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## Final Master's Portfolio

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# **FINAL MASTER'S PORTFOLIO**

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

with specialization in Literary & Textual Studies

April 27, 2023

Dr. Bill Albertini, First reader

Ms. Kimberly Spallinger, Second reader

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### **Analytical Narrative**

By the time I started the MA in Literary and Textual Studies program at Bowling Green State University in the fall of 2021, I had a clear idea of why I was beginning the journey to obtaining a graduate degree. Prior to enrolling at BGSU, I completed an English Literature major college degree in 2018 and had stints working in the media and literary publishing industries in my country, Nigeria. My professional experience exposed me to new trends in African and postcolonial literary and expressive artifacts, which have been influenced greatly by digital globalism. By applying for a graduate degree, I wanted to expand my academic knowledge of literature and apply my practical industry knowledge in academia. In the course of the last four semesters, I have had the privilege of taking courses and learning from professors whose diverse expertise has improved my own knowledge of different literary, critical, and cultural theories. I have been exposed to new texts and received training in critical practice that has expanded my existing knowledge of textual and literary analysis, including postcolonial discourse. I have drawn from my engagement with various bodies of knowledge I have been exposed to in various classes I have taken. This portfolio reflects the culmination of the interests I have nurtured over the last four semesters.

A consistent thread across the four papers I showcase in this portfolio is my overarching interest in the story of the oppressed vis-a-vis imperialism. I have endeavored to explore this interest in such areas as African and African Diaspora Studies, African popular culture, Critical Race Theory, and Postcolonial Studies in literature and film. Over the last four semesters, I have taken courses in Indigenous Films and Literature, Black Studies and Performance, as well as in Global Capitalism, in order to have deep knowledge of underlying factors that frame skewed relationships that exist between human groups, whose identities, races, gender, sexuality and class place them in different and unequal zones of power. In this regard, I am grateful to the Literary and Textual Studies program for allowing me to take

courses outside the department. This has allowed me to have a more expansive scope to study my interest in the story of oppression. I will be including one of the papers I wrote in the two courses I took outside of the department in my portfolio.

The first piece in the portfolio comes from the final paper I wrote for the course offered through the Department of Theater and Film in spring 2022: THFM 6700: Contemporary Black Theater and Performance taught by Dr. Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson. In the course, we surveyed dramatic texts and performances by Black authors and performers who published or staged their works since 2010. The timeframe was set to track the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter, Trumpism, as well as the re-emergence of postcolonial theory as an appropriate critical theory to understand the renewed spike in racism in the wake of Trump. In this piece, therefore, I engage Black performance theory to read Aleasha Harris's play, *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* (2016) as a legitimate, contemporary example of plays written in the lynching drama tradition. The lynching drama concerns itself thematically with racial violence that Black people face in America. To properly situate Harris's work in the lynching drama tradition, I rely on Koritha Mitchell's study of the lynching drama tradition, which emerged in the late 19th century as a Black creatives' response to the real-life lynching of their people in America. I argue that *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* pays homage to memories of Black people killed via racial violence and at the same time implicates American theater's complicity in that violence.

My aim in this paper is to connect Harris' play to an established tradition of Black dramatic texts, and in so doing, reflect how Black authors have always responded to historical oppression faced by African Americans. Of all the papers I am including in this portfolio, this paper made the greatest demand of me during the revision process. Because I was trying to situate a contemporary text in an old tradition, I needed to conduct a historical survey. I, therefore, had trouble with the structure of the paper initially. With the feedback I got from

Dr. Forbes-Erickson, I was able to restructure the paper to indicate my thesis, placing emphasis on the connections I endeavor to make between, on the one hand, Harris's work and lynching drama and, on the other hand, the American theatre and the racial violence visited on Black people. I, therefore, structured the paper into three broad sections to reflect those points. Also, unlike the original draft, I try to make Harris's work an instance of contemporary lynching work, rather than a defining example of lynching drama.

The second piece in the portfolio is taken from ENG 6800: Indigenous Films and Literature offered through the Literary and Textual Studies program. Taught by Dr. Khani Begum in the fall of 2021, this course represented my first exposure to the literary and film practices of the Indigenous people of North America. I was pleasantly surprised by some similarities in the creative responses of the Indigenous artists and that of African and postcolonial artists I had knowledge of. Hence in this piece, titled, "Contesting Image-making: A Postcolonial Reading of Indigenous Film Practice," I explore the utility of postcolonial theory to study a representative film, *Smoke Signals*, by an Indigenous director, Chris Eyre. I argue that since postcolonial theory examines responses of marginalized or dominated groups to imperial power, it can be used to analyze *Smoke Signal* and other works by Indigenous artists. This approach allows for the explication of unequal power dynamics that are reflected in the media and other cultural artifacts with which a dominant group—in this regard, America—suppresses the voices of dominated group. In revising this piece, I owe a debt of gratitude to my portfolio's first reader, Dr. Bill Albertini, who offered very helpful constructive criticism and suggestions for the overall intent of the paper. Initially, I did not properly account for the very defining importance of settler colonialism in the experience of Indigenous people and how this would have shaped their creative responses. Giving attention to that factor has enriched my analysis.

I have taken my third and fourth pieces from *Eerie Capitalism: Searching for an Exit in the 21st Century*, taught by Dr. Phil Dickinson in the fall of 2022. This course has been very helpful in my understanding of global capitalism. Structured around late British professor Mark Fisher's works, especially *Capitalist Realism*, the course has helped my ability to articulate how capitalism or neoliberalism has largely tricked people into believing there could be no alternative to capitalism. The central question throughout the class is: could there be a way out of the capitalist trap? In my third piece, titled "Capitalism, Consumerism, and Lost Individual Identity in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*," I read Alexandra Kleeman's novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, to explore how neoliberalism, which Mark Fisher says is the dominant form of capitalism this century, aims to erase individual identities and shape our consumerist behaviors. I also use insight from the social democracy group, Plan C, especially their articulation of the dominant affect of capitalism, to explore how capitalism has fostered anxiety about the precarious state of our living conditions in the 21st in order to condition us to disbelieve any alternative to it. I establish Kleeman's unnamed major characters' excessive attachment to TV commercials and reliance on large franchise grocery stores as instances of capitalist consumerist trap, which has enough enchantments to distract the characters' from their immediate problems or from imagining solutions to them. In revising this work, I took the suggestion by Dr. Albertini that I could switch the arrangement of the essay title to properly capture my thesis. Initially, I had titled the essay, "*You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine: Capitalism, Consumerism and Lost Individual Identities*." Additionally, unlike the previous drafts, I take time to engage concepts I have taken from Mark Fisher and Plan C, foregrounding their utility and connections to my analysis.

The fourth and final paper in my portfolio comes from one of the position papers I wrote for the *Eerie Capitalism* class. In the paper, "What Capitalism Always Obstructs," I

examine the unfinished work of Mark Fisher, *Acid Communism*, in which he argues that what should concern the Left is what capitalism prevents them from having, which is essentially freedom of choice. I am particularly concerned about the applicability of Fisher's idea to the African context, so I read his central argument to reflect on the various instances of capitalist programs in Africa since the 1960s. Particularly, I zero in on the effect of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) on the continent, and how they represent the use of subtle threats and prevention of alternatives by capitalism. Not only have SAPs and other capitalist programs caused an end to welfarist programs on the continent, but they have also exacerbated acute socio-economic problems, including poverty, and lack of access to good education and health care. Yet, capitalism has driven the continent's political leaders into a rabbit hole they could not get out of, hence their inability to conceive of an alternative to capitalism. Furthermore, I establish the recent dominance of multinational music and video streaming companies in Africa, as an instance of how capitalism squeezes out alternative and ultimately render old traditions less fancy to both producers and consumers of cultural artifacts. To ground my point, I rely on Fisher's analysis of the phenomenon of the crackles in Western musical canons. Meanwhile, the major revision I have made to this essay is in the provision of specific examples to support my claims. For instance, I have included some film producers in the Nigerian film industry to show how their works deconstruct the notion that only films that reflect upper-class sensibilities could thrive in the global market in the present time.

The four pieces I have selected reflect my engagements with texts and cultural artifacts that explore the concept of power, identity, oppression, and imperialism as they relate to Africa and Indigenous cultures. I have been most interested in the nuanced critical responses to continuing Western imperial dominations by contemporary Black/African and Indigenous artists, writers, and filmmakers. I have also been interested in the effect of global



capitalism on young people in the 21st century, hence my inclusion of the work of the American novelist, Alexandra Kleeman. The interests I have pursued here will continue to frame my graduate school experience as I proceed to a doctoral program in the fall of 2023. I am thus grateful for having been exposed to discourses and teaching that have expanded my knowledge and deepened my curiosity about the oppression that has been compounded and complicated by global capitalism.

### **Racial Violence and Lynching Plays' Implication of American Theater**

In the author's note to *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* (subsequently referred to in this essay as *What to Send Up*), African-American playwright Aleasha Harris states that the play "uses parody and absurdity to confront, affirm and celebrate" and that the goal is "healing through expression, expulsion and movement" (6). Harris's intention in the play becomes clear in its first movement where it is quickly established that the play is a ritualized performance that will confront the disturbing fact stated by Character Four that "Black people in America are twice more than likely to be killed by the police than white people" (7). In this essay, I engage with how Harris makes use of ritual drama so as to pay homage to the collective memories of black bodies violently killed in racially motivated terror and also implicate American theatrical—and wider societal—complicity in providing historical motivation for that terror. In order to aid my engagement, I will explore the connection between American theater and the rise of racial violence against Black people, drawing upon Black people and Black writers' varied responses to the violence. This history helps to elucidate why Harris has resorted to a dramatization of what Harvey Young describes as the "collective Black critical memory" (6) of violence so as to question the continuing racialization of Black bodies. *What to Send Up* thus recalls the lynching play tradition in its examination of the racist violence in the embodied Black experience in America.

Harris's dramatic approach allows her to confront pervasive anti-Blackness and at the same time raises the question of American theater's responsibilities for its historical complicity in the proliferation of ideas that inform the violent racialization of Black people. There are intimations in the play that American theater is complicit as much as any medium that has historically curated negative images of Blackness to the extent that even some unsuspecting Black people now internalize self-hatred of themselves and what they represent. Those images and their negative significations have been so mythologized to the point of

them being taken as a natural, automatic representation of Blackness, and inform to a large degree, the justification of racialized violence against Black bodies. It is also in the context of this false depiction that *What to Send Up* represents a form of a theatricalized instance of bell hooks' loving Blackness, a revolutionary and decolonized attitude that seeks to foreground Blackness and repudiate victimized self-hatred (10). hooks notes that loving blackness is a form of political resistance "which transforms our way of looking and being, and thus creates the condition necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (2). One cannot, therefore, overlook the socio-political and economic undertones of the racial projections to which Black people are subjected in America, and how theatrical performance has over the years aided those projections. Works by Black playwrights such as Harris help to demonstrate that Black artists, just like Black civil rights activists, have always resisted racist projection of their people

While the idea of sending up might connote a lighthearted performance, *What to Send Up* is anything but a comic play. From the first movement, the serious nature of the ritual of remembrance that frames the world of the play cannot be missed. A ritual of remembrance or ritualized remembering in the context of the play happens when a character names a dead Black person, and states their personal details, as well as the circumstance of their death. It is the circumstance of their death—racial violence—that binds all the dead people mentioned in the play. A circle is formed by the characters in the play, and each character takes turns to name and details a Black person killed through racial violence. Significantly, members of the audience are invited to join in this ritual performance. Meanwhile, the act of naming and recalling the nature of death creates the somber mood of the play. In this regard, the audience is immediately pulled into the action from the get-go as the second character that speaks, Character Two, informs them they have come, actors and audience, to engage in a ritualized re-membering of unjustly killed Black people in America. This ritual, as well as the play

being enacted, is not going to be the normalized performance in which the actors will be at the mercy of the audience's (most stage performance audiences in America are dominated by white people) gaze. No, both the audience and the actors will carry out “a ritual honoring those lost to racist violence” (8).

There is a clear intent to expose what is the root cause of the needless death of Black people in America in this play's world: violence fueled by racism. There is also a strong resolve not to mince words about this subject which represents an existential threat to the Black community. In the play's first movement, after the first few acts of ritualized remembering, Character Two, who is leading the procession, notes: “The people are coming before it is the day after or the day before it has gone down,” and he adds, so as to clear any ambiguity as to what they mean, “You know what I mean by ‘it,’ right?” The character continues: “It equals a terrible thing/ Some bang-bang thing/ Some wrong color thing/ The shit that don't stop/ Since it don't stop/ We are always before or after it goes down.../ It happened yesterday and it will happen tomorrow/ We find ourselves between the happenings” (9). Thereafter, the character begins to give concrete details of this terrible “bang-bang” violence as it happened in 1900, in 1916, and also in 1919; the audience should know, as anyone aware of racial relations in America should know that this violence has persisted to this day.

George Floyd's murder in 2020 caused universal consternation because we all had a visceral experience of it thanks to the magic of social media. Apart from Floyd's, other notable deaths that resulted in protest over the last decade included Trayvon Martin (2012), Freddie Gray, Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Walter Scott (2015), Alton Sterling (2016), Philando Castile (2016), Stephen Clark (2018), Breonna Taylor (2020) and Daunte Wright (2021). Yet, we know, as Character Two reminds us, that this terrible thing still somehow strangely persists and affects more nameless numbers than

what the media fix attention on. According to a report published in March 2022 on NBC News by Curtis Bunn, “After all the attention the Black Lives Matter-led racial justice movement generated after George Floyd’s death in 2020, new data show that the number of Black people killed by police has actually increased over the last two years.” The report also states that despite the fact that Blacks represent 13 percent of the American population, they accounted for about 27 percent of the number of people shot and killed by the police in 2021. There is therefore a deliberate invocation of history and statistics in *What to Send Up* to foreground the underlying racial dimension in the exposure of Black people to violence in America. There is an unmistakable urgency in how the play engages its subject in both the tone and language, which are meant to cause a visceral understanding of the collective pains of Black people in America. The ultimate aim of this ritual remembering is to lead to a cathartic moment for both Black and non-Black communities, which is significant when we think of the dynamics of theater patronage in America.

### **American Theater and Racial Violence**

It is necessary to reflect on the connection between American theater and the rise of racialized violence against African Americans. Koritha Mitchel argues that although American theater historians often neglect its close relationship with racialized violence committed against Black people, African American—especially those who lived at the height of lynching terror between 1880 to 1930—never failed to note how the U.S stage was instrumental in the legitimatization of violence against Black bodies (88). In other words, while American theater has historically had connections with activities that encourage racialized violence against black people, there has been a rather curious reluctance to come to terms with this reality. Yet, Black people, who are at the receiving end of racial terror, have never at any time failed to recognize the apparent linkage between racial terror they suffer in America and the use of American theater to instigate that terror. Depictions of Blackness and

Black people in American theater, as well as other media, have historically been steeped in racist imagery, that has shifted from benign foolery that could be tolerated to dangerous beasts that should be violently tamed. Undeniably both extreme forms of depiction—mild fools and dangerous beasts—set the stage for the othering of Black people to violent attacks. Mitchel argues that “Stereotypical depictions of blacks as submissive uncles, vacuous buffoons, or uncivilized brutes [has] helped create an atmosphere conducive to racial violence” (89). She continues that, “there was already mainstream agreement that blacks were not citizens: indeed they were labeled uncivilized, but their presence could (initially) be tolerated as long as they were considered harmless” (94).

The initial dominant mainstream portrayal of Black People as ludicrous, almost harmless Uncle Toms and sub-humans only fit for slavery and as tradable chattel began to shift as soon as their Black presence became to be seen as a threat. As Robert Hornback argues, blackness had been associated with “folly, madness, and an absence of that divine gift, the ‘light’ of reason,” preparing grounds for the justification of violent actions against black bodies (49). Once Blacks were declared emancipated, supremacist white people who no longer had financial loss inhibitions resorted to lynching as a way to check the political, social, and economic ascendancy of Black people during the Reconstruction era. Needless to say, the moment Black people’s freedom began to be construed as possible threats to the White population, they became “beasts that must be killed” (Mitchel 94). As negative attitudes shared towards Black people grew from being seen as mere buffoons to dangerous creatures, it also became easier for racist ideas that could encourage violence to be portrayed in the theater. Downess argues that “The theatrical stage as a cultural institution has been a source of unsubstantiated truth-making. White constructions of blackness formed onstage became stereotypes, traveled across the country and internationally and accepted as truth by audiences” (185).

Another important point in the linkage between American theater and Black lynching is the move toward realism. American theater's move to realism was roughly coeval with a rise in white supremacist feelings of the threat posed by Black people. Mitchel notes that "American realist dramas emerged alongside the spectacle of lynching" (96). Both events were engaged in a mutual exchange of ideas and motivations that resorted to racialized violence against Black people. It was also in this period that the nexus between theater and racialized violence was firmly established; that is to say, American theater responded to the prevailing feelings of its White patrons to begin to characterize Black people not as harmless misfits of society, but as a real threat to purported American ideals that were based on White supremacist ideas. Mitchel brilliantly captures the appropriation of the theater in the formation of an idealized Americanness: "As more and more critics made claims about theater's potential to galvanize citizens and distinguish the nation from England, much American theater's mode relied on the mainstream audience's aversion to blackness – which was intensified as photographs of lynch victims circulated" (96).

White Americans' desire to chart unique national and cultural identity away from England curiously saw Blackness as an ontological pest that must be rid of. Plays performed on the American theater stage responded to this desire by depicting Blackness in a negative light and Black people as barbaric, just like European explorers' journals had misrepresented Black Africans and Africa as devoid of civilization and thus beneath the social hierarchy relative to White people. Trudier Harris notes that the ritualistic nature of White Americans' desire to get rid of Black people was a sort of rite of exorcism (268). The lynching of Black people consequently became justified as a patriotic will to rid putatively white America of Blackness.

An explicit connection between the American stage and lynching of Blacks as a patriotic duty for white Americans was arguably first established by Thomas Dixon Jr. Dixon

took advantage of the new threatening identity ascribed to Blackness to rewrite his white supremacist novel, *The Clansman* (1905), into a play which he successfully staged across the country (Mitchel 90). Dixon's play was one of the earliest in which themes, characterization, and symbols that suggested racial violence as the solution to the purported threat of Black men against white women, white families, and the nation (conceived as white) were established. Mitchel's argument about the emergence of Dixon's play at the same time when William Dean Howells and others championed the development of a distinctive American stage realism is quite useful to see how Black people became collateral damage in both the states and real life in the quest for unique American national identity. There is thus the mutual exchange of white supremacist ideas between the stage and life in the racialization of violence meted out to Black people.

While lynchers attracted audiences and their violence followed familiar scripts, mainstream playwrights dramatized American identity as one of heroic self-determination, and as they did so, they marked "true Americans" most often denying black citizenship and black humanity, producing scenarios, images and discourses not unlike those disseminated by the mob. (95)

Thus, "real-life lynching incidents provided the perfect mixture of danger, passion, and triumph with which to elaborate the uniquely American narrative of white bravery versus black barbarity" (Mitchel 95). Framing racialized animosity towards Black people in the guise of the difference between White civilization and Black barbarism created an ambiance conducive to violence against African Americans. White people who meted out this violence could hide behind a seemingly heroic compulsion to safeguard their civilization, basically, a White-ruled nation.

There were times when the lines between real-life lynchings and theatrical enactment blurred. In those instances, theater stages were coopted into the act of violence against Black



bodies. An account by Rober Zangrando (1980) revealed how a black man, Will Porter, was tied to a stage in which his body was “riddled with one hundred bullets by mob members who purchased tickets to participate” (6). It is estimated that over three thousand black men, women and children were lynched across the United States between 1880 and 1930. In one such gruesome episode of the violent lynching act in which a Black man, Sam Hose, was burnt alive in 1899 in Newman, Georgia, “approximately two thousand white men, women, and children participated, as both witnesses and active agents” (Young 167). Jacquelyn Dowd Hall suggests that there is a theatrical essence of lynching acts against Blacks and that reports of the incidents were not only graphically written but contained details like the obligatory accusation, usually that of rape of white woman, in order to increase attendance in subsequent episodes (Hall 335).

The theatricality of such heinous violence drew in crowds but also reflected the blurring lines between reality and dramatized fiction that American theater at the time purportedly staged. This particular close similarity shared by the stage and life, including the actual use of the art stage to carry out lynching, has been named lynchcraft, which explains the bizarre artistry that was attached to the whole process of lynching of Black people (Dray 214). Grisly violence against Black people thus strangely served both entertainment and economic purpose for the white community. As Deborah Barnes explains,

By the 1890s, lynchings had become a social distraction for white, a form of grisly public entertainment....it is also worth noting that the trend of spectacle lynching opened a niche for financially viable opportunities. Events that were perceived as appalling elsewhere proved serendipitous to local whites who were able to profit financially from the eruptions of mob rule. (280)

Apart from the selling of lynching paraphernalia, including hanging noose, fuel, bullets, and even food, a noticeable draw to the lynching spectacle was the possibility of getting lynching

keepsakes or souvenirs which were the mutilated body parts of lynched Blacks that were competitively bid for (Young 175). Also, the lynching episodes were an economic boon to the telegraph and newspaper owners, who respectively notified lawmen about the accused's whereabouts and printed graphic details of the whole lynching process, from the accusatory stage to public chase and humiliation. Life and art have thus bled into each other in the unfortunate lynching incident that has continued to plague Black lives in America.

### **Lynching Plays and Response to Historical Moments**

Harris' authorial note and play text firmly link her play to a sturdy tradition of committed black-authored theatrical works, which, according to Koritha Mitchell, recognizes the responsive nature of drama to historical moments (88). Plays that fall into this tradition have been described as lynching plays due to their preoccupations with the nature and acts of lynching violence that Black people in America have historically been victims of. They also reiterate the fact that Black writers, as have been suggested earlier, recognize the culpability of art (in the case of this paper, the theater) in the racially motivated violence against them. For Judith Stephens, lynching plays “function as a dynamic cultural text by both conserving the memory of this particular form of racial violence and continuing to evolve as a theatrical genre on the American stage” (4).

In dramatizing historical moments, Black-authored lynching plays project a vision that aims to cause change and conversations beyond the world of the theater. That is why at the heart of these plays is an unmistakable desire to identify the root cause of violence against Black people: racism. Although a social construct, race has correctly been defined as a master category as its impact mutates relative to different historical circumstances and is it is in constant formation or iteration (Omi and Winnat 125). For Black people in America, the racialization of their skin and origin has come with fatal consequences and has historically impacted their place within American society. Lynching plays are steeped in the recognition

of the roles race and racial relations have played in America with respect to the embodied Black experience.

According to Mitchell, “Because African Americans were attuned to the power that theatricality lent to the mob when black authors began writing lynching plays, they continued the tradition of exposing the ways in which theater and lynching worked together to conceal evidence of black humanity and achievements” (91). For African American intellectuals and playwrights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the relatedness of violence against Black people and the theater was apparent. As suggested by Michel, while American theater history might overlook the foundational role of Dixon and his works on American theater especially as they negatively framed and exposed Blackness to danger, recontextualizing Angelina Weld Grimké’s play *Rachel* not just as a response to the film D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* but also as a theatrical rejoinder to Dixon’s *The Clansman* would bring to light the connection that Black playwrights and intellectuals saw between violence against their people and the American theater (94).

Grimké had written her play at the behest of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which advocated for artistic responses from Blacks to the racist portrayal of Black people in *Birth of a Nation*. The medium — drama to be staged — through which Grimké wrote her play makes it a necessary counterpoint to Dixon’s work, which had enjoyed tremendous success among white audiences. Moreover, Grimké’s artistic effort at this time also inaugurated the tradition of lynching plays by Black playwrights. The NAACP noted that her play was “the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relating to the lamentable condition of ten million Colored citizens in this free republic” (Lehman and Brehm 272). While it is easy for mainstream “white” scholarship to gloss over the role played by white-dominated theater space in the prevalence of violence against Blackness, this fact has not always been lost to

Black artists and perhaps increasingly Black critics. Apart from Grimke, another notable example of lynching drama, especially in its earliest development as a form of artistic critique of racially motivated violence against Black people, is Alice Dunbar Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. A one-act script, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* captures the general ambiance of terror that Black people lived through at the height of the lynching episodes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mitchell observes that the play "proves representative of the cultural work that lynching drama accomplished" (26) during this period. Generally, lynching plays at this point aimed to present as much a realistic portrayal of racial violence being suffered by African Americans.

Harris's *What to Send Up* shares a historical and thematic kinship with previous lynching plays in the way it utilizes theatrical performance to engage the subject of the racially motivated killings of Black lives. However, it does through an unconventional approach by breaking the fourth wall, pulling the audience into the action, and in the process, symbolically appealing to the conscience of the American public. This is quite significant in light of the fact that the American theater audience is mostly peopled by white Americans. In *What Send Up*, there is also a recognition of the possibility that the mostly white theater patrons might feel uncomfortable and perhaps conflicted at the sight of an unabashedly Black truism being enacted on stage. Character Two, therefore, offers, "If at any point during this ritual, you find that you don't want to do anything that's being asked of you, please step out of the circle. We only ask you that you don't disrupt those participating in any way" (8).

Harris' unfiltered espousal of the embodied black experience is quite important given the prevailing nature and politics that undergird American theater, where there is a disproportionate access to opportunities between White artists and Black artists. Black artists who must have a slice of access have sometimes needed to dilute their artistic vision in order to fit a white grand narrative. However, blunting one's vision in order to fit a set narrative is

intrinsically self-harming for Black communities. According to hooks, the process of loving Blackness involves taking on responsibility for helping other Black folks to decolonize their minds (19). This process has historically been fraught with the impending danger of being cast as being confrontational or seen as a separatist in a prevailing atmosphere that purports a colorblind nation. However, as hooks notes, “challenged to rethink, insurgent black intellectuals and/or artists are looking at new ways to write and talk about race and representation, working to transform the image” (2) of Black people in America. She had earlier quoted the African playwright Sembene Ousmane, who explained that for Black artists around the world, there are no such things as models. We are called upon to create models. For African people, Africans in the diaspora, it is pretty much the same. Colonialism means we must always rethink everything” (hook 2). This encapsulates the artistic and thematic preoccupation of Harris in *What to Send Up*. Succumbing to what is taken as the standard convention invariably means succumbing to the white theatrical convention.

Whereas barefaced public lynching appears to have abated over the years, it is unquestionable that police killing of Black people has replaced that act of terror to an equally terrifying degree. The cold composure with which Derek Chauvin continued to knee press George Floyd’s neck despite Floyd’s plea that he could not breathe lingers. This raises the question: if there is sadist pleasure derived by the police officers from seeing Black folks struggle for life as they – the police officers – take them through the worst possible death throes. In most of the instances of police killings that have been captured on videos, there seems to be a repetition of the same pattern of behaviors. For example, there is the unfeeling white police officer who continues to press hard on the neck of a Black guy, who struggles for breath and faintly begs: I can’t breathe. Also, there is also the popular image or video of the police officer who still shoots at the Black guy, despite the Black guy’s already hands up. All these repeated patterns points to the theatricality of the performance of violence against

Black people that goes back to the lynching era. The ultimate intention is to get the Black communities to cower into submissiveness and behave themselves in a non-threatening manner to the White community.

Additionally, the influence of race in these episodes and in the events leading up to them could not unfortunately be overlooked. Recently, a video of two young boys—one, phenotypically Black, the other seemingly White due to his skin—engaging in a brawl at a Bridgewater Mall trended on the microblogging site, Twitter. It is clear from the video shown online that the light-skinned boy was the aggressor, as viewers could see the other boy standing first apart from him, while they exchanged words. However, as soon as they got involved in a kerfuffle, two White police officers—one male, the other female—came out of nowhere and pounced on the Black boy. Viewers could initially think they were trying to restrain the boys from fighting by first restraining the Black boy and then the other boy, but no. Once they could get hold of the Black Boy, they let the light skin boy off, did not bother to speak to him, but continued to restrain the Black boy in a typical police ground chokehold, until they were able to handcuff the young boy. Strangely in the video, the light-skinned, seemingly White boy held out his own hands too to the police, perhaps thinking he would be arrested too since he had begun the fight. He was ignored. According to a report of the event by an online news magazine, *New Jersey Advance Media*, on February 21, 2022, the apparently White boy, “Joseph, 15, is Colombian and Pakistani and says he’s ‘not white.’” The report further quoted him saying: “I don’t understand why they arrested him and not me. I say that was just plain old racist. I don’t condone that at all. As I said, I even offered to get arrested.”

What underscores the different treatment that the phenotypically Black boy received at the hands of the police goes back to the racialization of Black skin. Frantz Fanon clinically examines this phenomenon in his essay, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” where he

reflects on the construction of a Black person's identity by the other (white person) shaped by both history and especially influenced by the Black person's visible phenotypic features. Fanon vividly captures the fragmentation of the Black self, as he is made an object among other objects through the process of interpellation - where he is hailed or picked out and then treated with both fear and scorn. Fanon notes that having been burdened by a history of slavery, colonization, and others, the Black body loses its body schema, "giving way to an epidermal racial schema" (1). This way, his skin is inscribed with negative meanings and made to answer years of historical misrepresentation such as evil and violence. This explains why the Black-skinned boy could be thought of as the guilty one, without any benefit of the doubt.

More so, unlike any other group, a Black person has no place to hide their epidermal features and therefore they are not only slaves to the ideas constructed for them by White supremacy. Invariably, the lived experience of blackness is shaped by the White gaze. The inscription of meanings onto the Black skin and the continued policing of those meanings by the White gaze are fundamental to racialized violence that affronts the humanity of Black people in America. Harvey Young has noted that "the inscriptions of meaning onto the Black skin racializes the black body and exposes it to violence" (17). He also describes the mechanism beyond the racial policing that the White gaze underpins. He calls this mechanism "the racializing look," which he says "announced, not only repeats but also transforms the (the boy into a man!), dislocates, imprisons, and objectifies" (2). There is a clear connection between the experience of the Black person that Young is describing here and that of Fanon more than fifty years earlier. The lived experience of black people continues to be shaped by the white gaze. Both Young and Fanon have examined this experience across different generations apart from their personal experience of it. Such experience is not exclusive to them but shared in varying degrees "among the majority of

recognizably black bodies, both male and female who live an objectified existence within the Western world” (Young 4).

Young’s examination of the relatedness of the Black experience in the formation of phenomenal blackness (12) allows for the reading of Harris’ play in the way it interrogates the relationship between racial violence and ritualized critical memory. As conceived by Young, critical memory is the act of reflecting upon and sharing recollections of embodied black experience (19). In Harris’s play, this is done by naming and detailing of Black lives killed by racial violence. This shows how embodied black experience is steeped in the complex racialization of black bodies that Frantz Fanon remarked had been grafted with objectifying significations that not only interpellated the Black person but also exposed them to violence (2).

There is a need to situate the seemingly different ways that Black bodies might have experienced racialization in the context of racial misrecognition that underlies those varying experiences. Phenomenal Blackness according to Young depends on racial misrecognition, and “although black bodies vary, thus preventing them from having exactly the same experience, the similarities in how they are seen and see themselves constitute a relatable experience of the body” (14). What constitutes the black body —as a defining singularizing experience of phenomenal blackness — depends on a racializing or announced look from the white gaze which refuses to see actual black bodies differently from one another. This sinister look causes black bodies of varying size, age, sex, and other categorization to be compelled to the same compulsory visibility or surveillance within the United States. It is the fatal consequence of this experience that informs the ritualized performativity that *What to Send Up* dramatizes.

The play relies on critical memory, which, Young explains, influences the process of group socialization and habitus (Young 20). It is also important to pay attention to how it



informs behavioral patterns and attitudes, especially in a racially conscious society like America. Young relied on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus to foreground his examination of the black social habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus refers to the collective mechanism by which and into which different social and cultural conditions are created and reproduced. He describes habitus as "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (86). These "internalized structures" and "schemes of perception" influence an individual's (shared) worldview and their "apperception" of the world in which they are supposed to live (86). Habitus is 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Navarro 16). Habitus thus represents the manner in which a group of people nurtures an individual's behavioral and attitudinal tendencies within that group and in relation to outside groups. Habitus in some way also represents an interplay between a group's "beingness," steeped in the group's collected shared experience," and "becomingness," which demonstrates the ongoing process of development of the collected experience. In the case of becoming, one could perhaps say individual experiences might play a defining role. In any case, black social habitus and black critical memory define and inform even the dramatization of the embodied black experience.

There is a pervading recognition of how critical memory shapes embodied Black experience in *What to Send Up* in how it uses collective ritual performance to honor the memories of black bodies violently killed in racially motivated terror. Since American theater patronage is disproportionately dominated by white, the use of collective ritual performance, which breaks the fourth wall, allows the white audience to have a visceral experience of the agonies that have shaped embodied black experience. The play underscores the gap between Blacks' utilization of their own social habitus and Whites' seemingly obtuse

misunderstanding of embodied black experience. It first asserts the blackness of its performance in the first movement through the characters and so sets the stage for the cyclical enactment of the Black character, Made's social and psychological misrecognition by the white character, Miss. Made and Miss are two named characters in *What to Send Up*, unlike other characters in the play's other movements, who are simply named Character One, and Character Two. In a rather chilling, yet revelatory part of the drama, when the White lady is confronted with the fact of her misunderstanding of the racializing experience of the Black people, she retorts in exasperation: "I'd like to apologize on behalf of my entire race. That's what you want, isn't it? I am so fucking sorry that I was born white and/ There is racism in the world and that/ You have to suffer through it, but what do you want me to do, huh?" (Harris 48). Miss believes she is being unfairly judged and cannot be blamed for her misunderstanding and inability to feel what the Black characters feel.

Yet this self-righteous exoneration from ingrained racism and its bloodied consequence for Black people is precisely why embodied black experience continues to be susceptible to racialized violence. As Made captures, embodied black experience continues to be steeped in violence precisely because white-controlled institutions "ain't learning. You throwing words but it ain't working. You marching, you screaming through a bullhorn but you dead and they are smiling" (53). In the world of the play, Made does not want that experience anymore: the bloodied experience that took her kids, "after the boy's been filled with holes, the boy's body washed and sobbed over and hymend over and placed into the ground" (52). One could then understand how irritated Made is to be assailed by Miss's patronizing solicitation, which she (the Miss) is so unaware of. Instead of reflecting on why Made refuses to acknowledge her solicitation nor wishes to accept her offer of friendship, she concludes that Made must be rude and self-aggrandizing, so the best way to deal with her is

to confront her with the fact of her unbecoming behavior to her White boss or daughter in the case of the third movement, who had been good to her for many years.

While reading *What to Send Up*, and thinking of the experience of Made, I could not but recall my first direct, physical conversation with an African American in the United States. Just the week I got here, I had a reason to visit a friend in a school hostel, and it happened that some people were cleaning the adjoining apartment. After some time, a middle-aged Black woman came over to my friend's apartment to clean the place. Once she saw us (two Black guys), she immediately became chatty. She soon realized that we were Africans and sought to know how long we had been in America. Learning it was only recently, she got into sharing her experience with us, the searing part of which was that she had lost five young boys to racially motivated violence in America. The sheer callousness of a system that enabled such casual loss of lives ran cold fear down my spine that very day and has instilled instant fear in me whenever I have run into the police in America. While describing what constitutes embodied black experience, Young contends that "firsthand encounters with racializing projections are not a requirement...it can also develop through second and third-hand accounts that are shared among community members" (22). Through the tragic sharing of her embodied black experience, the Black woman has psychologically prepared me and given me the tools to encounter the cause of that experience.

Also, my second-hand experience does not preclude me from having first-hand experience since my skin color, Black, is critical to having that experience. My skin color has variously announced me, taken me apart, and inserted me awkwardly in the gaze of whiteness since my encounter with the Black woman. I have become Black in America and now understand what Young means by the black body having "connotations, exodermically arrived, grafted on the black people" (18). As Fanon correctly muses, the Black person, among his own people, will not feel the weight of his Blackness and the connotation of his

epidermal difference. He is only made to answer for it once he meets the White gaze just like Fanon finds out when a white child repeatedly hails him a negro, which not only strips him of his humanity but also disembodies him and makes him aware of his third person consciousness. This has been the experience of millions of African Americans over the years. This is what informs black social habitus and critical memory that Harris' *What to Send Up* engages in its ritualized invocation of Black victims to racial violence. This allows it to implicate the theater, still largely dominated by white America, for its advertent and inadvertent dissemination of White supremacist ideas and proliferation of violence triggering racial images of Blackness.

As Omi and Winant argue, race and the process of racialization realize their meanings from the discourses from which they have been used (126). In other words, the meanings and significations attached to race and racialization depend on the acts through which they have been deployed in the first place. In the case of the theater, the enactments of Blackness as a negative aberration that could only be tamed through violence give meaning to Blackness as a race and the racialization of Black people as potentially violent people. Omi and Winant also reflect on the concept of the racial project, which they say has been crafted around the junctures of the significations of race and social structure to exercise political influence and organize our understanding of different groups of people (126). One cannot deny the fact that the need to control political, social, and economic systems in America underscores the racialization of Black people in the first instance. Each moment there appears to be Black ascendancy in those systems, there usually arises overwhelming racial animosities against Black people such as in the Reconstruction era, Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights movements, and also Barack Obama's presidency.

In concluding this paper, the need to ask this question arises: What is then the responsibility of an artist whose communities continue to face this sorry existential pestilence

gleefully inflicted by their fellow country people? What should an artist, a playwright write about in the face of unrelenting institutionalized racialized violence against her people? It is expedient to reiterate that the infliction of corporal injuries against and killing of Black people does not only constitute racial violence against them. As Young argued projections of racial assumptions “across individuated (black) bodies exist as acts of violence that assume a variety of forms: epithet, racial profiling, incarceration or captivity, and physical/sexual assault” (5). So, what then should a conscious Black playwright write about? According to African writer and critic, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature (and we can add, as well as other artistic endeavors), as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming” (80). Artists must be willing to confront what another African writer, Chinua Achebe, calls “the burning issue of the day” (33). The burning issue of the day in America remains institutionalized racism that continues to fuel violence against Black people. In order to engage in this type of social consciousness in the conception of artistic work, it might be necessary to eschew a conventional creative approach, which in any case had been appropriated in the service of domination of Black people. As Character Two in *What to Send Up* notes: “The shame of the picture, plus the fuckery of the shit has gone down and the knowing that it will go down again will not allow for mincing of words or giving too many fucks about sensibilities or convention. It don’t make sense so why should it make sense?” (14).

The play is a ritualized theatrical engagement with the past and the present and also has ramifications for the future. One important futuristic ramification of the play can be said to hinge on the hopeful purgatory process which the play takes the audience through that is

meant as a ritualized release valve for grief over “the bang bang thing;” which metonymizes racialized violent acts against black bodies that have persisted since slavery. While Harris’ play is a performance of black critical memory - an important reminder that serves a visceral reenactment of generational racializing violence suffered by black people in America, it unmistakably reasserts the deterministic nature of race in the violence suffered by black. It does so by appropriating for the Black people a “safe, public space for expressing their unfiltered feelings about anti-Blackness” (8) on the theatrical stage which has been dominated by white supremacist thinking and forms of entertainment. This act is unmistakably an act of loving Blackness and negation of pervasive Black hatred.

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## **Contesting Image Making: A Postcolonial Reading of American Indigenous Film**

### **Practice**

#### **Introduction**

The Western colonial enterprise has historically been legitimized by ideological discourse. At the heart of the discourse is the privileging of Western culture as the standard, mainstream culture, from which the belief in whiteness as a supposedly superior race emerged and has since been transmitted effectively through the media, but also education, and even religious systems. Not only does the Western supremacist discourse in the media help to normalize its colonial policies, but it has also served to foster debilitating stereotypes and prejudices about Indigenous people. In North America, ethnographic documentaries, Hollywood and television have over time portrayed Indigenous people in simplistic, primitive light, thereby creating and sustaining the notion that their cultures are inferior to the Western culture. The debasement of Indigenous people and their culture in the media, television, and film has created an artificial but powerful way of looking that might best be called a colonial gaze, a standpoint from which the idea of the Indigenous people as inferior is constructed. According to Kerstin Knopf, the colonial gaze has given way to the “rejection, disrespect, racism, patronage, injustice, marginalization, and economic, political, and cultural oppression that characterize societal contact between mainstream and Indigenous societies” (11). Colonial gaze has helped to create discourses in both critical and popular media which diminish the worth of Indigenous cultures and so normalize their domination.

Centuries-long normalization of colonial discourse in the media has had some sinister consequences for Indigenous people, one of which is the sometimes appropriation and acceptance of colonial narratives which often cause identity crises, self-denial and cultural alienation (Nicholson 1). Due to the longstanding unequal power dynamic, as well as the fact that the West virtually owns and controls the media that transmits colonial narratives, there

has been a deliberate silencing and suffocation of alternative discourses from Indigenous people. This has thus pushed Indigenous narratives, including channels through which they could be propagated, to the margin. Yet, as will be shown in this paper, an alternative narrative by Indigenous people of North America represents a serious decolonizing attempt. This study will consequently conduct a postcolonial reading of Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* and how involvement in image creation in films and other art allows Indigenous people to challenge the often simplistic, prejudiced constructions of themselves that have long appeared in Western media. It will also show how important is filmmaking in revealing the often erased complexity and diversity amongst the population that makes up the Indigenous communities in America.

### **Postcolonialism and Postcoloniality of Indigenous Film Practice**

Postcolonialism as a theoretical formulation is often related to the cultural and political expressions of previously colonized peoples in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In its broadest sense, it attempts to negate the universalization of imperialist cultures, from which colonial situations are often created and justified. Consequently, postcolonial theory contests and challenges the standardization of Western beliefs and the subsequent devaluation of other cultures. Proponents of the theory often engage in cultural affirmation and alternative discourses to colonial meta-narratives. Their counter-narratives are geared towards explicating factors that have stalled the development of former colonized nations years after attaining political freedom. Some of those factors include neocolonialism, globalization, and political and economic sabotage by Western powers who work in cahoots with leaders of the post-colony. A necessary justification for postcolonial theory is its critical interrogation of the Western-derived dependency model of modernization, which is often used in Western discourse to correlate Third World countries' apparent underdevelopment to their inherent lack of nation-building imagination and consequently a justification for continued

dependence on the West. However, proponents of postcolonial discourse finger the global power structures and capitalist systems such as the United Nations, World Bank, and International Monetary Funds, which are dominated by the West and have been deployed to hold back the development of formerly colonized countries in African and Latin America (Ashcroft 1998).

Whereas what is obtained in the so-called Third World countries amounts to purported political decolonization, which is however held back by continued Western economic colonization, the situation for the Indigenous people of North America is quite staggering as they neither enjoy political nor economic independence yet. The unique context of the Indigenous people is why they have been described as the “Fourth World,” to suggest the apparent economic and political servitude they are being subjected to by settler civilization in their original lands (Manuel and Poslon 23). While most Third World countries had experienced classic colonialism, where a foreign nation attempted to control the political and economic processes, what Indigenous people have been experiencing is settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is the “complete destruction and replacement of indigenous people and their cultures by the settler’s own in order to establish themselves as the rightful inhabitants” (“Settler Colonialism”). A concerted effort is to take over Indigenous lands and erase their cultures and traditions. As we will see in the analysis of *Smoke Signals*, culture is very crucial in the fight against the erasure of Indigenous culture. By erasing the cultural legacies of Indigenous people, it is easy to erect new histories and myths that will support settler colonialists' claims over indigenous lands.

Therefore, postcolonial theory’s underlying critical motivation, which is to challenge Western supremacist assumptions and colonial discourse that validate their domination of other cultures and erection of hegemonic discourses meant to crowd out indigenous discourses, makes it a suitable theoretical basis to examine North American Indigenous

Peoples' quest to upend oppressive structures and narratives about them in the media and film. According to Mishra, postcolonial theorizing represents "a critical discourse of displacement, enslavement, and exploitation [that] existed with what Conrad called the redemptive power of an 'idea'" (1). Thus a postcolonial reading allows for a close engagement with *Smoke Signals* to see how it challenges Western colonial ideas that have long been normalized in popular culture through films and other media outlets. It also helps to reveal how those supremacist ideas have perniciously percolated into the popular consciousness of Indigenous people, with the result being feelings that range from mimicry, confusion, self-hate, hybridity, and rejection. Knorr foregrounds the analytical expediency of Postcolonial theory in reading film productions of the Indigenous Peoples:

Postcolonial theory, as applied to the analysis of the film, serves to reveal underlying colonialist relations, to pinpoint latent self/other dichotomies and derived binaries, to disclose the practices of romanticizing, othering, essentializing, and appropriation within colonialist discourse, and to indicate their reflection in these films, and appropriation inhering in colonialist discourse, and to indicate their reflection in these films. (16)

Eyre's *Smoke Signal* is an example of how self/other dichotomies and derived binaries work in the context of Indigenous people in America, who have had to contend with the suffocation of Western narratives meant to undermine their own. How Eyre engages with this subject will be looked at later in the essay.

Meanwhile, it is expedient to draw a historical survey of Indigenous film practice in order to highlight the postcoloniality that is inherent in it. The 1970s are often considered an important temporal milestone for developing the Indigenous film practice, in which socio-political advocacy gave rise to Indigenous documentary films that focused on cultural, and social issues, and political conflicts. Also, in 1972, John Adair and Sol Worth

experimented with teaching a number of Indigenous youths in Navajo how to use the video camera to shoot and edit films. They were able to produce seven films, most of which are rudimentary (Worth and Adair 1997). However, it was not until the 1990s that large-scale Indigenous filmmaking and production started. In this regard, Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998) is widely cited as key to the development of the industry as it was the first Indigenous feature film to receive acclaim nationally (Houston 8).

*Smoke Signals*' success, as "the first widely distributed feature film created by the native people of North America," has often meant it is often mistakenly treated as the first cinematic Indian film that responded to mischaracterization of the Indigenous People in the mainstream Western films (Wood 17). Representation of Indigenous People in Western films throughout history has mainly tried to serve the purpose of legitimizing European conquest and subsequent colonization of the indigenous people's homelands in which countries such as Portugal, Spain, England, and France would claim sovereignty over America and the New World. Successor states to those European powers, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, have continued in the same vein to systematically lord pernicious narratives over Indigenous people meant to suppress them and sustain Western hegemony. Wood notes that films produced by Westerners have tended to flip "history on its head, presenting European invaders as heroes and their 'Indian' victims as barbarians" (Wood 17). This false historicization was deliberate and consistent with Western colonial discursive practice revealed in Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), where he notes that such practice was to establish grounds for the domination of other cultures by the West. One strategy often deployed was the creation of the singular identity marker, Indian for the diverse groups that constitute the Indigenous People in North America. This was deliberate and racist othering meant to erase the identities of the original dwellers of the land the Western had come to seize. It is a rhetorical strategy deployed to systematically obliterate the

legal, moral and historical significance of the people indigenous to the formation of the new countries that have been established by the European settlers in the Western hemisphere. The creation of a singular Indian identity for the diverse native groups is indubitably a hegemonic designation that sprang from and became perpetuated in colonial discourse. Said explains that the practice of homogenizing diverse groups of people into singular, undifferentiated groups was meant to erase their multifarious identities and impose Western hegemonic ideas and ontological meanings on them (23).

Since the film represents a powerful channel for propagating discourses and instigating new attitudes, it has been deployed as a tool through which colonial mischaracterizing discourses have been fostered and propagated. Canonized American films, exemplified by John Ford's film production of the 1930s and 1940s, often depicted easily recognizable plot structures where civilized and genteel European settlers expressed palpable tension and fear as they clashed with the Indians who were portrayed as brute and violent (Marsden et al. 5). Even recent Western-backed films that are celebrated for their progressive shift of focus on the Indigenous people have been seen to easily slip into stoic and misleading characterization. In any case, those films, such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) mainly "make use of Indigenous cultures/figures as composing exotic and enthralling backgrounds and elements for plots with non- Indigenous protagonists" (Knopf 13). Indigenous people are more or less used props and the other half is the binary to Western civilization that is the main focus of those films. Indigenous productions such as *Smoke Signals* represent a significant effort by Indigenous people to seize narratives about their people.

### ***Smoke Signals* and Colonial Discourse: Challenging Insidious Misrepresentation**

Chris Eye's directed *Smoke Signals* (1998) is one the best-known and most-discussed Indigenous films from North America. Its success lies in its being the first film by an

Indigenous director that got mainstream attention and had wide distribution. Its screenplay was written by Sherman Alexie, who based it on the stories and characters from his short-story collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, particularly the story “*This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*,” *Smoke Signal* follows two friends, Thomas (Evan Adams) and Victor (Adam Beach), who have a complex relationship with each other and also with the memory of one of the friend’s (Victor’s) late father. Just as the film begins, the narrator, later to be revealed as Thomas, recalls a fire incident that killed his own parents who had started a large firework display to celebrate the “White People’s Independence Day.” It is also shown in that scene how a man saved Thomas from the fire and handed him over, as a baby, to his grandmother. The man is revealed as Victor’s father, Arnold Joseph (played by Gary Farmer). We learn from the narrator and from subsequent scenes that Arnold became devastated after the incident, as Thomas’ parents had been his close friends. He took up chronic drinking habits, beat his wife and son, and eventually deserted them. Arnold would later die, instigating the central theme of the story which is built around the road trip that Thomas and Victor embark on from their reservation in Couer d’Alene Indian Reservation, Idaho to Phoenix. It is from the road trip that we get a clearer backstory and forecasting of the lives of two friends, and how their lives reflect the experience of the Indigenous people.

*Smoke Signal* essentially achieves its counter-narrative intent in a lighthearted way which might not be immediately apparent since it is not direct or strident on the surface. However, its characterization of a seemingly soft and over-playful Thomas, from whose conversations and stories most of the important counter-narrative discourses are told is a masterstroke strategy that is often used by non-Western cultures across the world. For instance, the African American critic, Henry Louis Gates shows in his elucidation of his Signifying Monkey theory how enslaved Blacks in America deployed an innovative trickster strategy to deal with their oppressive masters (Gates 998). By playing on the ambiguity of

words, usually spoken in the Black vernacular, African Americans passed across the feelings and still escaped punishment that direct enunciation could have brought on them. This not only allowed them to evade harsher punishment at the time but also allowed them to criticize and rebuke the White oppressors in their faces as the words that were said were apparently harmless. Due to the dynamics that shaped the production *Smoke Signals* - it was financed and distributed by a white production company — the director, Eyre, and the scriptwriter, Alexie, would have had to be inventive in passing their Indigenously inspired message. Nevertheless, the film, even with its apparent understated mode, offers a strong, ironic critique of colonization and the continued oppression of the Indigenous Peoples. It achieves this through dialogic engagements with past depictions of the native peoples in films whose creative and imagistic powers were exclusively controlled by the dominating white people. By contesting the cliched, but popular images of the indigenous People long encrusted in the popular imagination by media and film, *Smoke Signals* speaks back to the continued settling colonial domination of Indigenous people.

It is from Victor, the seemingly unfeeling and undoubtedly troubled character, that we first get a sense of the re-narration and foregrounding of Indigenous people's conception of their own history of itself and in relation to that of the overwhelming enveloping West. At a basketball court, Victor is asked who is the greatest basketball player in the world, and he retorts deadpan: "That's easy: Geronimo." His peers on the court are not only caught by surprise but are left flustered by the finality that is intoned in the defense of his response. Although, Indigenous themselves, Victor's friends have been satiated all their lives on Western narratives and construction of heroes that it seems sacrilegious and unthinkable that someone of their own stock could be thought of in respect to heroics in sports, let alone be accorded the greatest athlete in a sports category. Beyond the apparent deadpan joke that is being made by Victor in this scene, there is a deliberate use of anachronism to score patriotic



points and educate the audience about the historical heroes of the Indigenous people. The historical Geronimo, who lived between 1829 to 1929, was never a basketball player, but a nationalist hero of the Apache people, an Indigenous group. He led his people in battles against Mexico and the US (Haugen 9). Considering the setting of *Smoke Signals*, it is significant that Victor names Geronimo as his own hero, although he inserts his heroics in popular American sport. It is noteworthy that Victor's friends do not bother to question why he will name Geronimo, instead, they take his word as a sort of boyish mischief. Yet, in that moment of lighthearted exchange, the film contests the politics of hero-making that shapes people's commitment to a country.

Furthermore, there are many instances in the films that the characters poke fun at what is construed as "Indian" characteristics, which have been cemented and perpetuated in films that featured Indigenous people by non-Indigenous filmmakers and in the media and popular culture. When Thomas and Victor set out for the journey to Phoenix, they hitch a ride with two carefree indigenous ladies. Once they get out of the car and exchange goodbyes, the ensuing conversations jokingly x-ray the existential conditions of the Indigenous People within the larger society of the United States:

"You two guys got passports?"

"Passports?"

"You leaving the rez. You're going to a different country, cousin."

"But it's the United States..."

"Damn right, it is. That's as foreign as it gets."

At play in this conversation is the place of Indigenous people within the United States. It is ironic that people who had been the original owners of the lands in which the country would be established have had to live with the knowledge of their inferior class within the framework of the socio-political and economic systems that have been created by the West.

Not only are the Indigenous People having been literally pushed off their land to carved-up fringes meant to single them out as some domesticated humans in the reservations, but they also live with the idea of their loss of lands and agency in their minds.

In another scene in the film, Thomas makes an important allusion to the history of native people's encounter with the Whites, from Columbus, who showed "we started moving away from the beach, to Custer," whose activities pushed the Indigenous people further off their lands. This relates to the long years of displacement his people have been suffering from their contact with the Westerners. Just like Thomas notes, Indigenous people have been forced to walk away from their lands, and are now bunched up in reservations, marked out as docile, conquered sub-humans, whose citizenship statuses in the new country established by the settling civilization, are at best non-existence. It is the reason the ladies that give Thomas and Victor rides, as well as many of the Indigenous people, reflexively know and joke about the different country that the United States represents once members of the Indigenous People go out of the reservation.

Even the white people in the film mostly reflexively find it strange seeing the "Indians" coming out of the reservation into the cities. There is an expression of surprise and mild irritation on the face of the white bus driver that Thomas and Victor board to Arizona when the two friends show up by his bus door. He looks at the friends as some exhibitionist curios he is not expecting to come in contact with perhaps at that particular time of the day. The driver's shock and amused countenance carry over to the faces of the mostly white passengers on the bus too. Two of them even cheat Thomas and Victor out of their seats on the bus to remind them that they are out of geographical line by joining the white on the bus. It is also the reason why it has always been emotionally problematic for members of the Indigenous people to properly integrate outside of their communities. Victor and Thomas are

mostly by themselves on the bus in this regard. In fact, we see little or no interactions between the Indigenous people and the white people in the film.

In *Smoke Signals*, there are many instances of Indigenous cultural references that either critique Western cultural impositions or foreground Indigenous people's diversity. On the bus, when Thomas starts a conversation with a white lady, the lady casually asks if Thomas and Victor are Indians; to which Thomas explains that they are Coeur d'Alene Indians. Conversely, the lady is simply "Cathy from Mississippi," and she does not need further identity qualifications to differentiate or pinpoint her place within the country. Although this is a very brief interaction, it shows the different worldviews held by the white people and the Indigenous people. Indigenous people to most white people are the same Indians; however, the Indigenous people cherish differences that exist amongst themselves as groups.

Meanwhile, a very strong instance of critique of the creation of a singular identity for Indigenous people's identity occurs when Victor asks Thomas how many times the latter has seen the film, *Dancing with the Wolves*, one of the modern films by a western director about the Indians celebrated for its apparent good depiction of Indigenous people compared with other movies that were released before it. However, in Thomas and Victor's discussion, we get a meta-critique of that film and how it merely perpetuates clichés about the Indigenous people that go back to deliberate, racist mischaracterization when the Europeans first made a stop on the Indigenous lands to tame the new world. Victor's words to Thomas echo those clichés: "Don't you know how to be a real Indian?" "Stop grinning – Indians are not supposed to smile. Get stoic. You should look like a warrior. Look like you just came back from killing a buffalo." The singular and simplistic image of morose-looking, wild Indians was constructed in colonial discourse used by the invading Westerners to justify their colonization mission in North America and more importantly to prepare an alibi for their

deliberate efforts at uprooting and obliterating the Indigenous people from their lands. The image of a stoic warrior referred to by Victor references the popular construction of the noble savages, who were amenable to the civilized, western hero, as perpetuated in films such as *Dance in the Wind*. It is noteworthy that Victor and Thomas repeatedly bring up this reference. Victor's admonition to Thomas to behave as a stoic Indian warrior is laced with irony meant to expose the longstanding stereotype constructed for the Indigenous people and has been used as an excuse to deal with them. In response to Victor, Thomas insists that his own tribe never killed Buffalo but were historically fishermen. This historical correction is essential to the overall postcolonial bent of this movie, in that it helps to counter prevailing incorrect, but the singular story that has been used to homogenous different groups that make up the Indigenous people.

Meanwhile, in one of the moving flashback scenes in *Smoke Signals*, we see Arnold refers to the institutional mechanisms with which "the white people"--whom he wishes he could just snap his hand and "puff! they are gone to where they belong: London, Paris Moscow"--have been holding back his people and forcing a singular identity on them. Arnold mentions the reservations, the trading posts, tribal schools, the drunk Catholics (symbolizing religion), and all the little Indians named Victor (the name is a colonial imposed identity). All of those variables that now shape Indigenous lives are unquestionably derived from their contacts with the settling culture of the West. They have been used to hold the Indigenous people on a leash—one enforcing identity, behavior, and geography—so that they will not constitute an existential threat to the hegemonic mission of the West. It is however seen that it is the Indigenous people that have been in danger of existential threat and only their resilience has saved them from completely vanishing, perhaps a desirable wish from their powerful adversaries.

## Conclusion

The Western colonial strategy has always been boosted by its deployment of ideological discourse disseminated through the media. One such powerful medium is film, as its audio-visual enactment of colonial discourse has tremendous and insidious magnetism. In North America—especially the United States and Canada—the use of films to propagate false ideological narratives has been effective in the centuries-old colonization of the Indigenous peoples, who have been caricatured, stereotyped, and mischaracterized as savages and uncritical beings. Although relatively recent and still so much less powerful than the dominant Western film industry, Indigenous film practice has sought to challenge the dominant Western narratives about the Indigenous People. In films like *Smoke Signals*, we see subtle, yet powerful critiques of Western false cliches and a thorough examination of the residential school system that was a critical ideological vehicle meant for the mental colonization of the Indigenous people. The film, in its artistic efforts, therefore tries to decolonize colonial meta-narratives in a responsive, counter-narrative way.

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**Capitalism, Consumerism, and Lost Individual Identity in *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine***

Alexandra Kleeman's novel, *You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine*, begins with a question in which the unnamed narrator, A, muses that "Is it true that we are more or less the same on the Inside?" (1). The narrator then goes on to reflect on how our vital organs could be medically exchanged with someone else's; and how a strange occurrence happened in Russia, where a man who had been coughing blood and was thought to have cancer actually had "a six-inch fir tree embedded in his left lung" (1). The reflection ends with what will, in hindsight of what transpires in the novel, become a somber conclusion: "It's no surprise, then, that we care most for our surfaces: they alone distinguish us from one another and they are so fragile"(2). The fragility of our treasured individual identities and our inability to keep hold of their differentiating features in a neoliberal, consumerist society drives the action of Kleeman's novel and also signposts the work as a veritable cognitive map to chart the dizzying contour of that society.

In the novel, we are introduced to A, who narrates the story. She has a roommate, alphabetically referred to as B. Before she even meets B, she is told several times that they share similarities and "have a lot in common" (50). In describing their similarities, A remarks, "If you reduced each of us to a list of adjectives, we'd come out nearly equivalent" (5). She seems to be concerned about the possibility of a singularly shared identity between her and her roommate. We will find out, however, that A and B appear to have at least a prominent difference: B almost never eats, except for her popsicles, which contain about "fifteen calories, and you could burn almost that many just by eating them with vigor" (17). We also find out that she nudges A towards this pattern of eating. Importantly, she is obsessed with completing a surface (physical) similarity with A and appears to be reaching this shared singular identity when she cuts off the long stretch of her hair, which "had always been our



way of telling ourselves apart” (11). It is at this point, that A begins to feel anxious about her own disappearing distinct identity. Curiously, B gives A her cut hair as a strange symbol of the bond they share. While at the surface level, this exchange of hair could be seen as just a gift by one friend to the other, the act bothers A who will become paranoid by her B’s increasingly disturbing obsession with physical, outward uniformity with her roommate. B states that “I didn’t know what I was afraid of. Maybe that in accepting this chunk of B’s body, I would be diluting myself further when already it was taking me minutes each morning to remember who I was” (13). As the novel progresses, we will discover that B is not just obsessed with becoming A in outward appearances, she wants to have and live what A has, including easily replacing her in her sexual relationship.

A has a boyfriend, C, whom she keeps apart from B, due to her fear that their meeting will lead to “seepage, contagion, inversion” (12). From A and C’s interactions, however, we see that he does not need to have met B before noting easy she could replace A. When A asks him to describe her and B, he offers, “I guess they might be the same words” (45). We find out that much like B, C seems to see no problem with the loss of differentiating identity which A cares so much about. She is further alarmed when C suggests that, since A is reluctant, B could actually pair with him to participate in *That’s My Partner*, a television show where partners would have their eyes covered up and would be led to feel different excessively clothed bodies in order to know if they could recognize their partners. A has repulsion for this show because it has often led to the disintegration of relationships as most people are not able to recognize their partners. This instigates the fight in the novel between A on the one hand and B and C on the other hand. It also maps the beginning of A’s quest to understand the fast-vanishing individuality that everybody around her seems to be unconcerned about.

In the capitalist, consumerist society that Kleeman's work exposes, the three main characters – A, B, and C – are inundated with behavioral guides that are mainly churned out through TV ads and shows. They are either obsessed with commercials about beauty products, and food (Kandy Kake), or with TV shows meant to direct them toward a particular way of thought. There is an intriguing unnamed television talk show, for example, where a man, Michael, is strangely obsessed with saving veal calves from the cruel treatment they face and from potential slaughter. He does this by buying as many as he can. When he can no longer afford to buy calves, he resorts to stealing them. At one point, he is caught and he attacks the employee who tries to prevent him from carting away the veal calves. At that point, the enormity of the task he sets out to accomplish dawn on him. He realizes he has been “eating a whole machine, a machine much bigger than me, and a lot better organized” (31). A will obsess over Michael's story and will eventually join a cult, “The Church of the Conjoined Eaters”, which preaches against the consumption of “matter that is improperly sourced” (200), but instead feeds its members with Kandy Kake, supposedly made of “real stuff,” but, which in fact, is made from synthetic product. In addition to the fact that Michael's bizarre story could so intrigue and eventually lure A into joining some strange cult, Michael's TV appearance turns him into an instant celebrity, having not just his face on the products he tries to sell but also his identity blurring into that of the product, to the extent that when A sees Michael on the TV subsequently, she can only think of the product. In what evokes Deleuze's *Society of Control*, there is an attempt at the total subordination of people's identities to that of the society in which they live, even going as far as inventing a prosthetic form of identity (2) as we see with Michael's disappearing identity. Michael's strange sense of heroism in saving cut-out veal calves is seized upon and exploited by The Church of the Conjoined Eaters, who are essentially representing the neoliberal force in the novel. They turn his eccentricity into a marketing stunt on the TV show to lure unsuspecting viewers such

as A into their cult, where members are conditioned into regimented uniformity. The larger point of this episode is to underscore how the neoliberal force desires simplicity and discourages diversity of ideas so as to be able to implement its profit-driven agenda without opposition.

Furthermore, A, B and C's obsession with TV, especially commercials and shows such as the one in which Michael appears, reflect how neoliberalism, with its accentuation of consumerist behavior, has devised a distracting mechanism to control people in society. This distracting mechanism allows neoliberalism to disguise the impacts of the "dominant affect" that neoliberal policies have brought on the people. According to Plan C, which is a decentralized organization that rallies against capitalism through treaties on its website, dominant affect is the prevailing emotion or feeling among people at a particular historical period ("We Are" 1). Capitalism easily adapts itself, and whenever a particular dominant affect becomes ineffective, it "recomposes around newly dominant affects....In the modern era (until the post-war settlement), the dominant affect was misery....When misery stopped working as a control strategy, capitalism switched to boredom" (1). Meanwhile, the dominant affect in the neoliberal era is anxiety, where everyone is too anxious about their socioeconomic precarity to really fight capitalism (2). Curiously, most people seem to understand the source of their precarity is tied to capitalism but cannot do something about it. Dominant affect thus works well when it is a public secret, "something that everyone knows, but nobody admits or talks about" (1). As a public secret, the dominant affect is able to slip away from people's grasp since everyone seems to know it, but cannot admit to it. The public secret, therefore, derives its power from people's inability to come to terms with it even when it is very much stuck to their consciousness and "as long as the dominant affect is a public secret, it remains effective, and strategies against it will not emerge" (1).

We find that almost everyone in the world of Kleeman's novel is suffering from different degrees of anxiety. From A, B, and C, to other characters, there is a prevalence of anxiety that hangs in the air, but which everyone, except perhaps A at some points, is unable to grasp. Their inability to grasp or admit to their anxious state works in favor of neoliberalism's scheme of control. Both A and B are highly anxious and their anxiety drives them toward the obsession they have with TV commercials. B, in particular, is unable to cognitively map her relation to the society in which she lives. Taken from Fredric Jameson's works, cognitive mapping can refer to an "individual's 'subjective' attempt to locate her- or him-self in a complex social milieu" (Tally 399). In other words, cognitive mapping is our desire to make sense of the world we live. This is especially significant in a neoliberal world that seeks to control our thoughts through duplicitous incentives. Due to her own failure to make sense of her environment, B, therefore, relies on others for guidance. We learn from A that B had come to share an apartment with A in the first place after B had a fight with B's boyfriend. The said boyfriend had become alarmed by B's overreliance on him, which was transforming into possessiveness, and eventually a desire for behavioral similarity. B's desire for uniformity and loss of individuality scares A. While B's apparent feeling of inadequacy in her own individuality causes her anxiety, she is unable to recognize this. Instead, she is obsessed with watching TV beauty commercials, which makes her buy different products that ultimately are unable to offer her satisfaction. She is therefore trapped in a neoliberal vicious cycle, which essentially causes that anxiety in the first place.

Apart from the TV beauty commercials, neoliberal capitalism also offers another form of unending, but unsatisfactory solutions, in the form of a series of regimented, boring jobs, whose aim really is to prevent any kind of creativity and curiosity in the minds of the people. A's office work, for instance, is basically long hours of repetitive proofreading work that asks her to be unimaginative. She is instructed to avoid making sense of what she reads as

“meaning was an obstacle to efficient proofing” (9). The major objective of the organization she works for is profit; to get as many works published as possible. The less imaginative workers are, the better suited they are to neoliberal capitalist profit-making desire. In a sense, people such as A, who want more from their work and from life generally will not find satisfaction in this kind of cold capitalist scheme. B, in contrast, is trapped in the scheme; yet, she is never able to derive any satisfaction from the numerous incentives that capitalism throws at her. This illustrates Mark Fisher’s thoughts about “capitalism's perpetual instability,” created to defer satisfaction, and ultimately to preempt a state of boredom in the people which might lead to reasonable action against capitalism.

Capitalism’s perpetual deferment of satisfaction allows its drivers the ultimate choice to always offer a seeming alternative system to people. When capitalism’s incentives are failing, and are thus unable to induce the prevailing dominant affect, capitalism quickly “recomposes around the newly dominant affect (“We are”). The phenomenon of Disappearing Dad Disorder (DDD) in Kleeman’s novel succinctly illustrates this point. The DDD is an intriguing story in the novel in which a number of fathers in the world of the novel are declared missing and a search team is set up to look for them. Eventually, when some of those dads are found, usually in other families’ homes, we learn that the majority of them have been suffering from a feeling of ennui caused by the repetitive nature of their roles in their families (Kleeman 65). Escape becomes an option, yet we find out from the interview with one of the dads, Jonathan, that their desire for running away is never satisfied by the homes they find for themselves (96). This points to how in a capitalist system, there is no escape from the search for satisfaction as capitalism generates desires in us that we cannot fully apprehend—like these dads who disappear without seemingly understanding why or what they want.

B's obsession with becoming A is also an indication of the overwhelming scope of late capitalism's social factory. In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher notes that capitalist realism, which is a state of resignation to the idea that it is impossible to imagine an alternative to capitalism, "entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic" (60). In other words, capitalism encourages the loss or subordination of one's identity to external forces such as TV commercials like in the case of Michael. It also induces a desire to merge one's identity with other people's as we see in B's obsession with turning herself into A. This creates a plastic or artificial reality that is aimed really at deferring responsibility to capitalist forces. In this regard, we never really get an inkling of the kind of outside work B does, but that does not matter. In late capitalism's social factory, she is assigned the domestic work of achieving a neoliberal desire for surface singularity. Moreso, we find out that The Church of the Conjoined Eaters, a cult that A is lured to join from the TV show that features Michael, represents a concrete example of how neoliberalism desires to carry out a large-scale social experiment aimed at stripping people of their individuality. In the cult, members are given uniforms, made to perform routinized tasks, assigned stripped-down artificially made food, and also forced to use a few chosen phrases to communicate. After A's experience in the cult's camp, she is able to reflect on B's desire to steal A's identity. A describes the result of this desire as "perfect prosthetics, modeled on her own original hands and face but with no investment in the person they were meant to imitate. I could destroy her with little feeling as it took to tear up a photograph" (150). We see how B has essentially resigned herself to becoming a prosthetic version of A, believing, "things would be better if I looked more like you" (58). B's desire for her friend's identity indicates the inadequacies that capitalism induces. When one is overwhelmed, as B is, by capitalist-induced inadequacies,

you are suddenly without connections, without stability, with nothing to hold you upright or in place; a dizzying, sickening unreality takes possession of you; you are

threatened by a complete loss of identity, a sense of utter fraudulence; you have no right to be here, now, inhabiting this body, dressed in this way; you are a nothing, and ‘nothing’ is quite literally what you feel you are about to become. (Fisher 4)

B feels that she is nothing. She is constantly looking for an anchor, which she thinks she will get through beauty guidelines from TV commercials. Those never make her feel any better. She thereafter seeks a refugee by subordinating her identity to that of her lovers or taking the identity of her roommate. When none of these efforts helps alleviate her feeling of inadequacy, she concludes something must be wrong with herself, and she resorts to Fisher’s notion of “responsibilization.” Responsibilization is, according to Fisher, how people ultimately accept self-blame for their miserable situations in a capitalist society (“Good For Nothing” 2). In the case of B, we never get to know if she ever interrogates the nature of her relationships beyond her obsession with and subordination of her identity to that of her lovers, roommates, and even those prescribed by the beauty commercials she regularly watches. For instance, at a point in the novel, A is astonished to discover that B has bought the same makeup set as A has. Dismayed, A destroys the set hoping that that will cause a break in their increasingly uniform appearance. A also expects a reaction from B, who to her surprise, offers a conciliatory remark: “What matters is that you broke this stuff because of me. I made someone do something they wouldn’t have done. You did all this for me” (149). B wants to take up the responsibility for the damage A has caused because, to B’s mind, they are now one. Unable to accept the version of herself, B hopes by blurring her identity into that of her roommates, she will be able to save herself. As I have indicated earlier, even this desire will not be able to satisfy her since capitalism ultimately defers satisfaction.

If there is any character who offers hope that there is a possibility we can find holes in the all-consuming canvas of late capitalism, it is character A. Although she will undergo a physically and psychologically draining journey to apprehend what ails her and ultimately

ails her society, her experiences offer a kind of cognitive map, which Fredric Jameson regards as a “code word for ‘class consciousness’” (Jameson 418). Cognitive mapping allows subjects to “regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion” (Jameson 54). There is a prevalence of social confusion in the world of Kleeman’s novel, which is an apt allegory for our present world. All the characters are caught up in the web of confusion and are unable to chart their courses in the world they live in. In most cases in the novel, they become ready prey for the same system that caused their confusion in the first place. A good instance is a family that lives across the street from A and B, who suddenly deserts their house (Kleeman 19-21). It is when A joins The Church of the Conjoined Eaters do we learn that this family had been lured to the cult, just like A was lured. The family had sought refuge in the cult because they became dissatisfied with their lives. A also suffers from this belief of dissatisfaction, or social confusion, that engulfs the world of the novel. Initially, she is also absorbed in the controlling tricks of the capitalist system, which in the novel are represented by commercials and the cult, that inundate the people with different ways to address their satisfaction. The objective of those tricks is to prevent them from actually nailing the source of their dissatisfaction. It is when A begins to feel threatened by her roommate's apparent stealing of her identity that she is able to start to question the society she lives in. Like A and C, and also most of the characters in the novel, her life appears to be an extension and copy of the simulated life shown in the commercials. The characters in the novels are more or less turning into prosthetic versions of the folks they see on TV.

For A, the physical landscape can also be a device through which social confusion is generated: “This is a landscape made by human beings but for human beings. Walk it and you always step on someplace identical to where you stepped before....The surroundings slide by until you realize that you’ve seen them all before” (110). We see the consequence of this



confusion comes to full cycle when A believes she has seen B and C in the *That's My Partner* show, which she is now part of the decoys. Protesting that she had looked for C in his condo, the woman whom she believes is B says to her: "You might have the wrong condo." "All the buildings look the same and it can be pretty confusing" (263). The sameness of the landscape is fundamental to how capitalist realism confuses and controls the masses. It also desires to create plastic, identical humans, amenable to its vagaries, able to work in its identical landscape, and dispensable when they cannot operate within its regulated system. Similarly, the Church of Conjoined Eaters also represents this logic of sameness in Kleeman's novel. The overwhelming nature of this logic, with the objective to create unreflective humans susceptible to capitalist profit-making motives, troubles A throughout the novel. Such a society is what Fisher describes as a stripped-down society in which individuals are engaged in self-surveillance while performing labor that is pointless and demoralizing (63).

Moreover, there is also strong symbolism in the travails of the Kandy Kat, the cartoon character that repeatedly tries and fails to eat the artificially processed cake, *Kandy Kake*, in one of the commercials that engross A and B's attention in the novel. In every iteration of the commercial, Kandy Kat is never able to eat the cake despite often tiring physical exertion. In its repeated failed pursuit, Kandy Kak is symbolic of people's ultimate pointless striving within the capitalist system. A reflects on what keeps Kandy Kat going in its pointless effort:

Maybe Kandy Kat survived like that, from the images of eating and images of food. Light consuming light, the desire for sustenance a type of sustenance in itself. Even if he was always paused on the narrow edge of starvation, what he was doing in pursuit of Kandy Kakes sustained him. They made his life terrible, but at the same time they made him more of himself. (Kleeman 112)

We likewise see in the resigned state of the Eaters, who are the recruits into the cult, that perhaps they expect less of salvation in the cult they have joined, but they are held back by their inability to construe an alternative way of defining meanings for their lives. When A asks Chris, a fellow recruit in the cult, towards the end of the story if he will like to go with her to “someplace nice...normal” (282), he is confused, unsure, and is no doubt cannot think of any other normal place than those offered by the cult.

An utter state of resignation to its own will is essentially the goal of capitalist realism, which aims to foreclose any thought about an exit for its captors. A’s partner in the cult, Anna, cannot fathom A’s apparent doubt in the system. She consequently outs her. Yet it is precisely in A’s inability to fit into the sham system devised by the cult that the inkling of a possible breakdown of capitalist realism’s “perfect” system exists. She becomes determined after finding no salvation in the cult of The Church of the Conjoined Eaters. After seeing how the cult turns people like Chris, Ana, and others she sees there into shells of themselves, A is determined and is ready “to try living” (281). To try living means “going forward, forward by way of getting back to the kind of life I used to have, only this time I’d live it better” (281). Although we are given any sense of this previous life that A is talking about. However, in A’s refusal to succumb to the ultimate objective of capitalist realism, to lure her into believing she could not get out of the cult nor escape from its influence, Kleeman offers the reader some hope and a hint that refusal to believe in the invincible nature of capitalism is a first step in gaining a cognitive map to chart our society.

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### What Capital Always Obstructs

In the introduction to his unfinished work, *Acid Communism*, Mark Fisher begins by engaging with the central thesis of Herbert Marcuse's work, *Eros and Civilization*, which he notes "is that the last forty years have been about the exorcizing of the specter of a world which could be free" (Fisher 1). He thereafter lays out what would be the claim of his own work, that what should preoccupy the left-wing struggle should not be the desire to end capital but what it prevents us from having, namely "the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy" (1). Fisher's thought here fits perfectly with his other train of thought in most of his writings, but especially in *Capitalist Realism*, in which he fervently calls our attention to the sly working of capitalism in obstructing any thought of an alternative to it. Although Fisher mostly explores how Capitalism obstructs alternative choice in the West, the capitalist system's desire for control and prevention of choice has had even more far-reaching impacts in non-Western countries, particularly in Africa. In this essay, therefore, I will be applying Fisher's ideas to analyze how the capitalist system, through its use of threats of sanctions and brute force, has been taking freedom of choice away from African countries so as to project itself as the only realistic and workable system in the world. This prevention of alternative choices has had political, economic, and cultural significance, which I will endeavor to address in this essay.

To redirect our focus to what capitalism prevents us from having requires an understanding of what undergirds capitalism's obstruction of an alternative vision to itself. Fisher points out that neoliberalism, although by no means the sole agent, has nonetheless been responsible for how capitalism has seemingly succeeded in flushing out other alternatives or thoughts of alternatives to capital (*Capitalist Realism* 1). For Fisher, neoliberalism represents a capitalist project that is principally involved "in the exorcism of the specter of a world which could be free" (1). In order to achieve this objective,

neoliberalism warps our thought of an alternative to capitalism through a mechanism Fisher defines as capitalist realism, “the fatalistic acquiescence in the view that there is no alternative to capitalism” (2). By stalling our ability and tampering with our desires to imagine another system, capitalism effectively naturalizes itself, preventing us from seeing it as any other but a matter-of-fact way of life.

Neoliberalism did not however suddenly push us into impotent submission to its invincibility. It achieved this through intentional political, economic, and cultural manipulations which culminated in both the failures and the ultimate demarketing of other alternative systems. As Fisher notes in *Acid Capitalism*, what ultimately became neoliberal signature practices were tested in Chile. On the political front, the Allende government, which had been experimenting with democratic socialism that “offered a real alternative both to capitalism and to Stalinism” (2), would be removed in a violent coup by General Pinochet’s American-backed coup. According to Fisher, “The military destruction of the Allende regime, and the subsequent mass imprisonments and torture, are only the most violent and dramatic example of the lengths capital had to go to in order to make itself appear to be the only “realistic” mode of organizing society” (2). After its destruction of both human and systemic alternatives to capitalism in Chile, the country thereafter became a testing hub for what would be signature neoliberal policies such as privatization and financial deregulation. Unlike the situation in Chile discussed by Fisher and that of African countries, as I discuss later in this essay, neoliberal policies were often implemented in the West in a complicated process that was not always as overt as it was in Chile and other countries. Fisher says that “in countries like the US and the UK, the implementation of capitalist realism was a much more piecemeal affair, involving inducements and seductions as well as repression” (2).

Therefore, what played out in Chile could also be mapped in other places, especially in Africa. African countries, most of which were newly independent in the 1960s and 70s, were caught in the middle of the “conflicting global ideological battle for world dominance” (Natufe 1) known as the Cold War between the US-led Western powers (NATO-aligned countries) and the Soviet Union (Warsaw Pact). African countries, still basking in the euphoria of political freedoms from Europe, were decidedly unaligned as they began to chart socio-political and economic visions for themselves. The newly independent African countries thus joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which included other countries from mostly Latin America. Formed in 1961, NAM sought to “create an independent path in world politics that would not result in Member-States becoming pawns in the struggles between the major powers” (Natufe 5). These countries did not want to be corralled into open support for either NATO or Warsaw Pact countries. In other words, they wanted to be allowed to make free political choices independent of the influences of the Western and Eastern blocs. However, as was the case with Chile, Western-led neoliberal countries could not brook the thought of the flourishing of another system and therefore hatched political and eventually economic solutions in some African countries.

Two prominent examples of forcing neoliberal policies into African countries are the CIA-backed coup that removed Patrice Lumumba, who was thought of as representing a communist takeover of the Congo Republic, as well as the violent assassination of the former Head of State of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, whose socialist posture did not sit well with Western countries (Natufe 4). The circumstances around the deaths of these political leaders show the extent to which Capitalist-oriented powers would go to impose their will on other countries. Natufe explains that in the case of Lumumba, his seemingly inexorable political ascendancy in Congo after he had prevailed in the Congo political leadership struggle that ensued shortly after independence against his Western-leaning rival, Joseph Kasavubu

Lumumba, set him on a collision course against Western powers who viewed him as having close ties with USSR (5). Patrice Lumumba would be assassinated in January 1961, merely six months after Congo's independence. Sankara would also have the same fate in Burkina Faso, as his open dissociation with France, a few months after the European country had ceased being the colonial ruler of Burkina Faso, marked him out as a potential threat to Western interests (Nwolise 59). Lumumba and Sankara's fatal removal from office represented a classic capitalist-oriented government political obstruction of alternatives to its own system. From the foregoing, we can see that the same kind of forced choice pushed upon Chile was also forced on Burkina Faso and Congo; the same occurred in other countries in Africa. These examples of Burkina Faso, Congo, and Chile show how capitalism obstructed freedom of political choices different from its own vision.

Furthermore, it did not take long before neoliberal economic policies were proffered to most African countries as the only economic solutions that could work. Hatched and sold through a series of overt and covert threats of sanctions and the threat of economic squeeze, the now infamous Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) would become the signature neoliberal policies designed for African countries in the 1970s and the 1980s. Pfeiffer and Chapman explain that "Structural adjustment programs (or SAPs) are the practical tools used by international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank at country level to promote the market fundamentalism that constitutes the core of neoliberalism" (2). There is now an existing, sturdy scholarly tradition on the effect of the introduction of SAPs in sub-Saharan African countries. For example, in a study that looks at its impact in Kenya, an East African country, Joseph Rono notes that, due to their insistence on market fundamentalism, SAPs led to high rates of income inequality, inflation, unemployment, and retrenchments" (3). Furthermore, the Kenyan currency was devalued leading to drastically lowered living standards, which "pushed up deviant and crime

rates, ethnic hatred and discrimination and welfare problems, especially in the areas of education and health” (5). Perhaps SAPs’ most enduring legacy for a generation of Africans has been its ultimate destruction of the social intervention and welfare systems that had prevailed before SAPs got introduced (Mkandawire 5).

The foregoing point about the connection between the centrality of market forces in neoliberalism and the destruction of the welfare system, which caters to many masses, brings to the fore how capitalism fosters the feeling of “magical voluntarism” (“Good for Nothing”) in people to deflect its negative affect on them. In his essay, “Good for Nothing”, Fisher, developing David Small’s original idea, defines magical voluntarism as the belief that it is within every individual’s power to make themselves whatever they want to be (1). He further notes that it is the dominant ideology, as well as the unofficial religion, of contemporary capitalist society (1). Those who could not succeed within the capitalist society, they could not afford to blame the system which has been set up against them. Rather, they must put the blame on themselves, as they alone are responsible for their failures.

In 2018, for example, Nigeria’s President, Muhammadu Buhari, criticized his country’s restive young population for protesting high-level unemployment in the country. He had said in an interview that “More than 60 percent of the population is below 30, a lot of them haven’t been to school and they are claiming that Nigeria is an oil producing country, therefore, they should sit and do nothing, and get housing, healthcare, education free” (Ogundipe 1). Buhari deliberately attempted to absolve his own government’s socio-economic policies that pushed up the unemployment rate to as high as 33%. Rather than accept responsibility for those policies, Buhari preferred to insinuate that it was the laziness of the youths that caused their economic despondency. Nigeria’s situation here fits perfectly into how magical voluntarism deflects capitalist society’s culpability in the misery that engulfs people’s life. The ultimate aim of this warped control mechanism is to prevent



consciousness rising, for Fisher notes that magical voluntarism is both “an affect and a cause of the currently historically low level of class consciousness” (“Good for Nothing”).

Having examined capitalism's stranglehold over politics and economics in Africa, I am going to examine how its obstruction of choices has also impacted cultural productions. Fisher, for instance, examines how “the exorcising of the ‘specter of a world which could be free’ was a cultural as well as a narrowly political question,” while further reflecting that this “specter, and the possibility of a world beyond toil, was raised most potently in culture — even, or perhaps especially, in a culture which didn’t necessarily think of itself as politically-oriented” (*Acid Communism* 1). This point becomes clearly significant when taking into consideration of Fisher’s earlier thoughts about what he terms “popular modernism” (*Capitalist Realism* 28). For Fisher, popular modernism represents a now long-disappeared predilection where particular modernist techniques and cultural products were made accessible to the masses (29). Rather than being seen as a populist adventure, popular modernism simply refers to democratizing otherwise elitist cultural products and techniques. In Europe for example, Fisher gives an example of the plurality of cultural products that range from continental classical literary texts, films, and music to experimental music being produced and were readily accessible to the masses in the post-World War Two periods through intentional government policies. In sub-Saharan Africa, a similar phenomenon happened during the heydays of nationalist movements and immediate years after political independence, in which there was large government support for the arts, which then became accessible to the large population. Unfortunately, neoliberal policy incursions killed this phase (Haynes 10).

In contrast to the plurality of cultural products accessible to the masses, what we now have is the proliferation of pastiches and undifferentiated cultural products we now consume, but which are now seen as decided cultural facts which cannot be rejected. While a previous

tradition of diverse and rich cultural productions still haunts us, there is a reluctance, caused by capitalist realism, to either not acknowledge those products or give up on the possibility that the tradition that made them flourish could ever exist anymore. Neoliberalism has therefore fostered the capitalist realist belief which essentially forces us to resign to what neoliberalism can only offer us. A concrete example of this plays out is captured in Matt Colquhoun's observation on the paradox that exists within neoliberalism in relation to music and film streaming companies. While streaming monopolies like Spotify and Netflix purport to enable access to a wide range of music, they in fact suffocate alternatives, pushing listeners toward a series of related music products that are best pastiches of previous musical eras (Colquhoun 4). The prevention of alternatives and the limitation placed on diversity in cultural production are clear examples of what capitalism, through neoliberalism, obstructs us from having. Neoliberalism purports to offer us choices, but it actually limits our choices by only presenting to us a set of choices, obstructing other mechanisms which could offer other choices besides it.

The neoliberal destruction of the social interventionist and welfarist system in Africa bears parallels with the erosion of the social democratic system in Europe, which Fisher often refers to in his works. Importantly, there is also a similarity in how these two systems continue to haunt the neoliberal system, despite the latter's apparent invincibility. Appropriated from Derrida's works, Fisher calls this phenomenon, hauntology, which he explains "refers to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence" ("Capitalist Realism" 25). Neoliberalism derives its invincibility from the apparent death of the welfare system in Africa and the social democratic system in Europe for example. Yet, these supposedly dead systems ultimately give meaning to neoliberalism, and thus their apparitions still haunt it. Since they still haunt neoliberalism, the welfare, and social democratic systems continue to affect and remind the people of other possible systems. Hauntology signifies the

way in which what presently exists derives its power and meaning from a series of things that do not exist in its stead — what Fisher calls “a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does” (“Capitalist Realism” 23). The significance of the continued haunting of neoliberalism by those two systems is that it strips neoliberalism of its avowed invincibility and renders capitalist realism impotent. Fisher captures the power of hauntology as representing “failed mourning,” not giving up the ghost,” and its specter “will not allow us to settle into/for the mediocre satisfaction one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism” (29).

It is also important to state that just like social democracy and welfare systems haunt the political leanings of capitalism, we can also point to some ways in which previous modes of cultural access haunt the neoliberal mode. Fisher draws his example from the use of crackle in the music of artists referred to as hauntological. These artists, including The Caretaker, Burial, Mordant Music, Philip Jeck, and a host of others, share a preoccupation with “an overwhelming melancholy” and “fixation on materialized memory” which led them to their sonic signature: the use of crackle. Fisher explains that using crackles in their sounds prevents us from lapsing into the illusion of presence (“Capitalist Realism” 28). Crackle simultaneously reminds us of the recording method by which their music is produced and also makes us aware of the playback system through which it is being accessed. The most important insight to gain from here is how these hauntological artists in their music are simultaneously mourning the stillborn future that postwar electronic music promised, and yet refusing to give up on the desire for that future.

A similar example of how a previous cultural phenomenon that promised so much haunts present cultural offerings in Africa would be the celluloid era of the Nollywood film industry in Nigeria. In the celluloid era, movies were largely made to be consumed and accessed by most members of society in a communal sense in movie houses, and usually

makeshift cinemas (Okome 19). There was also notable governmental support for the movie makers during the era. Okome also states that a notable difference thematically between the old celluloid era and the new multi-complex or digital streaming is that the old tradition was more orientated towards pan-Africanist cultural retrieval and celebration, while the new tradition is mostly oriented towards private issues affecting individuals in a capitalist society (21). One of the major reasons why the earlier film tradition collapsed has been attributed to the socio-economic struggle that followed the adoption of SAPs in Nigeria (Adejumobi 3). Not only did the filmmakers no longer enjoy government subsidies which had helped defray production costs, but they also struggled to access loans in banks as arts and other cultural artifacts were seen as less important to the country's prevailing needs.

A new profit-oriented film industry has since replaced the old industry, with more corporation and multinational partnerships. This new film industry has gentrified the film experience in Nigeria, with only a few members of the society financially able to go to the new state-of-the-art cinemas or subscribe to streaming giants, such as Netflix to watch the new Nollywood films. Also, the new film industry depicts modern city lives, with an almost exclusive obsession over the privileged and transnationally mobile lives of the upper class in Lagos, Nigeria's most industrialized city. However, like the hauntological artists, there still exist some filmmakers, especially on YouTube and Facebook, who still make efforts to make movies reminiscent of the old era. In fact, these films show marked similarities to the effect of crackles in that they reflect the improvisation and low-cost equipment used to make them. Although often derided for their low-budget and poorly edited productions, filmmakers such as Odunlade Adekola and a host of regional, but unsupported movie producers in Nigeria, continue to make movies reminiscent of the old era. What largely differentiates the movies these unfancied filmmakers make is that they shift thematic and subject focus away from the

posh, exclusive urban center of Lagos which has become almost the only focus from which stories of Nigeria are told in the new Nollywood films.

Apart from reminding us about older traditions, the works of filmmakers that make films in the manner of the old celluloid tradition also help to deconstruct and challenge the argument that only movies that depict modern city and diaspora lives could thrive and should thrive in this era. We get a sense of how tenuous the argument is when the Nigerian filmmaker, Kunle Afolayan, who bridges the gap between the old tradition and the new Nollywood in terms of his thematic and subject focus, released his movie *Anikulapo* in 2021. The movie is exclusively made in the Yoruba language, but released with subtitles in French and English on Netflix. The subject and thematic focus is much like in the old celluloid era, where movies were made to depict complex relationships in the colonial and pre-colonial eras. When Netflix released how films made by Nigerians had fared on its platform, it was discovered that *Anikulapo* had been the most-watched Nigerian movie not just in Nigeria but in the diaspora (Akoroko 1). This shows people actually desire stories that reflect their traditions that had been the focus of the old era, rather than the city-focused movies which are often times bad adaptations of West films.

In conclusion, Fisher's observation about capitalism's attempt to obstruct us from seeking alternatives has political, economic, and cultural impacts. Ultimately, capital's aim is to limit our choices to itself, and through capitalist realism, forecloses in our minds any thought of another system. As I have shown in previous paragraphs, Fisher's poignant observation about capitalism in the West could also be used to reflect on the destruction of the welfare system which had promises when most African countries gained independence. It also shows its impacts on cultural production. The destruction of the welfare system reflects the global reach of capitalism.

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