know what the difference is? Winners don’t give up,” is helpless within the ‘strictly codified’ world of the pageants (Robinson and Davies 353). Even the quite minimal class barriers Olive faces – in a diner she asks Sheryl “How much can we spend?” – are heightened when contrasted with the excess of the pageantry world. Olive’s simple leotard costume and ponytail looks pitiful next to the ostentatious outfits of the other girls. Ultimately, Olive crosses borders and overcomes the boundaries placed before her through the deep-rooted support and encouragement of her family. Not only do they help her get to California, but they encourage her to the very end, even joining her on stage in a final mark of defiance against the harsh and ceaseless world which grants the Hoovers no favors.



Olive at the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. (See full scene [here](#).)

Little Miss Sunshine is finalized as a film about the borders we face as individuals and the great depths we go to to cross them in the penultimate scene of the film. For the first time, we witness Olive’s performance. It is a dance routine she has been rehearsing with her grandfather, the content of which is yet unknown to her family. Olive’s performance turns out to be a scandalous burlesque dance routine taught to her by Edwin. Despite

the obvious sexualization of the other contestants, it is perhaps the agency which Olive unknowingly obtains over her sexual expression which transgresses the deeply codified beauty queen world. The dance routine is thus met with dismay and Olive is heckled, but in a wholesome and poignant finale, the family join Olive on stage. The characters themselves become borders between Olive and the “mainstream world of success and efficacy, warped, ambitious, spiteful and lonely” (Beck 30).



Olive's final performance at the Little Miss Sunshine pageant. (See full scene [here](#).)

As this essay has illustrated, *Little Miss Sunshine* exhibits the crossing of borders at an individual level. But it is the conditions in which these borders are crossed that illustrates the significance of the family dynamic in this film, as the personal journeys the characters undertake are supported by the presence of the unconditional love of their family. Personal development is facilitated by the family, and thus, each border crossing, geographical,

psychological or societal, consolidates the emotional ties that hold the family together. Olive is empowered by the realization that the most important judgement comes from those who love her. Dwayne is reintroduced to the familial love he previously rejected. Frank is reawakened to the unchallengeable love of his family after the pain of romantic heartbreak. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, the resilience each character shows is essential for the crossing of borders of all forms. As Eppler and Hutchings define, “Resilience is the process of coping with and overcoming adversity, finding purpose in the face of suffering, and preparing for the future with a focus on interconnections and personal strengths” (1463). As the Hoover family start the 700-mile drive back to Albuquerque, the yellow VW campervan provides the powerful symbol of this resilience, of the traversing of boundaries and the refusal to accept the adversities placed before them.



The Hoovers travel back to Albuquerque in their VW Van..

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Dreams, Doors, and Death: Exploring Liminal Space and Mortality in *Exit West* and *The Farming of Bones*

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Oftentimes, the most complicated narratives challenge the permanence of death by emphasizing the impermanence of the human experience. This is frequently accomplished through the creation of liminal spaces in text, which become almost purgatorial in their function. Here, characters choose to confront and embrace the inevitability of death or to reemerge into life. In Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, the linear historical narrative her main character Amabelle creates is interspersed with bolded sequences that draw from both her memories and her dreams. In order to come to terms with the trauma of the Haitian Massacre, these chapters communicate Amabelle's physical and psychological turmoil. Similarly, Moshin Hamid's *Exit West* centers on refugees Nadia and Saeed's multiple

passages through doors blackened by the sudden, spontaneous creation of international portals. As the couple moves through several doors and across several borders, their relationship to each other and themselves constantly evolves. Amabelle's dreams are manifestations of her acceptance of death and embrace of her mortality, while the portal-doors function as avenues for rebirth. Thus, Hamid and Danticat explore the complicated relationship human beings have with death and mortality in the wake of trauma through their rich descriptions of liminal space.

The idea of death, often either personified as a skeletal, scythe-wielding figure cloaked in black or deconstructed into a vast, foreboding void, has long enticed creators because of its ambiguity, its inherent and abstract unknowability. In order to fully complete an exploration

of mortality without engaging with the permanence of sacrificing a key character to the so-called “other side,” many writers often choose to create an environment that exists between life and death, a liminal space that becomes almost purgatorial in its function and construction. Both Edwidge Danticat and Mohsin Hamid are two such novelists. Both choose to use liminal space as the primary environment for their characters to confront their mortality head-on. In Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*, the linear historical narrative her main character Amabelle creates is interspersed with ephemeral, bolded sequences that draw from both her memories and her dreams. In order to come to terms with the trauma of her parents’ deaths and reconcile the life she lived with both Dominican and Haitian loved ones in 1937, Amabelle uses these chapters to communicate her emotional, physical, and psychological turmoil. Similarly, Hamid’s *Exit West* centers on refugees Nadia and Saeed’s multiple passages through doors blackened by the sudden, spontaneous creation of international portals. As the couple moves through several doors and across several international borders, their relationship to each other and themselves evolves to each new environment. When analyzing these two texts in conjunction, the border between life and death becomes increasingly hazy. There is pain on either side, and there is growth on either side. Hamid and Danticat explore the complicated relationship human beings have with death and mortality in the wake of trauma through their rich descriptions of liminal space.

To clarify, the aim of this argument is not to equate the experiences of the characters within these two texts, nor is it meant to erase the key differences in each novel’s unique historical context. *The Farming of Bones* is a realist text set in 1937, before, during, and after the Parsley Massacre. *Exit West* is a magical realist novel set in the modern day, aiming to complicate and criticize the contemporary world’s treatment of Middle-Eastern migrants. Rather, the synthesis of these two texts is designed to analyze how these two authors reconcile trauma (especially that which results from state-sponsored violence) with the inevitability of death and reflections on corporality. Both choose to develop a sort of liminal space to explore the complexities of mortality, but their characters approach their survival in diverse ways. Similarly, both operate under a sort of shared sense of cultural liminality, one that closely identifies with that outlined by critical cultural theorist Homi Bhabha.

Culture, to Bhabha, inherently exists in what he calls the “realm of the beyond” (Bhabha 1). Essentially, he describes a sort of cultural liminal space tied to the development of personal and communal development. Bhabha claims that this tension between the weight of the past and the pull of the present, this “process of displacement and disjunction” is representative of adaptation, of cultural and personal growth (Bhabha 8). Through this discomfort and acknowledgement of the complexities of history, characters like Amabelle, Saeed, and Nadia have the opportunity to reconcile their past trauma with

their current lived experience. By using Bhabha's conceptions of liminal culture as the common thread that connects these two descriptions of the "in-between" spaces that "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" and redefine personal identity, the linkage between Hamid and Danticat's liminal spaces becomes self-evident (Bhabha 2). Amabelle, Saeed, and Nadia all reemerge from liminality radically different from when they first entered that middling space.

The liminal spaces employed by Danticat are inherently a part of Amabelle herself. The space is created by her independent desire to reflect on her internal, rich bank of memories and her experience of vivid, moralistic dreams. As a child, Amabelle experienced dreams that made her feel caught between the realm of humanity and the supernatural spiritual world. She insists that playing "with [her] shadow made [her] feel less alone," and that even the real people (including Sebastien Onius, the who Amabelle loves above all else) around her occasionally felt like they were "one of them" (Danticat 4). In her memories, the borderland between life and death is blurred as ghosts meld with people, as dreams bleed into reality. Similarly, when Amabelle nearly dies from a severe fever as a child, her dreams remind her that her life, while impermanent, is not quite over; Danticat personifies death in the creation of Amabelle's animated voodoo doll. The doll assures Amabelle that she "will be well again," and that she will live to be "a hundred years old, having come so close to death while young" (Danticat 56). These initial experiences, though loosely tied to the trauma of adolescence and illness, familiarize a young Amabelle with the death that she will eventually confront. Danticat uses the liminal space of Amabelle's childhood dreams as an introduction to the harsh realities she will soon face. This liminality reminds her of life's volatility, yet shields her from the brutal experience of living as a Haitian in the Dominican Republic that will later characterize her adulthood.

Though Amabelle is conscious of human mortality from both the beginning of the narrative and her life as a whole, the liminal space created by her memories makes death far more tangible to her, far more traumatic. In the same bolded passages that detail Amabelle's dreams, Danticat interweaves memory with Amabelle's linear lived experience. This is yet another instance of a blurred border complicating Amabelle's relationship to her interior self. The first traumatic memory with which Amabelle and the audience are confronted occurs when she details her recollection of the day her parents died. While Amabelle describes how she watched her parents drown in the raging Dajabón River, she recalls how she screamed so intensely that she could "taste blood in [her] throat," lending an aspect of physical and emotional trauma to the scene (Danticat 50). Though she attempts to swim after her parents, to join them in their fight for survival, she is pulled back to life by two boys who remind her that "unless [she] wants to die...[she] will never see those people again."

(Danticat 50). As Amabelle continues to survive, to outlive both her parents, she slowly begins to process her trauma internally, choosing silent and dreamlike reflection as a method of reconciliation with her past. According to Megan Feifer, Danticat draws attention to both Amabelle's emotional turmoil and her personal growth by creating a transition of "grief from that of posttraumatic shock to a longing to narrate" her lived experiences (Feifer 45). Feifer notes that Amabelle's recovery fluctuates, that the transition may be linear but is not necessarily direct. She moves through her trauma in waves, grieving at the same time she heals through expression. In this liminal space, Amabelle is directly confronted not only with mortality and the border between life and death, but with survivor's guilt. In order to process this internal conflict and to avoid transgressing this border, she turns inward. She leans back into her dreams and her memories to rediscover her parents and reconnect with her emotions.

In Hamid's *Exit West*, the liminal space detailed in text takes on a far more physical element. It is represented by a sort of supernatural, border-challenging door that opens to another part of the world. Identified only by their internal blackness, these doors allow free passage into a random, alternative spot across the seven continents; obviously, for those who seek refuge from their native homeland, these doors offer them a chance at a sort of "new life." Nadia and Saeed, who live in a unspecified, war-torn country located somewhere in the Middle East, travel through these doors in order to both save their lives and salvage their burgeoning romantic relationship. Almost immediately after they travel through their first door, Hamid employs his first description of liminal space using the terminology associated with death and rebirth. Nadia, the character who is arguably the more emotionally aware partner in her relationship with Saeed, remembers that passage through the doors was known to feel "both like dying and being born" (Hamid 104). Upon embracing the darkness and emerging on the other side, Nadia notes that she felt "a kind of extinguishing" in her mind and body (Hamid 104). Both like a dying elder and a newborn baby, Nadia cannot stand and fights for breath after emerging through the portal-door. For Nadia and Saeed, there is a definitive "before" space and a definitive "after" space as they exchange one location for another, their native culture for a foreign one. They make a deliberate choice to walk through the door, and their bodies pay a physical price for supernaturally moving across time, space, and land. They are transformed, entirely different from the two people who first embraced the darkness of the door.

Similarly, the diction that Hamid uses to describe Nadia and Saeed's life both before and after their transition through time is riddled with reminders of mortality. Saeed moves out of his homeland with Nadia, a decision that means isolating his widowed father who wanted to stay close to Saeed's mother's grave. Hamid makes it known to his audience

that, much like death, the passage through the portal-doors is a permanent decision, one that radically alters both an individual's life and the lives of the people around them. Saeed recognizes that when a person makes the decision to migrate, they “murder from [their] lives those [they] leave behind” (Hamid 98). In using such extreme comparisons, Hamid raises the stakes of migration of this kind; Saeed and Nadia have to initially choose their lives together over the lives they had independently curated at home. The “death” of their past lives forces both characters to come to terms with the precariousness of their travels, of their lives. In order to move forward, to make progress, Nadia and Saeed have to recognize that their movement requires sacrifice. Both the companionship and the culture they were used to is radically and permanently altered.

In both cases, the liminal space created by the authors creates an avenue for self-reflection and personal growth. Amabelle matures rapidly because of her past traumatic experiences, but as a consequence she becomes an increasingly internal, isolated person, while Nadia and Saeed in contrast must cling to the familiar, to each other, in order to navigate their new world post-portal. Both authors explore mortality and impermanence, but their creation of liminal space ensures that both characters process their struggles in ways that are culturally and personally affirming. This choice once again reflects Homi Bhabha's definition of liminality, especially when he asserts that liminality is the “connective tissue” of identity (Bhabha 5). Without this in-between space, human beings would struggle to understand themselves and their position in their communities. In this sense, Danticat and Hamid are essentially exploring different reactions to change, loss, and grief in the context of an “interstitial passage,” especially one that “entertains difference” in interpretation and narrative result while still acknowledging the impermanence of the human experience and the unknowability of one's own fate (Bhabha 5). Their liminal spaces in text provide the “room” for each character to grow into a new, fuller version of themselves because of the flexibility these spaces offer.

However, given that Amabelle's space is entirely confined to the inside her own mind while Nadia and Saeed's space is externally represented by the portal doors, it is important to make the distinction between their experiences with liminality. Since Amabelle reflects exclusively on the internal level, she cannot share her trauma in the same way that Saeed and Nadia can. Through a shared bodily experience, a passage through a physical door, Nadia and Saeed can empathize with each other's feelings on a more intimate level. Conversely, Amabelle's experience is deeply personal to her. While her dreams and memories give her the necessary space for recovery, she has trouble commiserating with fellow orphans and fellow refugees because they cannot know exactly how she carries her trauma. According to scholar Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, Nadia and Saeed's passage through the doors instantaneously allows

their “bodies to move as fast as [their] minds,” lending their experience the proper physical vocabulary to communicate their trauma to both one another and their fellow refugees (Gheorghiu 88). Amabelle has no such language, choosing instead to communicate to the audience alone through the dialogue of her dreams. Though the function of both spaces is essentially identical, the recognition of the key difference in physicality reveals the different strategies for healing. Amabelle’s is fueled by pensiveness, reflection, and an embrace of the past, while Nadia and Saeed’s is fueled by commiseration, communication, and an embrace of the present moment. For Nadia and Saeed, the doors are a physical escape; for Amabelle, her dreams and her memories are an emotional safe haven.

The bolded sequences in Danticat’s work quickly grow from the simple narration of dreams and memories into a space for Amabelle to actively process her trauma. However, her growing preference towards her internal experience rather than the establishment of supportive networks outside her own mind ultimately prevents her from being able to embrace her new experience, her life after the massacre. As critic Eliana de Souza Ávila remarks, Amabelle initially experiences a sort of “numbness” after the massacre, an innate “disidentification from the surreal horror” that the death of her friends and even the loss of Sebastien thrusts upon her already grief-stricken body (de Souza Ávila 27). Though she finds safety and refuge across the Haitian border with Yves, Sebastien’s friend (and, momentarily, her lover), Amabelle cannot fully release herself from her past, attempting simultaneously to nurse her new traumas while preventing old ones from tearing open once again. She does so by turning inwards, crossing into her own liminal space. In a dream, Amabelle conjures a dust storm where people who she cannot identify walk before her. Embodied as her childhood self, she clings to her father and mother’s hands. However, when the storm subsides and the dust settles, Amabelle is left alone, with her “hands raised up, in motionless prayer,” as if abandoned by every person meant to guide her (Danticat 137). This dream, intentionally crafted by Danticat, is to encourage the reader to recognize Amabelle’s isolation and the inherent impermanence of her situation, of her life. Almost every person she has loved has slipped through her fingers like sand, crossed over the border of death and left her feeling entirely alone. She is precariously caught between life and death, and transgressing this border means embracing her family but sacrificing her new relationships, her new experience. In visualizing the chaos as a dust storm, Amabelle is able to grapple with her isolation, to give herself tangible meaning to her grief and loneliness.

Amabelle further confronts and soothes her mounting grief by recognizing the healing power of her dreams after first speaking with other survivors. They attempt to provide her with support but can offer no salve as potent for Amabelle as her own inner sanctuary. She speaks with Yves, with his mother, Man Rapadou, and Sebastien’s mother,

Man Denise, all in hopes of finding closure; while she emerges from each conversation with more strength, she is also reminded of her grief, of the things she had lost. After all these conversations, Danticat includes one of the longest bolded passages yet, allowing Amabelle the space to arrange her complicated feelings and understand that her old life has disappeared, has died with many of her loved ones. In her dream, she claims that the “dead season is, for [her], one never ending night,” and that the only way to ease her pain is to cross into “heaven,” or the “veil of water that stands between [her] parents and [her]” (Danticat 262). The fact that she frequently emerges from her liminal space, from her dreams, from her heaven, is the only thing that “makes [her] alive” (Danticat 263). Literary critic Jennifer Harford Vargas asserts that, “in her interior life,” Amabelle becomes the most cognizant of her suffering and comes to terms with it by meditating “on her own shadows and hauntings by fusing them with collective losses and disappearances” (1166). By giving her loved ones new life in her mind, Amabelle transcends the previously solid border between life and death. However, she cannot exist in this liminal space permanently despite the relief it gives her from her “internal struggles” and “the pain of her losses” (Vargas 1166). She compares her dreams to an “amulet” that protects her “from evil spells,” from experiencing further suffering (Danticat 264). She is slowly discovering that, in order to truly heal from her trauma, she must embrace the hurt, her grief, and her life’s transience by leaning into her past.

Nadia and Saeed, however, come to terms with their losses together. Since they do not carry their liminal space with them, since their memories do not feel tangible like Amabelle’s, they can grieve as a pair and, eventually, as a collective. According to scholar Michael Perfect, Hamid extends the liminal space of his portal-doors to the descriptions of refugees across the world, stating that migrants are “between roads and next to boundaries, and they sleep in the margins of streets” (191). Upon trying to navigate their new environment and their evolving relationship, Nadia and Saeed become increasingly aware of their surroundings. They initially cling to one another for support. They pitch their tents together, sleep in the same bed, share the same food, and make joint decisions on when and where they want to go next. They shield one another from extra pain by providing each other with reminders of home. They notice that their own migration, their own difficulty, is similar to every other person who passed through that marginal, liminal space between the portals. According to scholars Knudsen and Rahbek, the fluid migration and the suffering that often accompanies it in *Exit West* is “intrinsic to human nature,” and the experiences of Nadia and Saeed are recognized as almost universal (445). They recognize that loss is a part of movement, that “this loss unites humanity” and their ability to understand the “temporary nature of our being-ness” allows them to find support and comfort (Hamid 203). Even when cognizant

of the inevitability of dying, “in the face of death,” both Nadia and Saeed are aware that a better world for themselves, for their families, and for their peers is possible (Hamid 203). They find solace in community, in collectivity; they see impermanence represented in themselves and in their fellow portal migrants.

However, the strain of migration and the constant pressure of becoming houseless, starved, or marginalized like the people they see around them strains their relationship. As they grow into two separate people, their idea of what their lives should be changes. Nadia is socially active and areligious, while Saeed is internal and deeply spiritual. They simultaneously feel “friction,” “resentment,” “love,” and “loyalty” towards one another, but their tension, proximity, and shared trauma prevents them from attaining comfort and happiness in their new existence (Hamid 203). Their connection makes them feel caught, pulled between their lives before the portals and their lives after. They make the decision to separate as they have made every other: together. Hamid calls attention to the end of their relationship by framing it as a sort of passing on. He notes that the end of a couple is a “small death” in and of itself (Hamid 205). The “notion of death, of temporariness” is highlighted through Nadia and Saeed’s breakup, through their mutual decision to cut ties, but so too is the “value of things,” especially their lives (Hamid 205). At the end of the novel, Nadia and Saeed are completely at peace, but they are completely separated. Nadia has found companionship with a cook, Saeed with a pastor’s daughter. Love still exists between them, but it is not romantic; the consequence of their continuing lives is their relationship. In order to live on, to escape the constant middle-existence the portal passages and border-crossings presented to them, their partnership must come to an end.

The final scene of *The Farming of Bones*, in contrast, is one of reunion in death. After weeks of existing between her dreams and her new reality, Amabelle makes the decision to travel once more over the border to make a final visit to her old home in the Dominican Republic and the Massacre River. As she stands before the place her parents died, the place where hundreds of Haitians were murdered, and the symbolic resting place of Sebastien, Amabelle makes one final reference to the salvation of her dreams. She claims that she looked to them “for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed” (Danticat 308). She sees the river as “Sebastien’s cave, [her] father’s laughter, [her] mother’s eternity,” and so as she floats atop its waters “like a newborn in a washbasin” (Danticat 308). She surrenders her life over to her dreams, over to her past. She embraces life’s impermanence by launching herself into her dreams, living amongst her family rather than her painful new memories. She heals her trauma by leaning into her own mortality, by accepting it with the sense of peace that was not afforded to her parents, to her beloved. Her trauma is healed through dreaming, through reunification.

The climaxes of *The Farming of Bones* and *Exit West* explore both the acknowledgement of death and of life, but the decision to accept life's impermanence is carried out by Nadia, Saeed, and Amabelle to differing degrees. The choice to embrace death or rebel against it reveals the long-term effects of emotional pain and the volatility of life; both sets of characters have to survive in tumultuous, unfamiliar settings, yet both react differently. In both these instances, Amabelle, Nadia, and Saeed develop new "strategies of selfhood" as a result of their passages through liminal as described by Bhabha (Bhabha 2). While Nadia and Saeed's senses of identity have been strengthened by their communities, Amabelle's is uniquely "singular" because of her choice to embrace her own dreams, her own memories of the past (Bhabha 2). Though Amabelle's ultimate fate is intentionally left ambiguous, she acknowledges her mind and her dreams as her safe haven. She decides in her final moments to side with her memories and her lost loved ones, to cease her internal liminality by excluding herself from her post-massacre life. Amabelle reconciles with her trauma by exploring and embracing death, choosing to "reunite" with the figures she lost in both her dreams and at the conclusion of the novel. Conversely, Saeed and Nadia choose to embrace their new lives after traveling westward, choosing to appreciate their lived experience for what it is, while they have it. After confronting liminality and emerging from the other side, Nadia and Saeed are reborn. However, the end of their relationship still reflects the impermanence of the human experience. While Amabelle's journey concludes, Nadia and Saeed's just begins. After the doors, Nadia and Saeed are bright, alive, and separated; after her dreams, Amabelle is tranquil, at peace, and reunited.

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CEMETERY
CLOSED
AFTER DARK

“A Border is a Veil”: Death as a Border in *The Farming of Bones* and *The Book Thief*

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Within literature, death has always been a common theme. In this essay, death as a border in literature will be explored in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. *The Farming of Bones* follows Amabelle Désir, a young Haitian woman working in the Dominican Republic, and tells of the Haitian massacre in the Dominican Republic in 1937. *The Book Thief* follows Liesel Meminger, a young German girl living under the Nazi regime, and tells of life during World War II. Both Danticat and Zusak explore death as it appears in those tragedies, how it affects the people under those regimes, and how it creates a border. Death creates a border both physical and spiritual, rigid yet permeable, and one that is displayed through the personification of death by Danticat and Zusak.

When most people think of borders, they tend to think about physical borders: ones that separate countries, ones that separate the imprisoned from the free, and more. A border that is often forgotten, one that is both physical and spiritual, is the border between life and death. Death has long been a theme in literature and it has been explored in many ways. Death creates a border both physical and spiritual, rigid yet permeable, and one that is displayed through the personification of death in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle Désir is a young Haitian woman who works as a servant for a wealthy family in the Dominican Republic. She loses her parents to death as a child and later loses her other loved ones during the Haitian massacre. Amabelle survives the Haitian massacre in the Dominican Republic, what’s referred to as the Parsley massacre, and flees back to a Haiti she barely knows or remembers. In *The Book*

Thief, Liesel Meminger is a young German girl who is sent to live with a foster family during World War II. She loses her brother to death, her mother to the war early in her childhood, and then the rest of her loved ones over the course of World War II. Both Amabelle and Liesel are confronted with the reality of death due to genocide, as they witness their loved ones' deaths and the aftermath. Amabelle's and Liesel's lives are shaped by losing their family and friends to the other side of the border of death; or as Amabelle puts in *The Farming of Bones*: "A border is a veil not many people can wear" (Danticat 264).

The Farming of Bones

While death is more than just a physical border, the consequences of it as a physical boundary are usually the most prominent. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle Désir experiences the physical border of death when her parents die. While trying to cross the river from the Dominican Republic back to Haiti, her parents are swept away by the current while Amabelle stays waiting on the bank. One of the boys at the river, who stops her from jumping in after her parents, remarks on the finality of the physical boundary: "Unless you want to die,' one of them says, 'you will never see those people again'" (Danticat 52). The physical border of death keeps her from her loved ones later in life as well, like with Sebastien, her lover.

The spiritual border of death becomes blurred for Amabelle. She spends the better half of the novel living as if dead on Earth. She admits this to Sebastien in one of her dreams, saying "I chose a living death because I am not brave" (Danticat 283). Although we know she lives for at least two more decades after returning to Haiti, it isn't really living. As Hewett states, "Amabelle lives like a 'ghost,' trapped somewhere between past and present" (132). She sticks to her routine of sewing and staying in the house as she struggles with feeling able to live after being surrounded by so much death. Death, although she is scared of it, is something she comes to welcome.

After living through the river-crossing that her fellow refugees, Odette and Wilner, did not, Amabelle was not comfortable with her own survival: "There was a stillness to it [Odette's face] I nearly envied" (Danticat 205). Not only did Odette die, but it was a result of Amabelle's actions. While they were crossing, Wilner was shot by a soldier and Amabelle covered Odette's nose and mouth to keep her from yelling. Odette was still breathing when they got to the shore, but since Wilner died "... she had already made her choice" (Danticat 202). Again, after more than two decades have passed, Amabelle describes sleep as a "comfort" for it "... was as close to disappearing as I could come" (Danticat 287). After Sebastien is gone, Amabelle seems to give up on living. Even before she lost Sebastien, Amabelle said "I am afraid I cease to exist when he's not there" (Danticat 2). That feeling

would only solidify once she had lost him for good. After losing so many people to the violent acts of genocide, Amabelle experiences a spiritual death; she is never fully living again.-fort” for it “... was as close to disappearing as I could come” (Danticat 287). After Sebastien is gone, Amabelle seems to give up on living. Even before she lost Sebastien, Amabelle said “I am afraid I cease to exist when he’s not there” (Danticat 2). That feeling would only solidify once she had lost him for good. After losing so many people to the violent acts of genocide, Amabelle experiences a spiritual death; she is never fully living again.

Even the idea of parsley, which is explored throughout the novel, is used as a symbol of both life and death. Amabelle’s community used parsley “... to wash a new infant’s hair for the first time and ... a corpse’s remains one final time,” along with culinary and medicinal methods (Danticat 62). When Amabelle, Yves, and Tibon are being beaten by the Dominicans and have parsley shoved in their mouths, instead of thinking about the impending death that was sure to come, she thinks of it as a way to survive instead: “I told myself that eating the parsley would keep me alive” (Danticat 193).

Death is personified in different ways throughout the novel. Amabelle is the narrator of her own story and so we, as readers, get to experience her thoughts, feelings, and dreams. Amabelle is haunted by “shadows” in both her waking life and her dreams: “When I was a child, I used to spend hours playing with my shadow ... There were many shadows, too, in the life I had beyond childhood” (Danticat 2-3). These “shadows” followed her around her whole life, representing the spirits of all the loved ones she would lose. Amabelle also refers to Sebastien’s absence as her “shadow” before she knows if he has died or not (Danticat 281).

Haitian folk religion is heavily linked to the Voudoun religion and it makes its appearance in the spiritual practices of the characters in the novel (Weir-Soley 168). The Voudoun religion has been notoriously misrepresented, especially in Western cultures, and is “... perceived as an illicit source of spiritual agency, is associated with death, darkness and the devil” (Weir-Soley 171). It has even become common to refer to it as ‘voodoo’ with all the negative stereotypes of ‘black magic’ instead of the real Voudoun religion. But as Weir-Soley explains, it couldn’t be farther from the truth: “Experts recognize Voudoun as a legitimate source of agency and transformation for the Haitian peasantry, perhaps even a spiritual reprieve from the abjectness of poverty and the oppression of political tyranny” (171). Like most communities, the Haitians’ religious ferocity helps them to stay sane and deal with the turmoil in their country.

While Voudoun is not part of the “dark arts” as modern media would have us think, it does still have ties to both death and life through healing. When Amabelle is sick,

her mother makes her a doll out of her favorite things; whether it be a spiritual doll or just for comfort, it helps. In her fever, she sees the doll get up and start jumping rope. The doll tells Amabelle, “I am sure you will live to be a hundred years old, having come so close to death while young” (Danticat 58). Since Amabelle comes so close to death again later in life, during the massacre, it seems the doll’s predictions come true.

The way that life and death are addressed in *The Farming of Bones* is also very cyclical. The final scene wraps up Amabelle’s personal experience with death neatly. As Amabelle gets into the river, “in the place of [her] original loss,” she finds comfort in her dreams and memories instead of pain (Hewett 141). She “has found a place where she can be at peace with her body and the violence of her past, at least temporarily” (Hewett 141). We, the readers, don’t know if Amabelle is simply reflecting on her life when she gets into the water or if she intends to end her life. Hewett reads the final scene of Amabelle as a reflection of her life and finally embracing what she’s gone through. At this moment when “Amabelle finally embraces all of the losses that have defined her identity and creates a new self out of loss,” there is a rebirth (Hewett 141-142). But perhaps Amabelle was not there to simply reflect on death, but to embrace it herself. It would be a fitting way for her to go: just as her parents did, just as when she first tried to join them in death.

The Book Thief

In *The Book Thief*, Death as a narrator and death as the idea and act itself are two separate concepts, and thus require distinct styles of capitalization moving forward. Liesel Meminger loses her brother to death as well. She and her brother are traveling with their mother to be taken in by a foster family, but on the train ride there, her brother dies suddenly. Liesel “could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead” (Zusak 20). With the death of her brother, she sees the physical border of death in action; at one moment her brother is breathing and conscious, and in the next, he’s simply a limp body sat next to her.

Her brother’s death is not the only one she experiences, as she again witnesses the death of everyone close to her at the end of the book. Her foster father, Hans Hubermann, foster mother, Rosa Hubermann, and best friend, Rudy Steiner, all die in a bombing that she survives. She loses almost everyone. Literary scholar Débora Ameida de Oliveira states that “of all people who know Liesel, just three are able to survive and share her life” (49). Death separates Liesel from almost all her loved ones. Mass death is often described by Death through his narration, but in simple ways. Not only does Liesel witness her brother’s, foster parents’, and friends’ deaths, but Death does as well. Death often uses numbers to relay to the readers the violence he’s seeing in an impersonal way, like “just over two hundred

murdered souls” (Zusak 488). For Death’s own “sanity,” he creates a boundary between himself and the dead by trying to see them simply as numbers and not as the complex humans he knows they are.

Liesel is haunted by Death, as he follows her and tells her story, but she is also haunted by death, especially her brother’s. She often wakes up to terrible nightmares about her brother’s death, waking up “swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets” (Zusak 36). As Johnson explains, “Swimming while drowning symbolizes life—a painful struggle that ultimately ends with death. Liesel’s dream further demonstrates this innateness of human suffering because Werner’s death haunts only the living Liesel” (3). In her sleeping hours, the border of death becomes more permeable. Her dreams feel real and show her struggle with letting her loved ones cross that border. As Johnson says, only Liesel experiences the terror that Werner’s death came with because she is the one who is alive (3). When she’s asleep, the deaths that Liesel has experienced haunt her, while Death haunts her waking hours. Death sees Liesel’s interactions with death, the act, and has her own interactions with her, like picking up her diary after she threw it away (Zusak 539).

While Liesel is haunted by death itself, Death is also who narrates her story. To fully understand *The Book Thief*, “it is necessary to view *The Book Thief* as a double story: it is Liesel’s story, but it is Death’s story too” (Oliveira 37). Not only that, but one must understand that Death is both a character, narrator, and a border. Zusak wrote the narrative style in such a way that Death, since he is omniscient, can share the details of Liesel’s life, as well as her thoughts. But even Death experiences borders and is limited to only insight into Liesel’s mind. He says “Max, Hans, and Rosa I cannot account for, but I know that Liesel Meminger was thinking that if the bombs ever landed on Himmel Street, not only did Max have less chance of survival than everyone else, but he would die completely alone” (Zusak 384). While Death has the ability to travel around, he is entranced by Liesel once he first sees her, when he is collecting her brother’s soul: “I buckled — I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched,” and he continued to watch and share her story (Zusak 7).

Death is personified, as he is given feelings and opinions of his own, but he is not made human. Throughout the novel, colors. Then the humans,” while he ends the novel with “I am haunted by humans” (Zusak 3; 550). But he is not unmoved by all the tragedy he sees, often using the colors of the sky to distract him from the violence and keep his focus away from the humans who survive, “the leftovers” (Zusak 4). He takes no joy from collecting souls but even more so dislikes the whole experience of his job: “When Death takes someone away, he feels a great discomfort by noticing the behavior of those who stay” (Oliveira 26). In a convoluted way, he experiences death as a border as well; he never

is shown interacting with or even seeing the souls he carries away again. It is simply his job to carry the souls and they are permanently on the other side of the border once he's taken them away.

When he first introduces himself as what humans will meet at the end of their life, he makes sure to explain there is no choice in it, saying “Please, be calm, despite that previous threat. / I am all bluster— / I am not violent. / I am not malicious. / I am a result” (Zusak 6). While the explanation comes because he is desperate to make clear that bringing death is not his choice, the contrast of himself with humanity makes the border clear. As much as Death follows Liesel's life, the border of death keeps him from taking part in life at all.

Conclusion

Amabelle and Liesel both lived through genocides and experienced death all around them. Amabelle, like Liesel, is also haunted in dreams, often with imagery or memories of death. Although they have managed to evade death on multiple occasions, they are still surrounded by death in their waking life. Their stories take place only years apart, in 1937 and 1939 respectively. Death separated them from their loved ones, first as a physical boundary and then as a spiritual one. They both lost their immediate family early in their childhood and then the majority of their loved ones later in life, because of the genocidal acts. Death becomes permeable for them at times, like Amabelle with the doll during her fever dream and Liesel having Death narrate her story. At the end of both their stories, they themselves cross the border of death: Amabelle in the same river that took her parents and Liesel to finally meet her old friend face-to-face.

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Confronting Potential Cultural Barriers in Translated Works

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“Confronting Potential Cultural Barriers in Translated Works” reflects upon the stylistic choices of Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros in their respective works, “No Name Woman” and “Woman Hollering Creek.” Both strategically include either moments of or full iterations of translation culturally and linguistically. When incorporating translation at any degree, a potential barrier could arise: a barrier from comprehension, a barrier from translation, a barrier between author and reader, or a barrier between cultures. Throughout this essay, I will be discerning the stylistic choices of Cisneros and Kingston concerning their inclusion of translation but also their overarching storylines to evaluate whether their work disrupts the presented cultural barrier or whether the presented cultural barrier disrupts their work.

Truly *reading* literature extends beyond mere reading; it can become a type of conversation, but in order to embrace that rapport between the author and the reader, the text must be made available. When reading literature that has been translated in the sense of culture and language, the expectation of the reader varies. Cultural nuances that exist within the native language of a text may be lost in translation. Few, if any, languages offer a seamless translation, which makes literary conversations challenging due to a presented linguistic barrier. Cultural barriers are often presented alongside linguistic barriers. Translation offers a sense of mobility between the author’s culture and the reader’s experience. However, in order for a text to be accessed by a multitude of readers, its translation is *not* free from a type of debt to the original language and culture. Translation can either be halting to the reader, or translation can be a type of avenue, a border that, when crossed,

leads to newfound understanding. These notions are dually expressed in Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" and Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman."

"Woman Hollering Creek" is peppered with Cisneros's Spanish culture through implementing various words and phrases. These moments serve as a transmission of culture, and they are successful due to the words and phrases being identified with italics and then followed by an English translation. This specific strategy welcomes a monolingual reader, or a reader who is not well-versed in the Spanish language, into the story alongside Cleófilas. Cisneros assures the reader that they do not need to extend their mind further than the page since the translation is made readily available. However, with this strategy of coupling Spanish with English, one language may be put at a deficit. Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" is the telling of a family story from a Chinese-American protagonist. In comparison to "Woman Hollering Creek," Kingston's text is entirely translated in the sense of culture. "No Name Woman" was written in English; however, it was written by an author with a Chinese-American perspective. Kingston was able to comprehensibly transmit her Chinese culture in an American society. However, that was not achieved without some community backlash. "No Name Woman" begs the question of whether or not cultural ties were severed or weakened in order to construct a Chinese story for an American audience. When discerning the effects of translated texts, it begs the question of whether the literary conversation is mutually enriching to *both* the author's culture and the reader's experience. Cisneros and Kingston disrupt the cultural and linguistic barriers of translation with specific stylistic choices that welcome, rather than exclude, the monolingual reader into the literary conversation while still respecting the native cultures of their texts *and* staying true to their own linguistic liberties as authors.

Translation presents the possibility that there will be discrepancies on a linguistic level. Unique grammar and semantic structures will not always be seamlessly transitioned into a different language, which could impede the reader's comprehension and thus their connection with the literature. Translation of culture presents the possibility that certain expressions of cultural niceties may be subdued in order to uphold the comprehensibility of the literature. Both presentations are confronted with a positional cultural barrier. Allison Fagan says that as authors negotiate their own linguistic identities, there is now "the question of whether, and when, and how much to translate" (58). In this sense, translation can offer a type of mobility in itself to evoke a crossing of borders (Fagan 58). Bolaki commends translation for gifting language a form of mobility, but recognizes a "debt" that is bound to the original text (40). The intention of production implores the literary conversation to ask whether this construction is simply trying to resolve translation conflicts for the sake of presenting a coherent story. Cisneros displays this favorable type of mobility by representing

both Spanish and English in “Woman Hollering Creek.” While the essence of a barrier is to present a divide, Cisneros is able to create a harmony between languages. Cisneros’s opening paragraph is one sentence that sets up the scene for her female protagonist, Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández. Along with the culturally significant character names, Cisneros begins the coupling of Spanish and English early on. This sets the precedent for the importance of this “marriage” between Spanish and English: “...over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado* –on the other side –already did he divine the morning...” (Cisneros 43). The Spanish words are italicized and followed by an English translation, which maintains the plot and heightens the cultural significance of the story. Through the coupling of Spanish and English, the reader is further introduced to Mexican culture due the English translation being provided by Cisneros, which supports her intention of welcoming a variety of readers into the cultural and literary experience that is “Woman Hollering Creek.”

Extending beyond the literal words on the page which form this connection between Spanish culture and English readers, Cisneros’s opening line sets up the very barriers, linguistic and cultural, that are central to the plot of her story. Cisneros’s newlyweds are moving from Mexico to Texas. While the characters are literally crossing borders, the layout of the words on the page also displays the border between Spanish and English languages that Cisneros was able to bridge with an em dash. Cisneros’s literal and stylistic choice to present barriers showcases her implicit intention not to divide but to harmonize languages. When confronting potential cultural barriers in translated works with harmony in mind, there appears to be a “reconciliation” between languages as opposed to a form of domination in Cisneros’s work.

Deciding to incorporate translation could be a type of double reward for both the monolingual and multilingual reader, which Kingston and Cisneros portray respectively in their texts. Torres says that “much of the Latino/a literature written in English in the US incorporates Spanish at some level” which is exemplified in “Woman Hollering Creek” (76). Throughout “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros identifies her culture by italicizing Spanish words and then following them with an English translation, like when she notes the title of popular telenovela “Tú o Nadie. ‘You or No One’” (44). This display of language could cast Cisneros’s culture as the “other,” as a cultural barrier itself. However, when looking at the translation above, instead Cisneros is *welcoming* the reader into the cultural conversation with Cleófilas and her neighbors by translating the title of the television show they watch. So, in that regard, Cisneros’s culture is not at a deficit, instead she is acknowledging the barrier and providing a bridge.

Torres continues to say that in the United States, the presence of Latinx immigrants

is increasing, which suggests that the coexistence of languages in literature is also representative of “literary language actualizing the discourse of the border and bilingual/bicultural communities” (76). Inclusion does not promote exclusion. Cisneros’s intentional inclusion of Spanish into her text represents her culture and the culture of her characters without excluding the reader or “othering” her native language. Torres says that frequently “these Latinized texts tend to provide special pleasure to the bilingual reader; monolingual readers may not have complete access to the text and while they can often decipher the meaning from context, sometimes they must resort to a dictionary” (83). Torres notes that a dictionary or a reference book may *not* help find the translation for which readers are searching, which only strengthens the cultural barrier that is present with translated works. However, Cisneros writes in a way that is accessible to both monolingual and bilingual readers. The English translations after her Spanish words and phrases are a stylistic strategy that dually supports the reader’s comprehension and combats the presented barrier. While most of the Spanish words and phrases are translated, there are few that stand proud in italics absent of an English follower: “*telenovela* episode,” “...going to go to the *farmacia* and buy a hair rinse,” and “Bad luck. *Mal aire?*” (Cisneros 44; 51). These words and phrases are still definable by the monolingual reader through context clues, which makes for a more academically enriching reading experience. With that, the bilingual reader is *doubly* enriched because, while these words and phrases are defined, their familiarity serves as a point of personal relevance which allows the reader and the characters to not only see culture but see themselves in one another. Cisneros’s co-existence of languages dismantles the presented cultural barrier by harmonizing cultures but also by welcoming and embracing the readers.

This skillfully incorporated point of personal relevance for the bilingual reader is also seen through Cisneros’s incorporation of the Mexican myth, La Llorona. Cisneros writes, “The natives only knew the *arroyo* one crossed on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back, was called Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood ...the townspeople shrugged because it was of no concern to their lives how this trickle of water received its curious name” (46). The monolingual readers of “Woman Hollering Creek” are similar to the townspeople in this way. The inclusion of Spanish and the premise of this cultural myth is not a concern to the comprehensibility of the story, but to a bilingual reader the story will now have a new layer of cultural depth. The monolingual reader, or reader who is unfamiliar with the myth, will gain general knowledge through Cleófilas’s thought process: “Is it La Llorona the weeping woman? La Llorona who drowned her own children. Perhaps La Llorona is the one they named the creek after, she thinks...” (Cisneros 51). With Cisneros’s skillful writing, “Woman Hollering Creek” reveals a door for connection to its bilingual readers without excluding its

monolingual readers, which supports a mutually enriching reading experience.

Maxine Hong Kingston establishes similar cultural realities to Cisneros in “No Name Woman” through the personal curiosity of her first-generation Chinese-American protagonist’s retelling of a family story. The “story to grow up on” is a devastating tale about how her aunt was humiliated and excluded from her own family and village due to her pregnancy outside of marriage. This rejection led her to commit suicide, killing herself and the newborn baby. The notion of storytelling and community are leading factors in Kingston’s text. It is from this story that the protagonist “believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that ‘aunt’ would do my father mysterious harm” (Kingston 6). This maturing female is lead astray about the nature of sex; she correlates sex and her aunt with harm. Her mother is trying to instill fear into her because she, like all women, has the potential to become pregnant. Unplanned pregnancy is a risk of further humiliation for this family, as they warn their daughter, “Don’t humiliate us” (Kingston 6). The cultural connections within Kingston’s preamble are evident due to the female, first-generation protagonist. These connections may have been lost if “No Name Woman” was not formatted this way. Kingston’s way of transmitting culture offers a sense of mobility that has the ability to unify cultures.

Bolaki writes that while Kingston “has been praised for extricating Chinese myth ...through her translations...” she has also been “condemned for twisting and distorting the meaning of the original in order to please her white sisters” (42). The criticisms of Kingston’s work may stem from the footnote, “Transcription errors may remain,” which alludes to there being moments of the text not all will understand due to the cultural barrier translation creates. However, “No Name Woman” was originally written in English (Kingston 7). So, these “transcription errors” are cultural, not linguistic. Yes, ‘No Name Woman’ translated well, as Bolaki suggests, but beyond accessibility, Kingston was able to create a space for culture to reside in a prolific way. Diverse literature presents the possibility of a cultural barrier to arise, but the intention of the authors like Kingston to create such spaces of cultural translation could dismantle that barrier before it becomes invincible.

The barrier of cultural transmission is prevalent in Kingston’s “No Name Woman” due to her representing her own identity as a Chinese-American woman. The story reveals how a Chinese woman’s community harasses her to the point of suicide, a death the family does not mourn. Instead, it is a death that allows for dismissal of the woman’s prior existence entirely in order to free the community of her wrongdoings. Kingston writes, , “Those of us in the first American generations have to figure out how the invisible world of the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in a solid America” (2). While the “us” in this quote is grouping the character in the story to others who had to assimilate to American

customs, the “us” can also extend beyond the text to represent Kingston herself as a Chinese woman in America.

Kingston’s syntax in her quote represents the barrier of culture. The dichotomy between “invisible” and “solid” presents a cultural barrier, while the verb “fits” evokes the possibility of harmony. Bolaki notes that this remark appears early in Kingston’s work, which requires the reader to quickly map out the invisible world from the solid world: “[The quotes] apparently rigid distinction between the “invisible” and the “solid,” which one quickly maps onto China and America respectively” (40). This polarity suggests a type of divide between cultures which Bolaki says conveys “a sense of incommensurable, and thus untranslatable, differences” (40). Kingston does not let the cultural barrier deter her protagonist and her readers from embracing the two cultures that characterize her adult life. By including the verb “fits” in “...how our childhood *fits* in solid America,” Kingston authorizes a sense of possible appeasement. Kingston is grappling with the sentiment of culture through her protagonist, who relates to the reader’s point of view because of her outsider status. Kingston’s narrator, who closely resembles Kingston herself, is transcending borders and disrupting cultural barriers by revealing newfound insights to her own personhood while trying to comprehend her aunt’s life story. Kingston’s intentional stylistic choice with syntax disrupts barriers while transmitting culture to the reader.

Literature welcomes a conversation between the author and the reader, but is one required to do more? Fagan reminds that there is an inherent mistrust with translation. With Latinx literature, Fagan says there are “interpretive possibilities by manipulating the role of Spanish in English (and vice versa)” (59). Translation poses as a barrier in itself due to the perils of translating culture. Torres notes that in “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros translates “*la consentida*” as “princess,” which is not a direct translation; the direct translation of that Spanish phrase would be “the spoiled one” (Torres 85). This particular translation shows priority to the monolingual reader’s comprehension as opposed to the understandability of the culture. Fagan describes the translation of the author’s work and the access to readers as a type of “fight for control over linguistic identity” (59). Translation allows for accessibility and a heightened range of readership, but that may expose the original text to a type of debt. However, is this debt to the original text or to the reader’s experience? While Cisneros’s inclusion of Spanish followed by an English translation does welcome the monolingual reader, Torres says that with that translation strategy, readers “do not have to leave the comfortable realm of his/her own complacent monolingualism” (78). But shouldn’t readers be deemed skillful enough to resolve any difficulty in a text instead of the author spoon-feeding them? Not necessarily, according to Torres: “main--stream readers expect to gain access to other worlds, not be made aware of their limitations” (82).

For Kingston, she embraces the curiosity of other cultures through her Chinese-American protagonist's own personal conflict between hearing her family's portrayal of her aunt and her own desire to retell her story: "My aunt haunts me –her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origami-ed into houses and clothes" (Kingston 7). Both Kingston and Cisneros dismantle the cultural barriers presented by translation by actively *wanting* to welcome a variety of readers to their texts. In this sense, translation does present a cultural barrier, but one that is permeable by artistic intention.

This permeation prompts the question of why might an author feel the need, or the want, to include a second language or transference of culture into their text? Fagan mentions that while "opposing one language to the other suggests a clear-cut equivalency that potentially distracts readers from the complexities of existing between or among languages," the inclusion of two languages, although with the intention of presenting the languages as equals, may create a barrier within itself (59). With two languages to view and digest, they could be a distraction as opposed to a helping hand. Fagan continues to say, "But the glossary, when examined closely, can also work to unintentionally or even subversively highlight those linguistic complexities" which is what Cisneros achieved (59). Cisneros in "Woman Hollering Creek," confronted the potential linguistic barrier with harmony in mind. While mindful of the possible complications of coupling Spanish and English in one story, Cisneros mindfully and skillfully intertwined the two languages to produce a more realistic and significant story not only for readers but also for her own identity. The purpose of translation is to welcome, not to exclude, which is a sentiment Kingston also represents. Kingston presents transition in a cultural rather than linguistic sense, which results in a more assimilative translation (Bolaki 44). With the culture of Kingston's story being rooted in a dominating, patriarchal society, translation in a similar sense can be a tool of domination. However, for Kingston, she strategically decided to choose harmony. As Bolaki notes, "... translation can be better described as a lost-and-found space" (55). Keeping with that belief, for Kingston, more was found than lost. Kingston's work may have been criticized for distorting the meaning of the original story, but the attempt to tell Chinese stories in an American context welcomes more readers to the literary conversation (Bolaki 39; 42). Both authors *wanted* to include translation into their texts, into their stories, to welcome a wider audience to experience *their* culture.

Translation gives texts mobility, but also a sense of evolution. Instead of forming a barrier, translation demands flexibility. The inclusion of culture and native languages within a text alongside the overarching English-American frame could either exist comfortably or uncomfortably depending on the author's stylistic intentions. For Kingston and Cisneros

alike, both authors achieved a balance of culture that harmonized language and disrupted the distinct culture barrier by embracing their native culture while simultaneously welcoming the monolingual reader. When confronted with a border, Kingston and Cisneros created a bridge. As Bolaki said in response to “No Name Woman” translating well, “I propose another phrase ...one that articulates, in its very assertion, the promise and perils of translation: ‘Something gives.’” This “gives” could denote one text being at an expense from another, but when concerning Cisneros and Kingston, this “gives” is more in association with that of a gift. Translation *gives* culture a widely accessible expression. These authors were able to transmute the presented barrier into a border that fostered newfound understanding for the readers while remaining truthful to the author’s moments of culture.

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Borders of Masculinity: The Hero's Journey in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe has grown into one of the most popular entertainment franchises since its debut film in 2008. Even with competition rising in the superhero film industry, the MCU continues to stand out due to its unique and intricate depiction of the hero's journey. The three foundational heroes of the MCU (Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor) illustrate how toxic expressions of masculinity create borders to their emotional development and character growth, borders that they must overcome along the hero's journey. In his first film, *Iron Man*, Tony Stark begins to reevaluate the path that his father laid out for him when he undergoes a major moral transformation that makes him realize the violent impact of weapons manufacturing at Stark Industries. By becoming Iron Man, Tony makes a commitment to bettering himself and serving as a protector, but his insecurities continue to manifest into his public image as hero until his final appearance in *Avengers: Endgame*. Captain America, though not the most obvious depiction of toxic masculinity, struggles with

the same identity issues as Tony Stark. From his first film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers battles with insecurities that stem from always having been the "little guy." Steve constantly starts fights that he cannot win to stand up for others, and repeatedly enlists to the WWII draft despite being rejected due to poor health every time. His desperation to fulfill the hero role separates him from his only love, Peggy Carter, by an uncrossable border, time, until he gives these toxic traits up to return to her in *Avengers: Endgame*. Thor also struggles to fill his father's shoes as the king and protector of his home world, Asgard. His need to be seen as a hero and fierce warrior make him impulsive and quick to violence, which puts his kingdom at risk and bases his self-esteem on this image of himself. Though Thor's arc isn't finished yet, *Avengers: Endgame* illustrates his coping with his failure to fulfill this image as he rebuilds his self-esteem into his own identity. These three heroes demonstrate how toxic masculinity creates borders to their personal growth and progression along the hero's journey.

Superhero films in recent years have grown in popularity since the Marvel Cinematic Universe's, or MCU's, first movie debut in 2008. The MCU continues to stand out despite the now oversaturated market because of its unique illustration of the hero's journey. While all superheroes face obstacles and fight villains, Marvel's protagonists must overcome their own toxic perceptions of masculinity in order to truly step into the hero role. Even after many of them seem to become recognized heroes by their community, they continue to struggle with living up to their own perceptions of masculinity. The MCU depicts superheroes' emotional growth from boy to man alongside the traditional hero's journey, wherein hypermasculinity creates a border between them and their ability to reach true heroism by imposing hegemonic values onto their gender identity. As the heroes mature throughout their prospective films, they have to overcome hypermasculine tendencies within themselves—such as needing to assert dominance, impulsive violence, and the desire to be perceived as a hero—to undergo emotional growth and discern their identity. This illustration recognizes how the pressures of cultural expectations and gender performance create unattainable and aspirational models of masculinity that coerce men to conform within the social hierarchy. The three foundational heroes in the MCU—Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America—depict how hypermasculinity creates a border in their lives that blocks their character development by stunting their emotional growth and development of personal identity.

To understand masculinity's significant role within the male heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is important to explain how it functions within sociocultural contexts to alter notions of male identity. In their research on diverse masculinities, scholars Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe outline how hegemonic masculinity necessitates the performance of manhood, stating that this “requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity man is established” (279). These practices are absorbed into the understanding of their self-identity, making the aspiration to this masculine “ideal” indistinguishable from the individual. The traits associated with hegemonic masculinity may change depending on cultural and social contexts, but it follows the same schema regardless. Medical research on how social expectations of gender influence men's behaviors defines hegemonic masculinity as principles that establish a gendered social order through a combination of the “hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy” (Jewkes, et al. S113). Internalization of culturally established gender roles imposes these values onto the formation of self-identity, constructing masculinity upon a foundation of power dynamics. Schrock and Schwalbe state that in the pursuit projecting this hegemonic ideal, “this means signifying a capacity

to exert control over oneself, the environment, and others” (286). Their research examines hypermasculine displays of these traits in men, such as failure to seek help, poor social support networks, and proximity to violence, that mirror the behaviors of the MCU heroes discussed further in this essay. These customs attempt to signal a “[capacity] to control one’s own life, to be invulnerable and needless of help, and to be fearless and hence not easily intimidated by others” (Schrock and Schwalbe 289). This understanding of hegemonic masculinity’s overarching influence on male identity and gender performance reveals the prominence of the masculine identity within the MCU hero’s journey.

Iron Man/Tony Stark

In Marvel Studios’s first film, *Iron Man*, Tony Stark’s struggle with hypermasculinity originates from his patchy relationship with his father as the effects of this trauma become distinguishable through his transformation into Iron Man. Tony grew up a boy genius turned playboy and, after his parents’ tragic death, inherited Stark Industries, his father’s tech and weapons development company. When Tony undergoes a major moral transformation, he is forced to confront the violence he has caused. In response to his introspection, Tony wrestles with his emotions as he considers leaving Stark Industries and the weapons business, wrestling with the idea aloud:

I never got to say goodbye to my father. There’s questions that I would have asked him. I would have asked him how he felt about what this company did. If he was conflicted, if he ever had doubts. Or maybe he was every inch the man we remember from the newsreels. I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I saw that I had become a part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability. (Favreau)

Tony’s perspective begins to shift and his guard comes down for the first time, revealing an internal struggle between ending his participation in further violence or upholding his father’s legacy. As the most prominent male role model in his life, Tony cannot help but wonder if his father had ever questioned the integrity of their business in the same way. As one of the most technologically advanced weapons manufacturers, Stark Industries represents hypermasculinity and the ultimate ability to assert control and dominance. Although Tony desperately wants to live up to his father’s image, he must let go of this symbol of violent masculinity to cross into his new frame of morality. By overcoming this border, Tony is able to find a new purpose in becoming Iron Man rather than continue the cycle of violence.



Tony Stark suits up to protect refugees from foreign militia in Afghanistan.

Tony Stark continues to struggle with how he fit into a masculine identity but as he begins to focus on genuinely living up to the hero role, his hypermasculinity only shifts into other areas of his life. He still yearns to be loved and wants to make up for his past, and Tony's suit quickly becomes a crutch for him to obtain these things. Stepping into his Iron Man suit creates a barrier that hides his past mistakes, only showing his hero persona to the rest of the world. This is where we see how his suit becomes a safe space that enables his need for validation, turning it into "a form of self-medication" that "strengthens his ingrained belief that the Iron Man suit is the only means of attaining his desired goal: to be a hero" (Wincherauk 45). The suit creates a physical and metaphorical border that shields the public from seeing Tony Stark. Instead, they only see the masculine figure he is projecting to the world. Although he believes his new identity as Iron Man is the key to his redemption, this plays into his hypermasculine tendencies explains how food studies can be used to identify systems within media: "Through identifying and studying food categories, it is possible to decode the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural systems in which food and food-centered practices are embedded" (5).

In *Captain America: Civil War*, a moral disagreement with Steve Rogers forces Tony to reevaluate his disposition to violence. After several years of working together, the Avengers team has become a family, but in this film, the "Sokovia Accords" drawn up by world governments divides them. The Sokovia Accords are meant to de-privatize the Avengers, allowing them only to work under the supervision of the United Nations. As the Avengers discuss whether or not to sign the accords, Stark pulls up a picture of a young college graduate who died during the gruesome battle in question. He explains, "He decided to

spend his summer building sustainable housing for the poor. Guess where, Sokovia. He wanted to make a difference, I suppose. We won't know because we dropped a building on him while we were kicking ass. There's no decision making process here. We need to be put in check!" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Civil War*). Until this moment, Tony had been sure about his actions as Iron Man, but he starts to question the good he has done as a hero similarly to the way he did with Stark Industries. Tony has seen the civilian lives lost as collateral damage, but he begins to recognize that his pursuit of heroism only shifted his need for power and control into a new outlet. explains how food studies can be used to identify systems within media: "Through identifying and studying food categories, it is possible to decode the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural systems in which food and food-centered practices are embedded" (5).

A division forms among the Avengers as they discuss the Sokovia Accords with Steve and Tony leading the opposing sides. Although Tony had previously thought the Avengers were protecting humanity, he now relates the Sokovia Accords to Stark Industries before he decided to end weapons manufacturing. Steve responds: "Tony, you chose to do that. If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there's somewhere we need to go and they don't let us? We may not be perfect but the safest hands are still our own" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Civil War*).



The Avengers face off, divided by Tony Stark's and Steve Rogers's moral differences.

Steve and Tony in this scene are at odds over how to handle conflict going forward, both having different opinions over what course of action would breed less violence. Steve Rogers is often hailed for his "uncompromising purity and resolve" as a hero that prefers to

use non-lethal force (Roblou 174). He is morally sound and confident in his role as a hero, but when Tony is forced to confront the victims of his actions, he reevaluates the choice he made to end the cycle of violence by becoming Iron Man. Tony's initial struggle with a violent and control-oriented concept of masculinity makes him unsure of his own judgment and overly concerned with his public image as a hero. The ghost of his hypermasculinity makes him insecure and favor supervision over the Avengers operating privately, but this forms a border that tears the Avengers apart.

In Iron Man's final appearance in the MCU, *Avengers: Endgame*, Tony finally transgresses hypermasculinity and makes peace with himself as he becomes a true hero. Initially, he refuses to help the Avengers with this final mission in order to protect the normal life and family he had built. He eventually confides in his wife, Pepper, that he cannot escape his conscience: "Something tells me I should put it in a lock box and drop it to the bottom of the lake, and go to bed," to which she responds, "But would you be able to rest?" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Endgame*). Tony's moral transformation in Iron Man leaves him unable to ignore his role as a hero, "he must live with his commitment to better himself" (Wincherauk 47). At the end of the film, he declares "I am Iron Man" just before sacrificing his life, signifying his acceptance of his past mistakes and final transformation into a hero. He gives up the peaceful life he had with his family to save innumerable lives, and in his absence he passes on his responsibilities as a hero to the remaining Avengers. Although Tony Stark began his journey as a reckless playboy with questionable morals and a distorted sense of masculinity, he was able to achieve true heroism in his final moments by breaking down the barrier of hypermasculinity that blocked his emotional growth.



Tony declares "I am Iron Man" as he reverses the final battle against Thanos.

Captain America/Steve Rogers

Out of all of the Avengers, Captain America is generally not the first hero whose masculinity would be called into question, but his character is built on his feelings of inadequacy. Before Steve Rogers became Captain America, he was just a short, scrawny boy that struggled to get a date. This gave Steve a fragile sense of masculinity that made him feel the need to prove himself as a man. When World War II began, he repeatedly tried to enlist in the military despite being denied countless times for his small stature. When the military notices his falsified enlistment forms, they question him, uncovering his motives. He says, “I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t like bullies. I don’t care where they’re from” (Johnston). Steve feels an overwhelming desire to defend others because he has been the “little guy” his whole life, but this does not mean he was already the perfect hero. Because of Captain America’s symbolism for American perseverance and morality, he is often seen as “a champion of the American dream and its ideals, though his posture has not always been as clear-cut as one would expect” (Roblou 174). Despite his size and lack of muscle, Steve is shown in the first few scenes constantly getting himself into fights that his friend, Bucky, has to end. Although he knows he will not win, Steve feels an overwhelming desire to defend others to compensate for his fragile masculinity. Like Iron Man with wealth and control, Steve’s insecurities manifest hypermasculinity by leading him to seek validation and assert his physical strength.



Steve gazes at Peggy through a glass window during the time travel mission.

This creates one of the most important aspects of Steve’s character arc by separating him from his first and only love, Peggy Carter. At the end of *Captain America: The First*

Avenger, Steve must crash an airplane into the Arctic Ocean to avoid hitting New York City with a stockpile of nuclear bombs. He remains frozen in the ice for almost 70 years, but when he wakes up he enters a new world in which he has, and always will be, a symbol of heroism and uncompromising morality for his actions in World War II. Although he obtains the identity he has always wanted before undergoing his transformation into Captain America, he spends the rest of his time in the MCU longing to go back in time and live out a peaceful life with Peggy. Because he chose the role of a hero, he was separated from Peggy by a seemingly uncrossable border: time. Near the end of *Avengers: Endgame*, Steve must use the Avengers's new time travel technology to return the Infinity Stones back to their proper timelines, one of which brings him back to the 1940s. He returns seemingly seconds later but shocks the Avengers by coming back as an elderly man. Steve explains, "Well, after I put the stones back, I thought maybe I'll try some of that life Tony was telling me to get... It was beautiful" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Avengers: Endgame*). In the decade that Steve spent living in the future, he realized that his fragile masculinity and desire to fulfill the hero role had overshadowed the only thing that could truly make him happy. Rather than returning immediately to continue his role as Captain America, he let go of this part of his identity to cross back over the time border and live the remainder of his life with Peggy.

Thor

Arguably the most obvious depiction of hypermasculinity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is Thor's origin film. Thor's desire to fulfill the hero role stems from his upbringing as the future king of his home world, Asgard, but this desire to conform to the values of hegemonic masculinity makes him overzealous and quick to violence. Like Iron Man, he wants to prove that he can "make things happen," "resist being dominated by others," and live up to his father's great legacy (Schrock 280).

THOR: The Jotuns must learn to fear me, just as they once feared you

ODIN: That's pride and vanity talking, not leadership. You've forgotten everything I taught you about a warrior's patience.

THOR: While you wait and be patient, the Nine Realms laugh at us! (Branagh)

Thor desperately wants to fill his father's shoes, but this makes him prideful and quick to violence. Odin conquered all of the enemies that threatened his kingdom and Thor longs for his own opportunity for glory. This had already put his friends and kingdom in danger, making Odin realize his son's immaturity: "I was a fool to think you were ready" (Branagh). Thor is stripped of his title, powers, and sent across space to live on Earth as punishment. The pressure to perform within this model makes him violent and prideful; overcoming the border that hypermasculinity creates within his identity allows him to become a true hero

and noble king.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, Thor struggles to cope with his failures as a hero; his pride and heroic image of himself collapses, and he loses his sense of self-worth. Although all of the remaining Avengers are struggling with loss and survivor's guilt at this point, Thor's decline is the hardest to ignore, mostly because of the beer-belly he's grown. Instead of the chiseled god of thunder shown in past films, Thor has become a deadbeat drunk that spends most of his time playing video games. Though his appearance is used as comic relief in this film, his physical decline reflects his emotional journey from an overly confident god to a broken man. In his article on "Fat Thor," Gregory Wakeman writes "There's no doubt that the new Thor embodies a more complex and vulnerable version of masculinity, and *Endgame* shows that even a god like him, who has the 'picture perfect' looks, can be affected by trauma, can be mentally fragile." Thor puts up walls to avoid his pain, cutting him off from his friends and dissolving the overly confident person he used to be. Because he tries to avoid the pain and grief he feels, "[he] goes from being a perfectly chiseled, confident, and arrogant god to a decrepit alcoholic who suffers from a panic attack during a mission" (Wakeman). Thor's character takes a complete turn from who he previously was, and the once mighty god of thunder now spends his days in hiding, closed off even from those closest to him. Thor has built much of his self-image on his role as a hero and cannot cope with his shortcomings.



Thor passed out while the Avengers plan their final mission.

He struggles to accept his failure to prevent the death of his entire family, the destruction of his home planet, and now half of all living things in the universe. Thor's emotions send him into a downward spiral and the state of his mental health makes it difficult for him to

regain his confidence, making him surprised when he is still worthy enough to wield his hammer. His pride and desire to fill the hero role are expressions of hypermasculinity that create a border keeping him from confronting his emotions and learning to accept himself. He cannot live up to the unattainable image he has of masculinity, and though his arc is not finished he's within the MCU, he begins to let go of these expectations of himself by the end of the film.

Conclusion

The Marvel Cinematic Universe uncovers the connection between heroism and hypermasculinity through its protagonists' character arcs. In all of their personal struggles, masculinity and the pressure to perform are at the root, making them assert dominance, act with violence, and question their self-worth. Although many of these men had already become recognized heroes across the universe, they continued to struggle with their sense of self until they let go of their hypermasculine tendencies. Whenever these heroes try to live up to the explains how food studies can be used to identify systems within media: "Through identifying and studying food categories, it is possible to decode the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural systems in which food and food-centered practices are embedded" (5). standards they set for themselves, they are submitting to their insecurities and fulfilling their need for validation. The Marvel Cinematic Universe continues to stand out from other superhero film creators because of the emotional growth that its characters undergo by struggling with the idea of heroism itself. Throughout their films, they grapple with overcoming the border that hypermasculinity creates in their own lives until they gain self-acceptance. The MCU recognizes the connection between the hero's journey and masculinity by reinventing this iconic characterization to uncover the consequences it has on men's lives.

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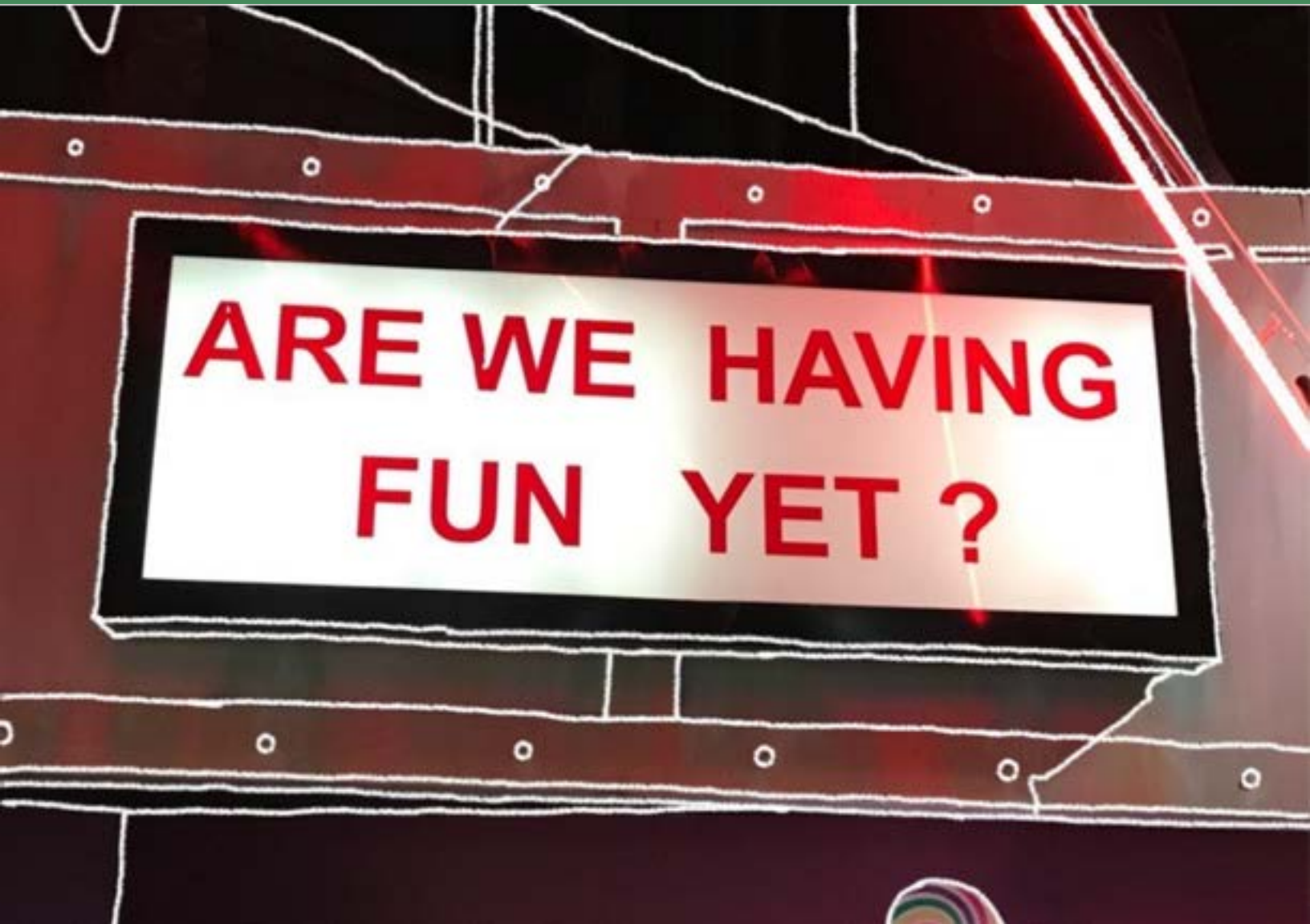


Photo By: Cassidy Forbing

It's All About the Punch(line): The Crossing of Masculinity's Border as portrayed in Todd Phillips's *Joker*

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Catcalls, rapists, dick jokes, and risky business are only a handful of symptoms of the current worldwide viral epidemic dubbed “toxic masculinity.” Focusing on toxic masculinity in Todd Phillips’s film, *Joker*, this essay recounts the toxic behaviors associated with America’s hegemonic masculine system and addresses how party clown and failed comic Arthur Fleck’s journey across masculinity’s border—and transformation into the famous villain, Joker—glorifies the adoption of these toxic traits. Phillips’s film is an unhealthy influence on young, nontraditionally masculine males. Fleck’s character arc teaches them that using violence, sexually asserting oneself, and withholding emotions all come with serious social benefits and lack any consequences. Phillips claims through *Joker* that the oppressed unmasculine man can overcome his social hardships by simply replacing his weak, effeminate personality traits (such as crying openly, solving conflicts without physicality,

and sexual passivity) with mainstream toxic behaviors. This personality change is necessary to cross the border into mainstream masculinity and elevated social states, according to Phillips’s character study. Phillips’s catch-all solution is a claim I contradict with evidence of the failing health of young men in real-world America, concluding with a plea for the creation of safe spaces for healthy male identity exploration. overcome his social hardships by simply replacing his weak, effeminate personality traits (such as crying openly, solving conflicts without physicality, and sexual passivity) with mainstream toxic behaviors. This personality change is necessary to cross the border into mainstream masculinity and elevated social states, according to Phillips’s character study. Phillips’s catch-all solution is a claim I contradict with evidence of the failing health of young men in real-world America, concluding with a plea for the creation of safe spaces for healthy male identity exploration.

Toxic masculinity is a modern pandemic that has overtaken young white men in America at an incredible rate, with restrictive symptoms such as withholding one's emotions, displaying hypersexuality and aggression, and adopting unnaturally high self-reliance, among others. These values are not intrinsic, but societally enforced in the practice dubbed hegemonic masculinity. Todd Phillips's version of DC villain Joker, Arthur Fleck, is a modern poster child for the American male everyman's journey to adopt toxic masculine principles in order to mature into a man of dangerous confidence and consequence. Fleck's zero-to-hero character arc is an adept illustration of how society forces men to cross a metaphysical border from "weakling boy" to "real man" in order to gain respect from others and exert control over one's own body. However, as Fleck's journey across the border illuminates, crossing into toxic masculinity requires the adoption of many dangerous traits—from coveting violence to embracing hypersexuality and adopting emotional façades—and serves as a testament to why toxic masculinity's border should remain uncrossed.

A Biblical Book: Masculinity's Commandments

In tracing Fleck's haphazard arc toward toxicity, one must first understand exactly what toxic masculinity requires of its adherents. In 1976, social scientists Deborah David and Robert Brannon synthesized a "Guy Code" from years of research, having drafted a bible-to-be for those coming into manliness:

1. No Sissy Stuff: anything that even remotely hints of femininity is prohibited. A real man must avoid any behavior or characteristic associated with women.
2. Be a Big Wheel: masculinity is measured by success, power, and the admiration of others. One must possess wealth, fame, and status to be considered manly.
3. Be a Sturdy Oak: manliness requires rationality, toughness, and self-reliance. A man must remain calm in any situation, show no emotion, and admit no weakness.
4. Give 'em Hell: men must exude an aura of daring and aggression, and must be willing to take risks, to 'go for it' even when reason and fear suggest otherwise (Levine 145).

But America hasn't burned this bible yet. Distinguished sociologist Dr. Michael Kimmel recently asked young men (ages 17-22) from every state in America (and 15 other countries) what phrases came to mind when they heard someone say, "be a man." Much to his dismay, Kimmel found that the Guy Code's pillars remained largely unchanged:

1. Boys Don't Cry
2. It's Better to be Mad than Sad
3. Don't Get Mad—Get Even
4. Take It Like a Man

5. He Who has the Most Toys When He Dies, Wins
6. Just Do It or Ride or Die
7. Size Matters
8. I Don't Stop to Ask for Directions
9. Nice Guys Finish Last
10. It's All Good (Kimmel 45).

These “commandments” form the foundation of toxic masculinity—real men must follow them to receive the highest social status. Several of these commandments are embraced by Fleck as he fills out his (rather large, clown-like) shoes during the film’s progression.

“It’s Better to Be Mad than Sad”: Beat-Downs and Bystanders

The classic Joker is one of the American public’s most beloved villains. He is a complete madman boasting a chemically-inflicted skin disfiguration and a love for violence and manic laughter. However, Todd Phillips’s Joker, Arthur Fleck, is contrastingly unremarkable. He is a socially awkward, sad party clown who simply learns to stand up for himself. Fleck’s life is one boisterous, walking example of Kimmel’s second principle, “It’s better to be mad than sad” (Kimmel 45). When Fleck simply chooses to be “sad,” he is beaten and battered. The film proposes that violence is the necessary answer to Fleck’s woes, using it as the vehicle to help him cross the border into manhood. Joker opens with Fleck, the professional party clown, sporting a painted grin while spinning signs for a liquidated business. Only seconds later, a gaggle of teenagers seize Fleck’s sign and a chase ensues, ending in an alley beatdown. While kicking Fleck, the boys shout, “This guy’s weak, he can’t do nothing. Harder, harder!” and “Beat him up, take his stuff” (Phillips). [The camera engages in a lengthy pause](#) to emphasize Fleck’s pitiful state as he cradles his groin on the pavement, painted smile twisted with grief.



The camera engages in a 24-second pause to emphasize Fleck’s pitiful state.

Within the film's first minutes, Fleck is presented as a pitiable effeminate character; this is what motivates the young boys to target him. When Fleck is a "sad" man, he's an easy target for physical beatings. This trait is a reflection of toxic masculinity's emphasis on learning how to "take it like a man," that is, with unbreakable stoicism. The boys also take his belongings in a brief ode to Kimmel's fifth principle, "He Who has the Most Toys ...Wins" (Kimmel 45). Fleck isn't respected by others because his failed masculinity places him within the bordered outlands of the social eye.

However, everything changes once Fleck is gifted a pistol by his coworker Randall. Suddenly, Fleck can choose to be "mad," and his life becomes considerably better. Arthur Fleck first toes the border between weak and powerful masculinity on a late-night subway ride when an unexpected episode of his pseudobulbar affect (uncontrollable, mood-noncongruent laughter) pins him beneath the shoes of a drunken businessman trio who mock and assault his shaking, contorted body (Phillips). An analysis of this scene's physical posturing is pertinent to illustrate Fleck's newfound empowerment after crossing toxic masculinity's border through a sudden act of violence.

During the early stages of confrontation, Fleck remains seated and small while the businessmen circle over him with outstretched arms and loose posture that project their socially owed confidence. The men's relative posturing is indicative of their relative social statuses. These businessmen bring home respectable money, sexually assert themselves upon a female passenger on the subway, and use violence to uphold their place in the pecking order over poor, unmasculine, feeble virgin Fleck. But once he draws his pistol, Fleck unfolds his spine for the first time and [stands tall while marching after the last of his aggressors](#) who is symbolically wounded into a limp (Phillips).



Fleck stands tall, pistol in hand, positioned dominantly over his last victim.

Fleck is able to stand over the now-terrified man's body before murdering him from above, indicating that with violence he is able to quite literally stand above the men to whom society has awarded a higher social status for living within masculinity's borders. Fleck then does something unexpected. Instead of grieving, he performs a ninety second dance in a nearby bathroom to further emphasize the unexpected wave of joy he has experienced from getting mad rather than sad. Miraculously, Fleck manages to escape the crime scene and return to his home, visually minimizing the consequences which come from using violence to solve disputes.

The contrast here is blatant. When Fleck passively took a beating in the film's opening scene, his body and paycheck were bruised and broken just like his wooden sign, but when he became angry and killed his aggressors, his problems simply vanished. His adoption of violence as a problem-solving method is the most apparent sign that feeble Fleck has hopped over toxic masculinity's border, taking Kimmel's adage to heart; it really is better to be mad than sad (45). Once Fleck retaliates by using violence to control others, he finally sheds his weak façade to reveal his inner Joker: a confident man with a more jovial attitude who is an active player in his own life's story. Affirming the positivity of this masculine behavioral change is the next visit Fleck pays his social worker, wherein he expresses that he's "finally a real person" and that "[his] life matters" (Phillips). These expressions heavily coincide with toxic masculinity's notion that the only men of consequence are those who use violence to obtain power, something the malnourished, weedy clown had not attempted before acquiring a firearm.

Much later in the film, popular ex-coworker Randall arrives at Fleck's apartment with their mutual friend Gary in tow. Randall begs Fleck to falsely testify that Randall didn't give Fleck the pistol he used for the subway car's triple-murder (thus acquitting Randall from any criminal charges), but Fleck simply smiles while stabbing Randall repeatedly with a pair of blunt scissors (Phillips). This gruesome event indicates Fleck's growing confidence in his manhood, as he no longer feels subordinate to his larger, more popular backstabbing colleague. Whereas Fleck once lapped up insincere praise from Randall in the green room, his growing sense of entitlement to power now emboldens him to eliminate the man threatening to blow his cover. By "getting mad" and utilizing violence, Fleck effectively eliminates this threat to his new lifestyle so he can climb the social pecking order. Further, he does so yet again with no consequences, as Gary wearily leaves the apartment alone, having decided to withhold this information from the police for the film's duration.

Fleck's violent tendencies escalate when he feels betrayed by his own mother, Penny, who had been withholding information on his adoption from him. Fleck verbally indicates his crossing of toxic masculinity's borders while standing beside her hospital bed,

explaining that “I used to think my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it’s a ...comedy” (Phillips). This statement is the final indicator that Fleck no longer will simply lay down and feel “sad.” He has turned to unpredictability and reckless abandon, finally adopting toxic masculinity’s desire for chaos and power over others by “[giving] ‘em hell” (Kimmel 45). After this admittance, Fleck coolly smothers his mother, illustrating his newfound masculine entitlement to power, and escapes into the night. Important to notice is the [relative positioning of bodies](#) here as well—Fleck’s power has overcome that of even his own mother, indicated by his high relative position while standing over her low-lying bed (Phillips).



The camera focuses on Fleck with an angle equal to his eye level to imply rationality regarding his mother’s strangulation.

The camera’s angle also remains parallel with Fleck’s eye-level to suggest his actions are levelheaded and thus minimizes the horror of his violent act by excluding his mother from her own death scene. Despite the disturbing nature of this event, the film’s use of framing and positioning suggests that Fleck is not behaving as an insane villain, but simply as a different man—a real man, thanks to toxic masculinity’s commandments. Fleck’s use of violence to cut social ties to the weak and unlikeable (his mother) proves that he’s willing to do everything necessary to cross into toxic manhood, and that he has no desire to hold onto the past or return to the effeminate boyhood from which he came.

Important to note in Fleck’s beatdowns is the underlying perpetuator of male violence as a means to enforce masculinity’s border during assaults: bystander silence. There are easily [dozens, even hundreds of bystanders](#) who watch Fleck chase down the mischievous sign-snatching teens in the film’s opening scene, yet all refuse to respond to his frantic cries for help (Phillips).



Fleck sprints past countless bystanders while crying for help—most don't even spare him a glance.

Similarly, both Randall and Penny's murders were sloppy, with bystanders and vital-monitoring technology witnessing the events. Yet Fleck is never explicitly punished for either crime, projecting that violence is an acceptable solution to one's problems since there are no consequences, all thanks to bystander silence. Scenes such as these are prime examples of how Phillips's film asserts the problematic mentality that guys can act however they please without the risk of being held accountable for their actions—showing young men that they can mirror Fleck's actions to rise from zero to “hero” without any unwanted consequences.

Unfortunately, the Guy Code can easily explain the reluctance of bystanders to stop an assault. Real men don't show weaknesses such as walking away from a situation, stepping forward to stop it, or informing an authority figure of any misdoings. Real men have each other's backs. Guys learn not to tell their teachers, their police force, their parents, to look the other way when lewd remarks are thrown at women. They learn to stay silent. They learn to let immoral behaviors continue unpunished. Weak men remain victims, and the Guy Code lives on.

Phillips's normalization of unopposed violence as a means to solve issues in film feeds into the greater hero film culture which young boys mirror as they mature. This leads to regular, real-life beatdowns in order to assert the hegemonic hierarchy. Thanks to fictional media, persons in power asserting their status over subordinates has become a “natural” process of life. Fleck—and American kids—are simply carrying out society's brutal orders.

While most fictional heroes and villains aren't children, they are no less guilty of asserting a strict hierarchy upon their fictional worlds. Heroes sit atop the social hierarchy by means of using artificial assistance (flight, laser beams, and the likes) to control others. They are, simply put, humanity's best. The everyman stands below them, and villains are the scum of society. Modern elite heroes, according to professor of mental health Dr. Sharon Lamb, are far healthier influences than their comic book counterparts, who were “real people

with real problems and many vulnerabilities.” She classifies two types of modern hero’s masculinity: “slackers,” who are funny but avoid responsibility and exist as sidekicks, and the more socially desirable “players,” who are dominant, stoic, and violent (Lamb). Young boys seeking validation are far more likely to model themselves after the players such as Tony Stark/Iron Man whose persona outside of the super-suit manipulates women, rakes in cash, and demeans others in order to gain confidence, increase his social status, and give ‘em hell.

A character’s physical superpowers often also serve as a metaphor for the power used to put down others deemed as “lesser” by society’s elite. While real people can never hope to supernaturally slow time or breathe fire, they can vicariously live through empowered characters who possess the extraordinary means to subvert others. Most of these heroes are male, and male heroes are almost exclusively muscular, confident, and charismatic. By these standards, skinny, awkward Arthur Fleck should never have been able to transform into a powerful, inspiring figure, and yet he’s managed to win the public over. Although Fleck is completely unremarkable, his willingness to use any means to gain social acclaim is what makes him even more admirable to audiences who are “just like him.” Specifically, these audiences are composed of primarily young men who are still adrift in the turbid sea of masculinity, learning what they’re capable of enacting in order to rise to the top. Joker itself is the story of Fleck’s transformation from an isolationist nobody to a violent, confident player who murders all whom he had once held dear and proudly confesses to his crimes on live television without batting an eyelash. Therefore, Joker serves as a perilous playbook for real boys hoping to transform into players and follow Fleck across toxic masculinity’s border.

“Size Matters”: Homosociality and Hypersexuality

Behind each example of male-male bullying lies an explicit trend—sexual themes. Sex is a point of fixation forced upon men by the media, expressed in Kimmel’s rule number seven: “Size Matters” (45). To develop his sub-par comedic material, Fleck spends his nights watching comedians, from the famous television comic Murray Franklin to other wannabes. Much of the material Fleck watches relies heavily on the use of lewd jokes, such as one male comic who tells a long-winded metaphor about how men view sex like driving and women as a row of spot[s] to park in. “Oh, I have to pay to park here? Never mind,” he jokes, implying that, like a stretch of marked pavement, women have no willpower to decline sex and should be “easy” to sexually access. After he finishes the set, the audience goes wild, whistling and hollering (Phillips).

Yet another comic tells a sexual roleplay story with his wife playing a college student who is “willing to do anything to pass [his ‘class’].” The audience laughs at the comic’s sexual comments, relating his story to their own personal experiences and expectations

in the bedroom. These situations are unfamiliar to Fleck, a virgin and social isolationist. He laughs at all the wrong times during the set, proving that laughing at sex and the objectification of others are not innate tendencies; they're adopted traits enforced by society when crossing toxic masculinity's border. Fleck also earns a few side-eyes for his mis-timed laughter, indicating that there is little tolerance for people who don't live within masculinity's postulates. To show what he's learned that night, Fleck jots a note in large, messy script: "sexy jokes alwaze funny" (Phillips).

Where in society, though, is this pressure to start sexualizing the world coming from? Citizens are bombarded from all angles by the media's sexist and objectifying television shows, movies, product promotions, music, video games, and more. Content from all sides promises happiness once men transition into sexual confidence and dominance. Society depicts men as hypersexual beings who must be physically attractive, and sexually active—standards which assert the Guy Code's emphasis on risk-taking, use of genitalia, and an inflated sense of self-importance. Although Gotham is in an alternate reality, it's safe to say that sex still sells everywhere; its comics, construction workers, and passersby toss around sexualized comments from the film's background. Comedy broadcasts featuring lewd jokes often play on television sets, and audiences applaud while watching men kiss strangers without consent.

As Arthur Fleck's confidence in his newfound social behaviors grows, he himself takes a large leap in the "right direction" regarding virility, having stalked his neighbor for days before arriving at her doorstep to kiss her suddenly without consent. A similar incident happens near the film's conclusion when Fleck (now called Joker) seizes the chin of elderly Murray Franklin Show guest Dr. Sally and [kisses her on live television](#) while she flails her arms, eyes open in surprise, for nearly twenty seconds (Phillips).



Fleck, now called "Joker," forcefully kisses the elderly Doctor Sally on live television, who becomes visibly uncomfortable.

It seems that after crossing masculinity's border, Fleck has taken the other comics' lifestyle advice to heart by asserting dominance over the few females he encounters, in heavy contrast to the awkward virgin he once was. This problematic behavior extends from society's assertion of male virility: a man must be sexually forward, and that he can "have" any woman he wishes. By the film's conclusion, Fleck has successfully pocketed another trait of toxic masculinity—the necessity of dominant virulence—in order to step into toxic masculine territory.

In fact, many real and fictional men carry false or shaky definitions of consent and assault. Eighty-eight percent of men whose actions fit under the legal definition of rape adamantly denied that they had committed that act. This is because men are misled about what exactly constitutes rape. Society teaches them through sexist, brutal pornography and misogynistic music that all women are sexually available and have a sex drive just as high—or even higher—than men's, which is not exclusively true (Katz 27). Men are taught by American culture that women are continuously open to sexual advances regardless of whether they voice a consensual "yes" and are always ready to "take it rough" (reminiscent of the film's joke comparing women to parking spots), which often results in rape or attempted rape.

In America, "less than one percent of rape is committed by women," but rape is classified as a women's issue even though men are the perpetrators. This is because society has normalized hypersexuality as a normal male behavior. As American educator, filmmaker, actor, and advocate Jason Katz explains, "Men are the ones doing most of the battering and almost all of the raping. Men are the ones paying the prostitutes (and killing them in video games), going to strip clubs, renting sexually degrading pornography, [and] writing and performing misogynistic music" (5). American men are praised for a high libido, indicating that "real" men must be sexually dominant in order to cross the border into manhood and earn social praise. These claims carry across to Phillips's *Joker*. No male character is ever sexually degraded or beaten by a woman, and neither woman retaliates after being sexually assaulted by Fleck, normalizing his dominant behavior. Phillips's film is a problematic space for men to wreak havoc on society without consequences.

"It's All Good": Standing Tall like a Sturdy Oak

Perhaps the most famous trait of toxic masculinity is adopting the sturdiness of an oak. A man must remain unemotional and stand tall no matter his circumstances, or as Kimmel recounts, "It's All Good" (45). What sets this rule apart, however, is that Fleck learns this trait during his childhood and therefore exhibits it throughout his time on the screen. It's revealed late in the film that he was abused by his stepfather and neglected by

his own mother, who caused the head trauma behind his medical condition. Because Fleck's own guardians abused him during his childhood, he never learned to trust others enough to lean on them emotionally. Thus, the seeds of Fleck's sturdy oak are well-grown by the time he graces the silver screen.

When asked to share his mental health journal with his social worker (post-triple murder), Fleck's shaking legs and fidgeting fingers express discomfort with the idea of sharing its contents, as he is accustomed to keeping his emotions to himself (Phillips). When she asks Fleck if "it help[s] to have someone to talk to?" he responds with, "I think I felt better when I was locked up in the hospital." The scene cuts abruptly to a clip of straight-jacketed Fleck [beating his head against the walls](#) of an isolation ward (Phillips). This brief statement implies that even at the height of Fleck's sickness he was never cared for by others, but instead locked in seclusion.



Fleck beats his head forcefully against the glass window of his isolation ward cell's door in Arkham Asylum.

In real-world America, males experience a lack of medical care as well. The average man perishes five years before the average woman as reported by the CDC, but physiological differences don't explain this discrepancy. According to a study of 250 participants conducted by psychology professors Himmelstein and Sanchez, men who held 'traditional beliefs' about masculinity were more likely to put off the confrontation of medical issues, compared with women or men who held less traditional beliefs (Himmelstein and Sanchez). Traditional beliefs included being "tough, brave, self-reliant, and restrained in expression of emotion." Fleck is one of these men, exhibiting reluctance to share his journal's many dark thoughts about death and depression with his social worker, which prevents her from properly helping him to improve his health. This scene contains just one example of the

postulates Fleck has been forced to adopt in order to cross toxic masculinity's border: "It's all good" (Kimmel 45).

In the film's early scenes, even after running out of medicine and losing a paycheck for his busted sign, Fleck still soothes his mother's worries. He reasons that "everybody's telling me that my stand-up is ready for the big clubs" (when he hadn't yet performed a single joke), following up with "I don't want you worrying about money, Mom, or me" (Phillips). Fleck's tendency to lie about his financial situation, mental health, and career progress are indicative of his desire to keep up appearances and admit no weakness, even to those whom he should trust. He cries in secret, hides his bruises, and quite literally paints on a happy face for work every day to keep the world unaware of his internal despondency. However, Fleck's façade does slip at times. He is seen shooting himself in the head with finger guns throughout the film, and even places his loaded pistol's barrel into his mouth in a moment of despair. While folded delicately in his kitchen chair, Fleck records a rightly telling note in his journal: "The worst part about having a mental illness is people expect you to behave as if you DON'T" (Phillips).

And Fleck is far from alone. Boys who develop depression are far less likely to seek treatment than their female counterparts. Why? Because real men don't cry. A plethora of psychologists argue that from an early age, boys are taught to stow away their emotions and never display weakness. As a result, boys feel effeminate not only if they express emotions, but even if they only feel any at all (Kimmel 53). For men, there is socially sourced shame in sadness and in showing emotional vulnerability. These feelings are left to fester until a man cannot bear his burden any longer. In the United States, eighty percent of suicide deaths are males according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Holmes).

Who's Enforcing the Border: The Gender Police

It's important to note that without social pressure, masculinity would be noticeably more diverse. Who, then, is moderating young guys' behaviors? It turns out, nearly all males have become the self-employed gender police. Teachers, coaches, strangers, and—most importantly—a guy's own bros observe and judge his behavior. If a guy didn't have physical strength or stoicism, he wasn't deemed a man, and his peers made sure he knew it by either taunts, physical assaults, or barefaced exclusion from activities.

Although Fleck's educational background is unclear, he does fall victim to the gender police as an adult several times throughout the film. In the film's early stages, Fleck is personally brought up onto the stage during a taping of *The Murray Franklin Show* after yelling "[I love you, Murray!](#)" and explaining that his own purpose in life is also to make others laugh (Phillips). Franklin then tells Fleck that he'd be a great son to have and hugs him affectionately. But when Fleck finally attempts to perform his own comedy set in a nightclub, video clips of it wind up on the same comedian's television show. [Franklin introduces Fleck](#) this time as "a guy who thinks if you just keep laughing, it'll somehow make you funny" and not only plays into the masculine urge to ignore the possibility of illness (considering Fleck looks pained in the tapes) but also makes a mockery of Fleck's aspirations, teasing that this is "in a world where everyone thinks they could do my job" (Phillips).

Franklin thoroughly mocks Fleck, comparing the clown to himself in order to demean Fleck and boost his own public opinion. This change in behavior is brought about when Fleck attempts to ascend the social ladder from audience member to competitor, illustrating the masculine urge to uphold the male hierarchy. Franklin's opinion of Fleck turns from sweet to sour, his scorn pushing Fleck back into his place—outside of masculinity's walls.

Additionally, billionaire Thomas Wayne (who Fleck mistakes as his biological father from his mother's lobotomy-driven illusions) treats Fleck in a similar manner. When Fleck dons an employee outfit and sneaks into a high-class film premiere, the affluent audience spares him no glances, even staring straight through him when he walks down into the aisle. This is because Fleck is perceived as a lowly server who is of no threat to them, and especially not to Thomas Wayne. When Fleck follows Wayne into the bathroom, the mogul looks straight past him at first (Phillips). As Fleck approaches, Wayne entertains his story with an amused expression and light laughter until it calls the billionaire's social reputation into question. Once Fleck doubles down on his claim that Thomas Wayne is his father, however, Wayne's demeanor changes. He begins interrupting Fleck as if to prevent socially injurious words from even escaping into the air and offers Fleck a bribe to keep him away from the glittering Wayne family reputation. When that approach doesn't work, however, Thomas Wayne takes the familiar masculine approach and socks Fleck in the nose before quickly leaving the room. Yet again, Fleck is beaten down by a male moderator with higher social status who wants nothing to do with a poor, unsuccessful social recluse.

It's Not All Good: Some Borders Shouldn't be Crossed

If "weak" men like Arthur Fleck weren't forced to march across the border into toxic masculinity to earn a place in society, the world would be a safer place. There would be fewer rape cases based on the blurry line of consent and dominant masculine positioning. There would be fewer male suicides in the United States from years of severe emotional isolation. Boys in schoolyards and sidewalks wouldn't have to limp home after being assaulted by teammates in the name of "manning up." Some borders are not meant to be crossed, and Arthur Fleck is a superlative example of the burdensome behavioral toll paid by unmasculine men when crossing into toxic masculinity.

Although Fleck glows with confidence and self-satisfaction when leading Gotham's underdogs as Joker, viewers behind the screen can recognize that he has become a violent, lewd, dangerous isolationist. He is a perfect villain. However, simply recognizing toxic masculinity in films like Joker isn't enough; we must learn to recognize these films' negative impact on America's real-life young men. Hero films are a staple of American culture, and young boys developing their identities look to these heroes (and sometimes, villains) to determine how to act and what to value. Therefore, Phillips's Joker is only one instance within a genre that's hindering toxic masculinity's real-world abolishment. We must strive to provide better examples of masculinity to America's boys; to provide a safe space for every man in society: one without the pressure to cross borders into toxic masculinity's dangerous territory.

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