Theses and Dissertations   Hunter College

Fall 2017

Exorcising Power

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by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Literature, Language, and Theory, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2017

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January 5th, 2018	Dr. Kelly Nims
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January 5th, 2018	Dr. Marlene Hennessy
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I. Introduction

An examination of certain aspects of John Milton's life and beliefs in the proper historical context may better allow us to appreciate the ambiguity and scholarly contentions surrounding Milton's greatest villain. Prior to the birth of his son, John Milton Sr. was disinherited by his family for his Protestant leanings. After moving from Oxford to London following this banishment, the elder John Milton took up work as an apprentice scrivener, a post that gradually flourished into a lucrative career involving property management and the extension of loans. The family's success in the merchant-adjacent industry allowed them to hire a private tutor for the younger Milton, and for the author to spend his childhood and most of his adult life in a position of privilege relative to the average seventeenth-century English family. As Milton climbed the professional ladder, he "demonstrate[d] a clear awareness of the merchant and his concerns" (Tormey 132), and, as the Secretary of Foreign Tongues following a bloody civil war, he composed frequent correspondence on behalf of Parliament in order to insure political agreements and alliances that benefited tradesmen and merchants, recognizing their "crucial role within the young commonwealth" (133).

Though such admonitions hardly seem controversial through a contemporary lens--one colored by the increasingly intertwined relationship between capitalistic industry and nation governments--Milton's words were contentious at the time they were written. The newly parliamentarian English government, much to the consternation of conservatives and traditionalists alike,

was the first in the nation's history to grapple with burgeoning mercantilism as an indispensable economic philosophy. In <u>Canada in the European Age, 1453-1919</u>, Naylor describes the rise of a more politically autonomous merchant class as related to a "growing awareness of the need to link public finance to trade rather than loot, of the need to assure that Parliamentary law with respect to the national merchant class as a whole replaced royal whim with respect to this or that set of sycophants and favour-seekers..." (51) While Milton was undoubtedly a friend and early advocate of the newly formed government (in addition to his official position within the Parliament, Milton holds the distinction as one of the first Europeans to present the Republic as the only acceptable form of government), his own personal associations and origins within the world of mercantilism may have played a role in shaping his socio-economic policies.

However, as with most matters related to Milton's beliefs, the issue is more complicated. Tormey writes that the author "resisted the traditional professional callings of his station" (137) but he remained cognizant that it was by virtue of his family's involvement with mercantilism that his lifestyle of unbroken rigorous academic and religious study was made possible. Though early writings out of his office advocated on behalf of the merchant class, his religion created ambivalences and conflict. As Tormey argues in his essay, "Milton's Satan and Early English Industry and Commerce: The Rhetoric of Self-Justification," debates between land-owning nobility and emerging mercantilist elites "focused the justification" of the latter, "but also drew attention to secondary consequences in a rapidly industrializing economic and cultural climate" (127). These emerging conflicts were

centered around industries that depended upon the exploitation of natural resources, such as lumber and mining. The latter in particular was of special concern to Milton, who "was well placed to elaborate a visionary position regarding the technological domination of nature and society" (Clemens 47).

There is, in general, scholarly agreement that the juxtaposition of mining and militarism in the hellish imagery of *Paradise Lost* is a none-too-veiled reflection of Milton's thoughts on the matter, which draw from a long line of religious and conservationist moralizing (Ovid and Spenser--two Miltonic influences--to name a few). Given the appropriate historical context, the parallels seem obvious; in Book One, Milton speaks of the armies gathered by the demon Mammon: "...his looks and thoughts/Were always downward bent, admiring more/The riches of Heav'n's pavement, trodden gold,/Than aught divine or holy else enjoyed/In vision beatific. By him first/Men also, and by his suggestion taught/Ransacked the center and with impious hands/Rifled the bowels of their mother Earth/For treasures better hid." (680-688) Clearly, Milton is laying bare his opposition to mining on religious grounds, going so far as to intimate that it is only by infernal urging and instruction that mining merchants have managed to draw ore--labeled by Milton as "the work of sulphur" (674)--from the earth.

Tormey takes these observations a step further, arguing that the rhetoric of Satan and his underlings is strikingly similar to that of a long line of pro-mining pamphleteers. This pre-industrialist discourse had kicked off beginning in the sixteenth century, pioneered by writers like Georgious Agricola (*De Re Metallica*) and Vancoccio Biringuccio (*Pirotechnica*), who "frame their practical discussion of

mining and metalworking trades with arguments calculated to establish their moral

legitimacy" (131). In Milton's age, the cause was taken up by authors like Thomas

Mun, whose tracts sought to establish and justify the burgeoning, capitalist-oriented

merchant class, as well as foreign trade relations (yet another thorn in the side of

the religiously-minded, as Mun's early work argued that economic relationships

with non-Christian nation-states would be necessary for the good of the country). In

his first tract, published in 1621, Mun employs the "rhetoric of self-justification" to

argue that England's entry into the West Indian trade networks would be vital,

arguing not on behalf of the merchant class to which he belonged, but Christianity as

a whole, remarking that such an expansion of commerce would wreak ruin upon

rival "infidel" empires. This sort of capitalistic philosophy by way of Machiavelli was

common enough in the pamphlets and writings of pro-merchant authors, and as

Tormey notes, "[these] commentators suppress mention of the motives of personal

profit or political power, stressing instead the collective profit and welfare

generated in industrial and commercial ventures and therefore legitimizing profit-

seeking labors and technologies within the 'natural' orders of a Christian theological

framework" (131-132).

      Milton, of course, saw right through this rhetoric and, as Tormey

convincingly proves, imbued his Satan with similarly capitalistic, self-justifying

words and phrases. Note that in the beginning of Book Two, Milton describes Satan

presiding over the council of fallen angels, writing: "...on her kings barbaric pearl

and gold/Satan exalted sat, by *merit* raised" (4-5, emphasis mine). The author

constantly underlines the folly of right by merit versus right by way of divine power,

making it clear that Satan and his brood find a comfort in their armies and worldly

accomplishments that is counterfeit compared to the pure and all-powerful

righteousness of God. In Book Four, Satan even has a moment of doubt--one that

functions as a mirror to Christ's agony in the garden--in which he momentarily

chastises himself for his unholy ambitions: "What could be less than to afford Him

praise/The easiest recompense, and pay Him thanks?/How due! Yet all His good

proved ill in me/And wrought but malice" (46-49). However, in the space of less

than a page, Satan has managed some impressive rhetorical and intellectual

gymnastics, finding a way to blame the almighty for his own revolt (since God, after

all, was the one who gave Satan free will): "Whom has thou then or what

t'accuse/But Heav'n's free love dealt equally to all?/Be then His love accursed, since

love or hate/To me alike it deals eternal woe!" (67-70) Plainly, there are some

parallels between the kind of fractured, splintering logic employed by Satan to

justify his rebellion and that of pro-merchant pamphleteers who argued that mining

was an act of Christian obedience. As Tormey writes of Gabriel Plattes' *Subterraneall*

Treasures: "[mining] is justified by God's grander providential plan, one in which

'Treasures' are 'ordained of GOD (no doubt) for the releefe and sustenance of men's

livings'" (135).

　　While we can follow the evidence of Tormey and others to draw conclusions

as to Milton's feelings on the sociopolitical arguments of his day, as reflected

through his work and most notably through his villains, it is slightly more difficult to

pin down the ways in which Milton used Satan as a sort of literary receptacle for his

own involvement with the mercantilist class that he--by way of his writing of Satan--

appears to abhor, or at least, wishes to distance himself from. As previously

mentioned, some of Milton's work seems to hint at the author's ambivalence when it

came to polemics against the merchant-class from which he rose, but the finished

products in Milton's oeuvre are (in fits and starts) fairly straightforward in their

sociopolitical positions. It is my contention that Milton was the one of the first

notable authors to reconsider the means by which villains may be employed as

agents of social control--be they agents of assertion of subversion--and that the

complexity and ambiguity of the villain as a literary device grows more pronounced

as English-language literature evolves, particularly as the medium crosses the

Atlantic and develops in concert with the fledgling United States. Adding to his long

repertoire of literary firsts, I submit that Milton is one of the first authors who has

engaged with the villain by way of what I term a *literary exorcism*: a process by

which authors, through the creation and treatment of their villains, reveal the

degree to which sociopolitical and ideological pressures shape the moral or political

framework of their narratives, and often, but not always, results in a conscious or

subconscious projection of conflicting parts of the self onto those same villains, or

into the ether of the text at large.

II. Theoretical Overview

Eagleton writes in *Literary Theory* of the ways in which literature reveals

broader political engagements outside the narrative realm: "Literature may appear

to be describing the world, and sometimes actually does so, but its real function is

performative: it uses language within certain conventions in order to bring about certain effects in a reader. It achieves something *in* the saying: it is language as a kind of material practice in itself, discourse as social action" (103). Indeed, *Paradise Lost* and other innumerable works are remembered and celebrated long after their heydays have come and gone, not for the *product* of their political engagement with a certain time and place, but for what the *method* of engagement reveals about authors and readers alike. Milton's opus is useful to the faithful and non-believer alike in that his treatment of Satan, in relation to his own socioeconomic position, reveals a deeper truth that has grown almost banal in its clarity; we are often most disturbed by what we see of ourselves in those we wish to "other" and vilify. Throughout the history of English-language literature, countless authors, from Milton to Díaz, as well as their readers, have grappled with the concept of the literary villain not only as a foil for the literary hero (the agent of positive reinforcement for any narrative's moral framework) but as a means of coming to grips with identity as it relates to both the self and the world at large. By examining a cross-section of English-language texts in their respective socio-historical contexts, we can observe a trend in which the relationship between the author and the villain shifts from one that is more archetypal/adversarial to one that--consciously or otherwise--approaches a method of narrative subversion. Gradually, this evolution gives way to new and radical ideas, both in terms of structure and the potential for political and social engagement.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler explores the concept of conscience, vis-à-vis Freud and Nietzsche, as a replication of the visceral desires it is meant to

repress or erase. She argues that what we term the conscience is the result of "social regulation" imposed upon the self from the outside, and that the formation of the will arises, in part, through an act of repression (66). However, Butler challenges the notion that "social regulation" can be said to exist apart from the formation of the self, and in fact proclaims it "complicitous in the formation of the psyche and its desire" (78). In other words, the self, and by extension, the author and the text, cannot be considered separate from any dominant social ideologies that exist and press upon the author within a certain time and place. By merely existing and having consciousness, the author internalizes the political dialogues and moral frameworks of the day, and therefore, any written text is effectively an argument between the author and sociopolitical institutions. The degree to which an author is consciously aware of this argument may vary on a case-by-case basis, but all texts, in some way, grapple with dominant institutions and their associated effects.

Butler continues, citing Freud: "...the self-imposed imperatives that characterize the circular route of conscience are pursued and applied precisely because they are now the site of the very satisfaction that they seek to prohibit. In other words, prohibition becomes the occasion for reliving the instinct under the rubric of the condemning law...The 'afterlife' of prohibited desire takes place through the prohibition itself, where the prohibition not only sustains, but is *sustained by* the desire that it forces into renunciation. In this sense, then, renunciation takes place through the very desire that is renounced: the desire is *never* renounced, but becomes preserved and reasserted in the very structure of renunciation" (81). Freud and Butler are both arguing that this is not merely an

internalization of applied power, but a way that the conscience recreates the visceral satisfaction of desire by denying it. The desire to adhere to that "prohibition" replaces the desire to engage in the prohibited. For the purposes of this paper, I am transposing this theory onto the process of writing literature, and argue that in attempting to adhere to social pressures and ideological authority, the parts of an author's identity that may be in conflict with those prohibitions--the "desires" or "demons"--become intensified, and the "exorcism" I am discussing is a way for the author to grapple with that growing unease and shift the experience of the "desire" to the experience of the "prohibition" of desire. Applied to authors and texts, the piece of identity that must be denied is projected out of the author and onto the villain, or in some cases, into the text at large. The villain and text are the sites at which the author's renunciation is preserved and reasserted.

Butler cites the then-current U.S. military policy regarding homosexuality as an example of her theory in action. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" perfectly illustrates the phenomenon of forming a subject through what she terms "*renunciation* as an act of speech: to say 'I am a homosexual' is fine as long as one also *promises* 'and I don't intend to act'" (82). Butler's thoughts on renunciation as a formative act are compelling when applied to literature; authors (subjects) create texts (objects) as an act of speech, and the formation of villains within a narrative can be read both as an act of renunciation of the self and as partially formative to the ideology of the text. It is obvious enough to say that villains serve as dramatic foils for heroes, who assert and advance the moral authority of the text, but villains themselves are also formed via acts of renunciation, which I am terming "literary exorcisms." The author's text

bends in response to social pressures or "social regulation," but as Freud asserted, the pieces of the self that come into direct contradiction with these pressures, as well as the ideology pushed forward by the text, are not so easily destroyed. Rather than simply vanishing, these parts of the self, suddenly found in conflict with the will of the subject, are expunged into the text, forming the villain in an act of renunciation. In the case of Satan and his minions, Milton has effectively renounced his own intractably problematic ties to mercantilism by transposing the language of pro-merchant and pro-mining pamphleteers onto the villains of *Paradise Lost*. This "act of speech" exorcises the conflict between Milton's upbringing and identity and the moral framework of the text by re-purposing it as a formative element of the text's villains. Freud posited that our base desires never go away, but that the prohibitions we absorb and then apply to those desires simply turn back in on themselves; therefore, villains can be said to be the 'afterlife' of prohibition of which Butler, vis-a-vis Freud, speaks. The villain cannot exist without the part of the self the author wishes to exorcise, just as the prohibition cannot exist without the desire it wishes to renounce. Likewise, the creation of the villain does not erase the exorcised conflict, but merely repositions it within the text, transporting and transforming it from a part of the subject into a part of an object. Examining a cross-section of English-language literature across a wide enough timeline reveals that the degree to which these exorcisms are unconscious or employed by authors as means of responding to, subverting, or reconfiguring power varies from movement to movement and author to author, but the method by which authors become aware of

these processes and harness their potential increases exponentially with the progression of time.

As we contemplate and observe how this kind of subversion takes place in practice, engagement with theoretical conversations around power dynamics through the lens of identity becomes necessary, as perceptions of cultural and class difference are inexorably wound up in the ways human beings think about, exercise, and respond to power. The observation that pervasive cultural hegemony as promoted through colonialism distorts perceptions of reality is not a new and groundbreaking one, but widespread acknowledgment and support of this idea has remained somewhat elusive in both critical and popular circles. Human beings, even those who toil in the field of literary criticism, tend to approach reality from a results-oriented perspective, and attempt to reverse-engineer their critical interpretations of literary and social movements from empirical observations. In light of this, it is not altogether surprising that groundbreaking works on the subject of colonialism and its social and artistic fallout--such as Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* or Said's *Orientalism*--contain ideas that, though gathering dust, still apply to critical conversations about race, culture, and literature today, primarily because institutional authorities have effectively resisted their arguments. Said's landmark work focuses on the acknowledgment of power structures in the crafting of shared narratives, and the ways in which these shared narratives not only distort and re-interpret reality, but that they may *create* and *re-shape* culture and reality altogether. In his introduction, Said writes: "...ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their

configurations of power, also being studied" (5). In light of this, it is obvious that observing the ways in which different authors draw both their heroes and villains reveals much about the ways in which these authors perceive those "configurations of power," and what, if any, subversion or reinforcement the author wishes to consciously or subconsciously apply to those configurations through the methods by which those literary roles are filled. Said continues: "One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away...any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom...from...the late 1840s until the present in the United States must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies. Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a *created body of theory and practice* [my emphasis] in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment" (6). Said's phrasing inadvertently reveals the source of much popular suspicion regarding the fallout of colonialism, especially the extent to which its literary products serve to reinforce its tenants. The usage of the phrase "created body of theory" implies a conscious and meticulously planned system of domination, in which all those who belong to the dominant culture are complicit. The analysis and interpretation of different authors and their works, which make up the bulk of this paper, will hopefully shed light on the degrees to which authors are engaged with issues of cultural dominance, for better or for ill, but a misapprehension of what constitutes a "created body of theory" creates defensiveness and skepticism amongst readers and critics alike when it comes to engaging with postcolonial arguments. Said is intent on inspecting

the ways in which cultural hegemony ripples outwards to affect all that wield it and all who have it wielded upon them, either by circumstance or by design. In the case of H.P. Lovecraft, for example, the through line becomes somewhat obvious under analysis; the author was pointedly obsessed by notions of white supremacy and divine right by way of cultural domination, and the whole of his work, both directly and through thinly veiled metaphor, reflects a political agenda that preaches fear and mistrust of the other and projects (or exorcises) Lovecraft's own personal failures into a world in which the place of humanity is ultimately meaningless. After all, any universe in which an educated, Anglo-Saxon purebred could be forced to live side by side with immigrants and "foreigners" must, in Lovecraft's view, reveal a world that has no moral or logical center to which we may orient ourselves. This may appear a retreading, but when we consider the inherent, racially charged nature of Lovecraft's work and examine it in concert with Said's theories of Orientalism, it's important to understand that the "investment" into this "created body of theory and practice" encompasses not only Lovecraft's contributions to the world of literature, but also the acceptance and proliferation of those contributions by both scholarly and lay audiences, limited though both may be. This is not to suggest that problematic texts ought to be purged in the name of combating the problems of colonialism; on the contrary, informed considerations of these works might prove to be very useful in understanding and challenging the political frameworks upon which they are built. However, by the same token that we have inspected the theoretical usefulness of texts outside of authorial intent vis-à-vis Eagleton, we must also accept that authorial voices, in and of themselves, constitute

"configurations of power" by virtue of being acknowledged as authorial voices at all, and doubly so when those voices belong, as they so often do, to members of a dominant class. This is not to say that reading or enjoyment of Lovecraft, or any "problematic" literature represents a knowing or tacit endorsement of the text's political messaging. Rather, the endurance of these texts and, by extension, their ideas and political frameworks (both stated and hidden), do work upon active readers or even those passively involved in the cultural zeitgeist. The ideas carried within literature, both those inserted by authors and those divined by readers, while unpredictable and of varying efficacy, are never inert, especially when they are primarily created and transmitted by a dominant culture. This knowledge proves vital to our understanding of how power operates within literature, not only as a means of shaping and influencing authorial intent, but as an inescapable force that presents and reasserts itself throughout the process of living, writing, and reading.

II. Shakespeare and Colonialism

The Bard, like Milton, remains an enduring literary figure that resonates throughout history not so much for the narrative content of his works but for their multidimensional nature. Both Milton and Shakespeare achieve a kind of literary transcendence because their works are useful not only as the objects, but as the *means* of rhetorical engagement. To clarify: *The Tempest* is a work that has endured as an academically useful one centuries after its creation because it functions both as a text that can be analyzed through different academic lenses *and* as a lens in and

of itself. The drama's study and reception has been riddled with controversy from its first performances in 1611, as the editors Virgina and Alden Vaughan note in the introduction to the Arden edition: "...through centuries of changing interpretations by legions of scholars...*The Tempest* has resonated with unusual power and variety...although other Shakespearean plays enjoy worldwide recognition in the aftermath of the British Empire, *The Tempest* has been uniquely adopted by formerly colonized nations in refashioning their post-colonial identities" (2). The central figure that these myriad reformations and analyses depend upon is of course the play's apparent villain, Caliban.

Caliban is a relevant step in charting the progression of the evolution of the villain (although speaking strictly chronological terms, he makes his first appearance decades before the first publication of *Paradise Lost*). Like Milton's Satan, the character has been analyzed and interpreted by a wide host of scholars, and like Satan, one of the most contentious academic arguments surrounding Caliban lies in differences of opinion as to authorial intent and its relative value in relation to the frustratingly vague and infinitely broad issue of "meaning." On one side of the coin, there are the scholars who contend that Caliban is a useful figure in reading *The Tempest* as a meditation on the impact of colonialism and its withering gaze that creates the other both in the mind of the colonizer and the colonized. On the other, there is an endless parade of Shakespearean literalists, who respond to such post-colonial readings with thinly veiled contempt. Ben Johnson was notably disturbed by Caliban, though in *Caliban's Masque*, Kevin Pask asserts that this was not a result of "Caliban's colonial or racial otherness," but rather the result of the

ways in which Shakespeare portrayed that which was designated as other and monstrous with sickening physical clarity and as a fully considered character rather than merely a dramatic foil: "Shakespeare...has naturalized Caliban's monstrosity" (739-740). Indeed, Shakespeare, like Milton, gives his otherworldly demon plenty of opportunities to present his side of the story, often in ways that are not altogether unconvincing. At the character's first appearance, Caliban bitterly declares, "This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother/Which thou tak'st from me/When thou cam'st first/Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me/Water with berries in't, and teach me how/To name the bigger light and how the less/That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee/And showed thee all the qualties o'th'isle...Cursed be I that did so!...For I am all the subjects that you have/Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me/In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me/The rest o'th'island" (1.2.332-345). This is dismissed by Prospero as a lie, although no specific refutation is given other than to say that Caliban attempted to rape Miranda, which Caliban--somewhat flippantly--seems to confirm: "Would't had been done/Thou didst prevent me, I had peopled else/This isle with Calibans" (1.2.350-352).

From the beginning, Cailban is set up in contrast to the other native of the island, Ariel, who essentially behaves like a "model minority" throughout the whole of the text. Beautiful, obedient, and grateful, Ariel's reward for submission to Prospero is a limited kind of freedom and heaping adulation from the island's interlopers. However, it is Caliban who, somewhat curiously, endures in the minds of audiences and critics alike. If postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* so

woefully misapprehend Shakespeare, then we must ask what lay within the play in the first place that proved to be such a fertile staging ground for these so-called political hijackings. Much of the play's content gels neatly with postcolonial theory in ways that seem obvious from a contemporary perspective. Caliban has a self-destructive, animal appetite for liquor and women, calling to mind racist caricatures of indigenous peoples of both North America and Africa, as well as the descendants of African-American slaves. However, it is the mechanical workings of the text that challenge the hard-line "traditionalist" viewpoint that *The Tempest* is, stripped of all political interpretation and whittled down to its authorial bones, simply a tale about some magic goings-on, or a thinly veiled allusion to Shakespeare's own then-impending retirement.

Comparing Caliban to other Shakespearean villains, particularly those of a similar "othered" designation, we can see that critics of Shakespeare's day found Caliban's character noteworthy because of the way the author insisted on writing a character that was--for all aesthetical purposes--nothing like *Hamlet*'s Claudius (a human man of this earth, given ample stage time and dialogue) or the witches of *Macbeth* (supernatural antagonists that only briefly appear to set the plot upon its course). Caliban is written by Shakespeare as both a representation of the "other" and a character in his own right, full of pathos and imagination, rather than as a momentary detour into the fanciful. Caliban's very first lines are an accusation of colonization and enslavement, and nowhere in the play's text is this aggressive act of repossession, undertaken by the exiled Prospero and Miranda, ever refuted. Miranda and Prospero both admonish Caliban, ostensibly because of his sexual

assault on the former, yet the offense is barely lingered over in the entire course of the play, and the language of their admonishments is steeped in Caliban's appearance as well as his "savage" nature. Miranda states that, from the beginning, she "pitied thee/took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour/One thing or other/When thou didst not, savage/Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like/A thing most brutish/I endowed thy purposes/With words that made them known" (1.2.354-360). Caliban's primary offense is the root cause of his aggressions: namely, a refusal to submit to the will of the colonizer and surrender his birthright. His subsequent imprisonment by Prospero is justified by his attempted rape, but the dialogue of both Prospero and Miranda dials into disobedience and revolt in spite of supposedly benevolent subjugation as the source of his punishment.

Scholars who bristle at postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* tend to build their rebuttals on historical grounds, and generally point to presumed or confirmed facts about the early stagings as evidence that Caliban represents little more than an archetypal villain who serves as a dramatic foil and little else. The adjacent conclusion is that productions and criticism that position Caliban as a legitimately aggrieved party--in an effort to use the play as a lens for examining the fallout of colonialism--are built upon shaky ground at best, and at worst are hijacking the intended, textual spirit of the work in order to advance contemporary political agendas. I am not interested in arguing the former point, primarily because it is an irrelevant theoretical confrontation that serves as the basis for the latter, which clumsily resists the critical importance of not only Shakespeare, but literature

as a whole. As Eagleton notes, the value of a work of literature transcends the

material conditions in which it was written, a point that anyone trying to teach

Shakespeare or Milton to a class of 21st-century students can surely agree with.

Whether or not Caliban was meant to be a fish-man or a defiant Caribbean freedom

fighter is, in the grand scheme of things, window dressing. Rather, what is most

important about Caliban from a purely theoretical viewpoint is the way in which he

is positioned as an ostensible villain within the narrative of *The Tempest*. Though

Caliban definitely serves as an antagonist from a dramatic perspective (the

thwarting of his conspiracy is vital to the resolution of the play), Shakespeare

plainly draws the character as far more complicated and morally ambiguous than

past players who served similar purposes. He is more rightfully aligned in terms of

character depth with Shakespeare's tragic anti-heroes--Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet,

et al--than a Malvolio or a Claudius. Pask notes that "Caliban seems to threaten the

collapse of hierarchies, especially the hierarchies regulated by aristocratic marriage,

giving Shakespeare the opportunity to return to the connections between

aristocratic and plebian sexuality. Caliban possesses a plausible claim to aristocratic

status: possession of the island by inheritance from his mother Sycorax. (Prospero

never disputes this claim.)...He is more a part of the system of aristocratic marriage

than anyone in the play cares to admit" (751-752). This is the crucial component of

The Tempest that lends theoretical credibility to postcolonial readings of Caliban.

Always one for literary subterfuge, Shakespeare presents the audience with a villain

who covertly embodies the moral framework upon which the "heroes" of the play

stake their claims, and in doing so, manages to undercut the dominant sociopolitical

argument of the day whilst also elevating the ethical relevance of the villain that supposedly exists outside of and in opposition to it. It is this framework--an inspection of those who exist as both the victims and radioactive fallout of a dominant social idea--that postcolonial interpretations of *The Tempest* are built upon. These readings find purchase in transposing that framework into contemporary times, which necessitates removing a (mostly) bygone social argument (aristocratic marriage/birthright), and replacing it with a relevant one (colonialism and its consequences). This is not a case of historical revisionism, as detractors of such theories claim, but is arguably the *only* logical way to examine *The Tempest* as a political document through a contemporary lens. As Eagleton notes, the "actual human subjects" considered by Shakespeare himself are of little importance when grappling with the theoretical usefulness of *The Tempest*, in that they do not essentially change the literary arguments of the *text*, even if they may slightly alter the material subjects described by the author.

As Pask argues, Caliban exists as the simultaneous victim and product of the social conventions of Shakespeare's day. The commentary offered on aristocratic marriage and right of birth is byzantine and difficult, if not impossible, to decode. If Caliban is indeed a rightful heir to the island, then by what moral right does Prospero assert his will, and on what side of this moral argument does the author himself fall? It's difficult to say for certain, as Caliban's narrative function within the play aligns with other Shakespearean villains; he is dispatched as part of the play's resolution towards harmony. Yet he is also the character upon which the social critique described by Pask is built. How then to assess Shakespeare's relationship to

Caliban? We may speculate by examining what little we know about the author's life, and his relationship to British high society throughout. The first confirmed mention of the author appears in 1592, in Robert Greene's *Groats-Worth of Wit*. Though there is some debate as to how long Shakespeare had been an acknowledged presence in the London theatrical scene at that point, Greene clearly considered the author enough of a force to attack him in print: "...there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes Factotum*, [jack of all trades] is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country" (Chiari 143). It is generally believed that Greene is here accusing the upstart, middle-class Shakespeare of aspiring to great heights more properly left to college-educated and aristocratically-approved authors. Shakespeare's career took off from there. The best companies in London were performing the author's plays by the time he died, and his personal stakes in these had made him a rich man. Royal patronage undoubtedly embellished his celebrity and reputation as the country's leading playwright, and scholars generally agree that Shakespeare regularly used his work to send both overt messages and coded commentaries to the government and peoples of Britain both (Rankin 358). In *The Crisis of Aristocracy in Julius Caesar*, Wayne Rebhorn argues extensively that the play may be read as "depicting a struggle among aristocrats--senators--aimed at preventing one of their number from transcending his place and destroying the system in which they all ruled as a class" (78). Though *Julius Caesar* was written in or around 1599, some seven years after Greene's scathing critique, and approximately a decade before *The Tempest*, a

definite thematic through line can be observed. Shakespeare was born into relative comfort (his father was an alderman), but his family was not one of special esteem in the world of the arts, and his meteoric rise clearly rankled his contemporaries that *were* members of such an elite, and these individuals were clearly suspicious that one lacking formal education would dare to breathe in the rarefied atmosphere of London playwrights.

In this light, Pask's assertion that Caliban and *The Tempest* as a whole exist partly as a condemnation of the conventions of aristocratic marriage and social hierarchy comes into sharper focus. The success, partly due to royal patronage, that Shakespeare had already enjoyed by the completion of *The Tempest* may explain the author's ambivalence in fully forming this argument, and may also shed light on the ambiguous nature of Caliban. If we read the character as both a victim and product of the aristocracy, we can see echoes of Shakespeare himself, grappling with his own place within a social order that had previously rejected him. However, it is this social and political ascension itself that prevents the author from directly impugning the very class to which he now belongs. This is where we see evidence of Shakespeare's own "literary exorcism," one not dissimilar to Milton's relationship with Satan decades later; the author wishes to covertly raise the question, yet cannot ask it full-throated out of fear of alienation from the social order that his own good fortune and artistic merit rests upon. The "exorcism" is set in motion by mention of Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda, descriptions of his supposedly inborn savage nature, and a conclusion that sees his defeat as righteous and of paramount importance to the text as a whole.

By this token, and to a degree much greater than Milton's relationship with Satan, we may read Shakespeare's relationship with Caliban and *The Tempest* as somewhat tragic; Caliban's role as a mouthpiece for one of the text's critical arguments has been somewhat destabilized out of mechanical and narrative necessity. Julia Lupton writes in her essay, "Creature Caliban," that a creature is "a thing always in the process of undergoing creation...perpetually becoming created, subject to transformation at the behest of the arbitrary commands of an Other" (1). Lupton argues that the quality that defines a creature is a certain kind of limited autonomy that remains chained to the will of an outside authority. Within *The Tempest*, Caliban is a subject who bends to the will of Prospero, both in terms of literal narrative (his defeat is required for the play's harmonious resolution) and textual ideology (Prospero's victory over Caliban's designs is indicative of a textual overriding of truth spoken to power). So, too, is Shakespeare caught in a strange paradox by which his sovereign power as an author remains under the shadow of looming political authority. Indeed, Shakespeare's Caliban is intractably an extension of Shakespeare himself, his purpose and identity as a character splintered into multiple, and sometimes conflicting theoretical and narrative directions, in the name of satisfying both Shakespeare's political and narrative agendas, which are in turn worked upon by outside agents of what Butler refers to as "social regulation." This theory may be extended outward to Prospero, whom critics have often viewed as a stand-in for Shakespeare himself. The messy notions of empire and birthright grappled with in *The Tempest* are complicated by the seeming moral contradictions baked into the play's narrative and pointedly characterized by the relationship

between Prospero and Caliban. A strictly postcolonial reading of this struggle must position Caliban as the aggrieved party and Prospero as the usurper. Whether or not the audience is meant to regard Prospero and Miranda's justification for Caliban's enslavement (the aforementioned rape, his ungratefulness for civilization, et cetera) as credible is less clear.

In *Shakespeare's Politics*, Christopher Morris argues that the author had a certain royalist bent, but one that has been exaggerated by contemporary scholars who fail to completely grasp the sociohistorical context of seventeenth-century England. "No one could call Shakespeare uncritical of kings. He was as well aware as any of his contemporaries that there is a distinction between good kings and tyrants. Everyone knew this but everyone knew that there was not much to be done about a tyrant. There were no legitimate sanctions to be invoked against him. The tyrant had perforce to be left to God, who quite possibly had sent the tyrant as punishment for national shortcomings" (301). If we accept this assertion, it follows that Prospero's apparent conquering and brutalization of Caliban may at once be tyrannical but also "right" in the purely narrative sense--that is to say, representative of the order to which the chaos of the play's storm and ensuing conflict must give way. It is impossible to know for sure Shakespeare's true feelings about Prospero's treatment of Caliban and Ariel, but it stands to reason, given the author's own background and the trajectory of his career, that he may have, at the very least, felt a certain kinship with the deformed monster of the island, and was not so much morally aligned with Prospero's colonialist worldview as he was resigned to it. By that token, Shakespeare's "literary exorcism" by way of Caliban is

all the more understandable, since presenting an unwavering loyalty to King & Country was a not only a matter of personal belief, but one of spiritual and national character.

Lupton writes that Caliban exists as "an emblem of what Giorgio Agamben called 'bare life,' pure vitality denuded of its symbolic significance and political capacity and then sequestered within the domain of civilization as its disavowed core" (2). Applying this notion to Morris' comments about kings, tyrants, and the perceived legitimacy of criticism in the time of Shakespeare, we can clearly see the exorcism that results in Caliban's emergence and centering within *The Tempest* as a response to applied power, both in the form of royal patronage and prevailing attitudes surrounding royalty as an accepted and absorbed component of national identity. As Lupton asserts, he "takes shape at the negative intersection between (general) Humanity and (specific) Culture" (4). His indeterminate nature, reflected in the myriad ways that the character has been interpreted and reinterpreted over centuries, is rooted in the textual push and pull Shakespeare applies to him within the text, leaving the villain to function as both a response to the application of power and as an internalization of it. This represents a perfect example of a "literary exorcism" that results in a kind of buried subversion that only reveals certain dimensions of its theoretical power through the reading of it, rather than the writing; Caliban may not explicitly challenge or subvert the dominating ideology of Prospero in a superficial reading, but he serves as the vessel for buried conflicts and contradictions within the text that become apparent when pressed upon.

III. Temperance Literature and Subversion

A consideration of nationalism is necessary when discussing the means by which villains, as literary devices, may be deployed in the aim of either asserting or subverting dominant sociopolitical ideologies throughout history. Years after the deaths of both Shakespeare and Milton, Prospero's "brave new world" was on the brink of civic implosion as rifts between loyalists and revolutionaries rattled the tenuous order of the British-American colonies. The United States is a nation with the attractive mythos of the revolutionary woven through its character and history, and dominant conservative actors throughout its lifespan often return to these violent beginnings as a means of appealing to rank and file nationalism as a way of whipping up support for any number of policies that might otherwise appear authoritarian or exploitative. There is a certain romance to the notion that such a young civilization, founded by idealistic upstarts and champions of democracy, would shape itself into a world power in only a few hundred years, but the popular conception of colonial America often ignores or whitewashes the economic imperatives of both British colonization and the nascent days of the American Revolution. The notion of empires, dependent as they are upon popular appeal to a certain extent, obfuscates the degree to which imperialism is a direct extension of trade and economics rather than a philosophical or narrowly political method of expanding "values" and "culture". The white man's burden is an interesting bit of wrongheaded theory in that it accidentally expresses an accurate reading of

imperialism, but swaps the motivations with the results. Colonization occurs as a means of economic expansion, and cultural expansion thus follows as a means of shoring up economic interests. The two are quite obviously, inexorably intertwined with one another, but even contemporary readings of "culture" tend to confuse the reasons for which imperial expansion becomes necessary in the eyes of a nation state and the justifications for such hegemonic practices that both shore up economic conquests whilst expanding political ones.

A collection of essays published in London in 1763 (*Essays and Letters on the Following and Very Important Subjects*) contains an entire chapter devoted to the problem of "idleness" (the editor notes that the chapter was originally published in 1730). This compilation is a series of admonitions steeped in religious justifications, as the preface makes unmistakably clear. "Of Idleness," like the other chapters, tends to pore over the subject matter through a spiritual lens, but the text, like many religious polemics, reveals political motivations. Written approximately a century after the self-justifying pamphleteers that Milton abhorred, "Of Idleness" has moved on to a full-blown exceptionalist philosophy that couches its arguments in skepticism of public education. Writing of citizens who have risen past their inborn station to great heights, in part because of literacy, the unknown author offers an acknowledgement coupled with a caveat: "[these men] resolved to prevent that inconvenience [illiteracy] in their children; and there is no doubt but this care, under proper regulations, and rightly directed, is very necessary and useful: but when it proceeds so far as to keep lads many years at their books, who have no genius, it only makes idle pendatick drones of those, who, if they had been brought

up to trade, or some mechanick business, might have been industrious useful

members of the commonwealth...it is certain, therefore, that none ought to be

educated wholly to literature, but such whose early abilities promise great

proficiency in learning; *or those who by birth are entitled to such estates, as put them*

above the necessity of industry..." (266-267, emphasis mine) The author's objection is

rooted in economic and class anxieties, as the text makes it clear that the offense of

commoners pursuing that which is available to "those entitled to such estates" by

birth is equal or greater to the offense of becoming an economic burden upon the

state as a result of such high-mindedness. These attitudes endured as the American

colonies were established, and remained essentially unchanged during and

following the revolution, as full, democratic representation was more or less

confined to white, property-owning men. This curious political contradiction is

better discussed in a different essay, but the enduring values it created are of special

interest in our examination of literary villains, and the ways in which they are part

and parcel of sociopolitical arguments. The latter half of the nineteenth century

marks a period of rapid social upheaval within the United States, and nationalism

finds itself at the forefront of any number of discussions being hotly debated in the

literature of the 1850s and beyond: Westward expansion, abolitionism, the place of

women in society, and temperance. It follows that the heroes and villains of these

stories, steeped as they are in the contentious arguments of the day, reveal much

about the politics of their various authors, and also reflect the ways in which these

figures are useful in *creating* enduring political narratives.

The enduring anxiety surrounding "idleness" lurks in the background of the nineteenth-century American temperance movement, though other political actors tend to dominate scholarly discussions. From a contemporary standpoint, temperance and prohibition are often understood to be conservative movements, given the ways in which attitudes about religion, gender, and intoxication have shifted across the political spectrum over time. However, in the context of the 1850s, temperance was a radically progressive movement, and was ancillary to issues surrounding domestic violence, devotion, and religious morality. Still, a thorough reading of some of the charged texts of this era and movement reveal that temperance, and many other radical movements of the decade, are rooted in a prevailing economic nationalism that has roots traced back through the country's history, across the ocean, and to Milton's day, when the synthesis of morality and capital first began to foment. The previously discussed "Of Idleness" tract clearly lays the blame for such moral failings at the feet of an improperly maintained sociopolitical hierarchy. This anxiety that endured through the colonization of the Americas and the founding of the United States is cast into sharp relief when we consider the rapidly changing economic landscape of the nineteenth century. The beginnings of modernization had a marked effect on the way Americans thought about work and capital. In an 1890 issue of *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Albert Bushnell Hart describes these shifts as reflected in changing demographics: "Steam power, artificial roads, and the use of large craft have changed the character of manufactures and commerce. The political importance of cities has diminished, and their commercial importance has increased" (131). As the United States

transitioned from a civilization founded primarily upon agricultural trade to an

industrial one, the country saw a shift in the ways family life and the associated

dissemination of moral values was structured. The pre-industrial United States

functioned primarily as an agrarian society, and multi-generational homes were par

for the course, as was patrilineal employment. Sons often did the work of their

fathers, their wives often moved into the homes they grew up in, and grandchildren

lived alongside grandparents. Sudden and rapid industrialization began to change

the scope and structure of American family life, and with it, altered the assumed role

of families and households in imparting moral values to future generations. Hart

indicates that nineteenth century Americans were cognizant of these changes: "This

is a most significant and fundamental fact; for it means a gradual change of the basis

on which our institutions rest. The republic was founded for a country largely

agricultural, with a diffused population, having means of easy subsistence. I believe

that it will soon need to stand, and will stand, for a population of which one-half

lives in towns of 4,000 inhabitants or upwards" (145-146). Unease with the re-

ordering of American life is reflected in much of the temperance literature of the

time; there are countless tales of the corrupting qualities of not just the vice readily

available within cities, but the spiritual nature of cities themselves and how they

reshaped Americans' relationship to labor. John W. Frick writes: "...given the

enigmatic complexity of the great cities, [and] the social upheaval and moral

collapse they represented to large segments of the American populace...it is hardly

surprising that the city was commonly represented as being a veritable moral

swamp, and that the metropolis as an omnipresent menace should have become a

widely recognized and disseminated stereotype..." (20) This trope is well-represented in narratives like George Lippard's *The Quaker City*, and it emphasizes the interestingly complex socioeconomic agenda of such tales, one that is at once suspicious of the machinations of industrialization yet also anxious over the perceived breakdown of the American work ethic, and the spiritual and economic corruption that comes with the indulgence of idleness. However, let us first consider an example of popular temperance literature, as it provides an interesting window into the moral anxieties of the period through its interesting and altogether unorthodox treatment of villains.

Timothy Shay Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* was first published in 1854, three years after Maine passed one of the first state prohibition laws and sparked a national conversation about the propriety of governmental involvement in the temperance movement. A preface to the first edition stops just shy of suggesting that *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* should be considered a work of nonfiction, but admonishes the reader that the work is "marred by no exaggerations, but exhibits the actualities of bar-room life, and the consequences flowing therefrom, with a sever simplicity, and adherence to troths , that gives to every picture a Daguerrean vividness" (652). There can be no doubt that *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* is an extremely important text in unraveling the relationships between literature and politics in the nineteenth century, as Arthur clearly intended for the work to be consumed as something approaching a historical document, and approached the agenda of the temperance movement as one that intended to protect not just the spiritual and moral lives of Americans, but the very

fabric of the national character, as well as the material security of the country and its institutions. For Arthur, the country's problems with booze were malignant, and he saw that the proliferation of alcohol would lead not only to personal ruin and social degradation, but also to the economic as well as spiritual decay of American society. An editor's note to a reprinting of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* in <u>Popular American Literature of the 19th Century</u> identifies the text as "noteworthy for the way it captures how drinking is far more than simply a private act...Arthur was deeply concerned with choices whose consequences spread out like ever-widening concentric circles. Bad decisions could not only destroy and individual, but they could ultimately topple a nation" (Gutjahr 651).

On first examination, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* appears to function as a critique of unchecked capitalism, and Arthur's narrator clucks his tongue at tavern-keeper Simon Slade's apparent greed and moral compromises in the name of wealth accumulation. An early exchange between the two marks a clear wariness of the potential pitfalls of commerce unchecked by moral responsibility. Slade informs his guest that he used to make a living as a miller, but wanted to achieve more financial security with less manual labor, and so sold his mill and opened a tavern, the Sickle and Sheaf. The narrator inquires as to whether or not the mill provided for Slade and his family, and Slade answers in the affirmative.

> "A thousand dollars, clear profit, in so *useful* [emphasis mine] a business, ought to have satisfied you," said I.
> "There you and I differ," answered the landlord 'Every man desires to make as much money as possible, and with the least labour. I hope to make two or three thousand

dollars a year, over and above all expenses, at tavern-keeping. My bar alone ought to

yield me that sum. A man with a wife and children very naturally tries to do as well

by them as possible."

"Very true; but,' I ventured to suggest, 'will this be doing as well by them as if you

had kept on at the mill?"(656)

The narrator begins to half-heartedly explain the moral compromise in a career of

tavern-keeping, but remembers that his previous attempts were politely rebuffed,

and so remains silent as Slade argues a precursor to trickle-down economics. The

Sickle and Sheaf, it is said, has increased the value of all the property and businesses

surrounding it, and of the town of Cedarville itself. Great distinctions are made

between "a good tavern" and a "miserable old tumbledown of an affair," and

arguments are made on behalf of the tavern as a means of "advancing the interests

of Cedarville," to the point that Slade begins to swell slightly with hubris, slyly

suggesting that he did not disagree with one resident's assertion that he ought to be

rewarded for his supposed contribution to the community. The narrator takes all

this in stride, but with clear wariness, and inasmuch as this character is meant to

serve as a mouthpiece for Arthur and the temperance movement as a whole, this

wariness can be interpreted as a suspicion of the corrupting nature of capitalism at

large. However, closer reading tempers this analysis somewhat, leading a reader to

the conclusion that Arthur's quarrel is not strictly with the philosophy that

undergirds American capitalism, but the consequences of a supposedly diminishing

moral and (presumably religious) authority. Arthur and the temperance movement

as a whole may have couched their arguments in the language of economics and prosperity, but *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* positions presumed strength and hubris in the face of temptation as the origin of an impending national downfall.

This leads us to the ways in which Arthur plays with the role of villainy within *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*. There are certainly characters that serve as physical manifestations of the evil lurking behind tavern-keeping and drunkenness, but while these figures are drawn as somewhat malevolent forces, most are also regarded by Arthur as tragic victims rather than inherently malicious actors. The thrust of the narrative is built around the degradation of Cedarville and its residents, and this decay is manifested within the only characters that could rightly be construed as "villains," tavern-keeper Simon Slade chief among them. They do not actively campaign against the tale's hero (arguably, none exists), but rather, gradually succumb to the corrupting influence of drink and its consequences. The "tragic hero" is a well-worn trope within literature, but in *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, Shay introduces us to the much less common tragic villain. Slade's fall from grace comes not only as a result of misplaced faith in his own fortitude; he shrugs off the moral responsibility Shay clearly believes rests upon all *businessmen*: "'Thousands and hundreds of thousands are indebted to useful work, occupying many hours through each day, and leaving them with wearied bodies at night, for their safe passage from yielding youth to firm, resisting manhood. It might not be with you as it is now, had leisure and freedom to go in and out when you pleased, been offered at the age of nineteen.'" (668) This admonition is revealing in two ways. First, it succinctly elucidates the difference between a full-throated critique of industrial

capitalism and a critique of industrial capitalism lacking the proper mechanisms of *social control.* The issue at hand is not that industrialization is eroding the value of labor and diluting the job market, but rather it is Slade's disinclination to *set a good example* by not working from sun-up to sun-down for "honest wages" that pushes the working men of Cedarville into ruin. Secondly, it marks an occasion in literature wherein an author chooses to forgo any semblance of a traditional "hero" or "villain" and instead opts to focus on the victimization of an entire community as the result of the corrupting influence of alcohol and idleness. These abstract concepts more directly occupy the space of the "villain" within *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* than Simon Slade or the corrupted-from-the-start Joe Morgan. It is sin and vice that lead the former past the point of redemption, brought on by the demon drink, and little else. Near the tale's conclusion, the narrator speaks with a patron, who himself has been injured as a result of a drunken brawl, and who wails at the powerlessness of hard-working Americans before drink: "'It was the rum, and nothing else. Why, some of the very men who acted the most like tigers and devils, are as harmless persons as you will find in Cedarville when sober. Yes, sir; it was the rum, and nothing else. Rum gave me this broken head and black eye'" (732).

Reading such things from a twenty-first century perspective is galling on a superficial level; those of us who partake of alcohol responsibly may bristle at the insinuation that it is drink itself, rather than deeply rooted behavioral/psychological issues (including addiction) that may lead to such antisocial behavior. These days, all but the most religious Americans would find the claim that consumption of alcohol alone so drastically altered a person's behavior and moral reasoning to be

suspect. However, a more insidious form of propaganda is lurking underneath the narrative action of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, marked by the author's refusal to draw heroes and villains in a traditional manner. As mentioned earlier, the decay of Cedarville and the assembled cast of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* are mostly passive. Slade's inability or refusal to take a leadership role in the community--one the narrative assumes he is entitled to since he is a property and business owner-- guided by the principles of temperance, hard work, and responsibility, is treated as a justification for his downfall. In untangling all this mess we're left with the conclusion that in Shay's ideal world, the working people of the world would not only have no leisure time or idleness in which to succumb to vice, but that this responsibility falls onto the shoulders of businessmen as well as politicians or clergy. In spite of the novella's overt criticisms of industrialization and all that it has wrought, care should be taken not to confuse *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* for a populist tract. The overriding philosophy of Shay's story is one of authoritarian Puritanism, as is reflected by his choice of "villains." This is an ages old trick of authoritarian politics; by positioning vague, abstract concepts as "the enemy" one can push a political agenda that seeks to address the real grievances of a diverse populace with equally vague and abstract concepts, propped up by a curated blend of nationalism and spirituality.

Deep examination of the temperance movement and some of its underlying motivations and political aspirations shows us that critics and readers must be careful not to flatten history in assessing the agenda and philosophical frameworks of certain pieces of bygone literature. Temperance, rooted as it was in a very real

and serious problem, built its foundations upon citizens' inclination towards fear of

the unknown and the other, and this proclivity was fully realized as the prohibition

movement gained steam in the early twentieth century, when proponents rather

successfully wove threads of anti-immigrant messaging through their politicking,

focusing especially on German brewers with foreign-sounding names like Busch and

Anheiser. In effect, the movement, founded in the name of progressivism and moral

remedy for the most vulnerable in society, ended up producing, by design or

circumstance, literature that seeks to assert its political messaging through the

practice of othering. Still, absorption of dominant ideologies sometimes results in an

exorcism that subverts or repurposes the fallout of a particular application of

power. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found by examining African American

temperance literature of mid-nineteenth century. Black abolitionists largely

supported the temperance movement, but found themselves at odds with some of

its driving political attitudes. DoVeanna S. Fulton tells us that these writers

"regarded temperance commitment as a necessary component of antislavery

advocacy," but that dominant voices in the movement "either ignored African

Americans or caricatured them in stereotypical fashion...and contributed to the

prevailing racial discourses with saloon depictions of Black male dandies and

kerchief-headed guzzling Black females" (209). Fulton's article, "Sowing Seeds in an

Untilled Field: Temperance and Race, Indeterminacy and Recovery in Frances E.W.

Harper's *Sowing and Reaping*," argues that authors like Harper, writing in the

postbellum period, used racially ambiguous characters as a means of disrupting this

dominant conversation. Black writers found it necessary to avoid racial

characterizations that might amplify arguments as to the supposedly inherent

"moral degeneracy" of African Americans that were often invoked as ideological

defenses for white supremacy. Fulton further suggests that when early temperance

works did acknowledge the presence of blacks, it was to employ them as a sort of

racist, ideological cudgel; to engage in drunkenness and partake of saloon culture

was to sink to the animalistic impulses of an inferior race. As the temperance

movement's concerns shifted, away from the responsibility of influential and

powerful persons to implement the trickle-down morality of *Ten Nights* to more

inward-looking tales of self redemption, authors like Harper elided racial

descriptors in their work as a means of contributing to the overall discourse of the

movement without providing potential fodder to proponents of discrimination as a

means of benevolent bondage. *Sowing and Reaping* decentralizes racial

characteristics within its narrative, but also manages to flatten racial distinctions

within temperance discourse and thus moves the conversation in a more inclusive,

integrated manner. By avoiding racial distinctions, Harper opens the text and its

ideology to a broader readership, bringing individuals of disparate races and classes

to the same conclusion by way of mutual values and concerns.

  Through the lens of a literary exorcism, we can see that reactions to the

internalization of applied power may produce texts that alter or reconfigure the

ideology of institutional authority and dominant cultures. Within the scope of the

temperance movement, white authors represented the most powerful and amplified

voices, and promoted racial difference as a means of emphasizing arguments against

liquor and drunkenness. Black authors within the movement internalized these

voices and reacted in kind. The creation of "conscience" (turning back to Butler and

Freud) within this subgroup is represented by the acceptance of one part of the

proffered prohibition; drinking is a morally degenerate act. However, while these

authors do replicate and shift the prohibited desire into their texts, racial

indeterminacy is utilized as a means of fracturing and challenging the distinction of

racial otherness present in previous temperance works, the "demon" driven out by

this exorcism. In this case, the exorcism results not in the creation of a villain that is

formed by the purging of some facet of authorial identity, but rather in the

transmutation of the textual conversation itself. Temperance literature is unique in

that many of its texts do not contain traditional villains that serve as foils for heroes.

We can assume this is because temperance as a movement seeks redemption and

victory through what is essentially a course of non-action (the decision not to

drink). However, within *Sowing and Reaping*, the villain-adjacent role that blacks

played in antebellum temperance texts is not only erased, but the segregated nature

of the temperance movement itself is fractured. This phenomenon represents a

significant turning point in literary history: one in which authors begin to

consciously react to the pressures of social power and engage with it in ways that

subvert and challenge dominant authorial voices.

IV. Lovecraft and Internalization

H.P. Lovecraft is an interesting literary figure, in that he is an author whose

legacy is widely acknowledged and sharply celebrated by a certain cult following,

yet his work--with certain exceptions--remains largely unfamiliar to the public and

literary scholars outside the realm of the "genre" faithful. *The Call of Cthulhu* is his

most famous work by far, and these days, general Lovecraft hallmarks--fear/anxiety

of the unknown and ancient, man's shocking insignificance within the universe, et

al--are well-known tropes to avid fans of horror and science fiction. Less well known

is Lovecraft's absolutely virulent racism; the author openly espoused white

supremacist views considered distasteful even for the early twentieth century, and

occasionally engaged with them directly in his work (a 1912 poem, *On the Creation*

of Niggers is one of the most shocking and pointed entries in this category, and the

work is—unsurprisingly--scrubbed from most collections). There are certainly

innumerable instances in which we can observe the critical and popular veneration

of authors with less-than-admirable qualities, and discussions over whether or not

certain problematic works or creators ought to be lauded have become more

prevalent. Nevertheless, Lovecraft's strident racism is often shocking when viewed

from a twenty-first century perspective, in part because the minor fame and

credited influence that Lovecraft accrued well after his death is less removed and

clinical than the value placed upon other comparably problematic texts like D.W.

Griffith's KKK-revitalizing *Birth of a Nation*, or Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*,

both of which tend to be lauded with an explicit caveat separating appreciation of

technical innovations in the art form from celebrations of the content. Furthermore,

testimonials from those closest to Lovecraft confirm speculation that his personal

opinions on race were pronounced, even for his time. After divorcing him,

Lovecraft's wife Sonia Greene remarked: "Whenever we found ourselves in the

racially mixed crowds which characterize New York, Howard would become livid

with rage...he seemed almost to lose his mind." (Power) A biographer quotes an

unnamed friend of Lovecraft who describes his bigotry as all-consuming: "Howard's

monomania about race was about as close to insanity as anything I can think of"

(Sprague de Camp 374). Accepting the premise that Lovecraft's racism was notable

when compared to his contemporaries, we find much revealing information in his

biography.

Lovecraft was born and raised in Providence, Rhode Island, and came from a

well-to-do family. Tragedy struck early when his father was committed to a mental

institution and died shortly thereafter. Lovecraft and his mother moved in with

relatives, into a household in which her aging father was the main breadwinner. The

family fell upon financial hardships shortly after the death of Lovecraft's

grandfather, and moved into much humbler accommodations when the author was

fourteen years old. This pattern would repeat throughout Lovecraft's life, as the

author never produced enough commercial success from writing to support himself,

and often relied upon frugal living and assistance from loved ones to make ends

meet. After meeting his wife, the author relocated to Brooklyn, New York, and lived

off of her business earnings for a little over a year before she pursued career

opportunities in the Midwest and he relocated to Red Hook, which was then a

markedly working-class and immigrant-heavy neighborhood. Biographers generally

agree that Lovecraft was initially enthusiastic about New York. However, as he and

his wife began to suffer financially after she declared bankruptcy and he struggled

to find paying work, the author's unease with the culturally diverse neighborhood

began to manifest in his correspondence, as well as creative output. In a 1927 letter, Lovecraft describes his living arrangement as, "something unwholesome--something furtive--something vast lying subterrnely [sic] in obnoxious slumber" (Ocker 43). He reiterated this displeasure in another letter to Clark Ashton Smith, in which he explicitly voiced his displeasure with the neighborhood's ethnic makeup: "The idea that black magick exists in secret today...is one that I have used and shall use again...you will see what use I make of the idea in connection with the gangs of young loafers and evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere in New York" (Joshi 2). A year prior, he had penned a missive to his aunt, that seethed with anti-Semitic hatred: "...wherever the Jew wanders, he will have to content himself with his own society till he disappears or is killed off in some sudden outburst of physical loathing on our part. I've easily felt able to slaughter a score or two when jammed in a N.Y subway train...the problem assumes its most hideous form as loathsome Asiatic hordes trail their dirty carcasses over streets where white men once moved, & air their odious presence & twisted visages & stunted forms till we shall be driven either to murder them or emigrate ourselves, or be carried shrieking to the madhouse" (Sprague de Camp 254). These feelings ultimately culminated with *The Horror at Red Hook*, a story concerned with the machinations of an evil cabal of dark-skinned immigrants that secretly control the city, in concert with shadowy, diabolical forces.

Clearly, Lovecraft drew inspiration from his own life in crafting this tale, and we can reasonably conclude that *The Horror at Red Hook* exists partly as a fantasy to explain away the author's commercial failures in New York. However, some

biographers have suggested that the racist xenophobia that breathes on the surface of the short story is the result of Lovecraft's fast and long-held beliefs rather than a consequence of mere reactionary spasms. James Kneale writes: "It is easy to imagine Lovecraft as the classic outsider, a subject he explored in the story of that name. A seemingly reclusive figure who hated the 20th century and longed to return to the colonial era, he was an autodidact with strong and sometimes antisocial opinions" (109). Considering what we know about the author's upbringing, work, and correspondence, it is not difficult to surmise what Kneale means by "antisocial," but more attention should be paid to the characterization of "outsider." Lovecraft was, as mentioned, born to a well-to-do family, and to parents of purebred British ancestry. Additionally, even surface readings of Lovecraft reveal an intense focus on horrors and peculiarities that are so frightening because they transcend the scope of the human imagination, as well as the known universe. Taken in tandem, these two facts lead us to consider the possibility that Lovecraft's singular obsession was racial resentment, and that the unimaginable horror, the origin of the author's seeming inability to grasp or come to terms with his life and the world around him, stemmed from the fact that he considered success and prosperity to be his birthright as the descendant of white Anglo-Saxons. This sort of "racial loss"--a perceived degradation of social or economic privileges believed to be the God-given right of white men--produces the absolute dread and unmooring from an increasingly progressive society that Lovecraft's biographers describe and that the author himself alludes to throughout his work.

And it is here that we must consider Lovecraft's rogue's gallery, noting in particular some of his most famous and well-known villains. The "old ones" of the Cthuhulu mythos are not expressly tied to anything that normal, commonplace human beings may conceive of. However, the "old ones" are bald, metaphorical depictions of the general concept of "the other," drawn with thick black lines. The plainness in which these monsters, that weighed upon Lovecraft's imagination and that have inspired and delighted fans for generations, function as harbingers of the frightening and disorienting unknown is striking. Turning back to Said, and viewing the villains--also known as the "elder gods"--in the context of Lovecraft's biography and personal beliefs, we see a textbook example of the ways in which colonialism not only changes the relations between human beings but also shapes, or even pre-determines, the attitudes and reactions to these realities in some people. In our face-to-face interactions in the public sphere, we are often loathe, in this day and age, to appear to absolve racists and bigots of their own choice to be involved with those disgusting, hateful philosophies, and it must be stressed here that Lovecraft and others like him were not powerless in shaping their own attitudes towards their fellow human beings, and also possessed resources that far outstripped the targets of their hatred, resources that could well have been employed to overcome the trappings of a certain time and place, or an enduring American tradition of white supremacy. However, we must also acknowledge that this tradition of Anglo-Saxon superiority, embedded in the fabric of the United States from the start, has outward-reaching consequences not only for the victims of racial violence but for the perpetrators of it, and for their descendants. Lovecraft's family history of mental

illness notwithstanding, the assumption he carried with him--that he was entitled to financial and critical success by virtue of being born a talented, intelligent, white person of pure British ancestry--was a concept that was and is reinforced by Western civilization and its long, rich history of brutal, global colonization. Lovecraft's attitudes, though perhaps pronounced in comparison with his contemporaries, were not abnormal at their core. Considering the full breadth of Lovecraft's life and career, and reading the words of his most ardent critical supporters (as well as those of the author himself) we can see that the assumption of genetic, cultural, and moral superiority was a central pillar that supported Lovecraft's understanding of reality. In turn, the withering of the material results promised by such an assumption were, given such a fanatical obsession with racial purity and the supposedly inherent qualities of whiteness, enough to throw the author's entire understanding of and relation to the world in front of him into chaos and disarray. I wish to take time here to carefully articulate that I am not theorizing that Lovecraft's financial troubles, mental health, and lack of success as an author were rooted in or inextricably tied to his bigotry, but I do believe that the author's fanatical adherence to his bigotry informed the way in which he saw his place in the world. When the myth of biological superiority is superficially supported by the advancement of Western civilization and propped up by colonialism, the confluence of certain factors that lead to a shattering of that myth may have devastating psychological results. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that Lovecraft and others were unwilling participants, let alone victims, in a system that aggrandized their inborn qualities to the point that the decay of these supposed qualities pushed them

towards failure. Rather, a civilization which reinforces false notions of inborn, genetic superiority at every turn may yield individuals who, confronted with the fact that the myth of white supremacy does not apply to them (and especially when taken in tandem with the perceived *reality* of white supremacy all around), may fall into a politics of sheer resentment, one that transcends racial resentment and spirals into something approaching a cognitive dissonance so pronounced that everything one believes to be true--concerning the self, the universe, and all in between--becomes suspect and unknowable.

Using *The Rats in the Walls*, as an example, we can find this theme woven throughout. The narrator describes his cat (it should be noted that the cat's name is a racial slur) "whose moods I know so well, was undoubtedly alert and anxious to an extent wholly out of keeping with his *natural character*" (Lovecraft 95, emphasis mine). As the story progresses, the narrator discovers a series of hidden chambers beneath his estate, where human sacrifice is suspected to have occurred. As this character delves deeper into the catacombs, Lovecraft leaves no room for doubt: "My fear of the unknown was at this point very great" (100). Eventually the narrator discovers a "twilit grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see; a subterranean world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion" (102). At the tale's conclusion, the narrator is apparently spiritually overpowered by the lingering influence of his ancient cannibal ancestors that once walked the hidden halls and have been infesting his dreams. He tells us that his companions have discovered him "crouching in the blackness over the plump, half-eaten body of Capt. Norrys...[they] shut me into this barred room at Hanwell with fearful whispers

about my heredity and experience" (104-105). The theme of fearing the unknown is obvious on a surface read, and Lovecraft's obsession with racial purity is only slightly less apparent. Lovecraft's character discovers that he does, in fact, come from a long line of cannibals who bred human beings to a point that they resembled "human cattle." However, before the full scope of the horrible truth is revealed, the narrator notes that students who examined some of the altars theorized that these artifacts, believed at first to be of Roman origin, may have "been adopted by the Roman priests from some older and perhaps aboriginal people on the same site" (98). This is as close as Lovecraft comes to stumbling into some sort of awakening in regards to presumed racial difference. The bloody rites performed in the subterranean portions of the house are at first presumed to be the work of a savage people, far removed from the narrator's own bloodline, but at the story's conclusion the truth is revealed, and the horror of this realization is enough to drive the character insane. However, the character does not fully accept this new reality, though the knowledge does torment him: "When I speak of poor Norrys they accuse me of a hideous thing, but they must know that I did not do it. They must know it was the rats; the slithering scurrying rats whose scampering will never let me sleep; the daemon rats that race behind the padding in this room and beckon me down to greater horrors than I have ever known; the rats they can never hear; the rats, the rats in the walls" (105).

Here we see a different literary exorcism in action. The outside force working on the narrator via Lovecraft is the horrible knowledge that has been revealed, that causes these white men of a certain pedigree to doubt and second-guess everything

they have known or been told about their ancestors, and by extension, their place in the world. The character internalizes this knowledge, but cannot fully process it, and of course cannot accept that this revelation disrupts the terms of racial difference and inborn cultural traits that he has long presumed to be true. The narrator acts in accordance with his ancestors, perhaps overpowered by their supernatural presence, killing and eating his companion before the rest of his horrified crew, but as the story closes, he denies this to the reader. The exorcism that occurs is one that distorts the role of the villain, shifting the title from the narrator's ancestors, to the narrator himself, and most importantly, to the titular rats that haunt him with the knowledge of who he is, and where he comes from. Lovecraft is, consciously or not, commenting on his own inability to process the changing world around him, one that puts the lie to his internalized beliefs about white supremacy and the "natural" power of racial purity. Both the narrator and Lovecraft attempt to bury this new knowledge, but--turning back to Butler and the phenomenon of renounced desire-- the knowledge never truly leaves them, but is reconfigured in the rats that skirt the peripheries of the narrator's reality. So too, does Lovecraft, at some level, realize that his own perceptions of himself, his race, his ancestors, and his place in the world have been disrupted, but like the narrator, he is unable to fully process and accept the terms. Through this literary exorcism, Lovecraft comes dangerously close to unconsciously subverting the myth of white supremacy, but the bitter and confessional nature of his work remains buried under the dominant themes of fantastical horror. The author responds to the forces working upon him, but the exorcism he performs via his literature does not correct or subvert the internal

conflict, resulting in a body of work obsessed with racial otherness and the horrors of miscegenation.

V. Díaz and The Future

     The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao serves as an example of new and exciting fiction that seeks to transcend such attitudes towards conventional literary villains through innovative structural and textual conceits. The book is a humanizing and challenging novel that demands much of its reader, in terms of its use and presentation of language, and the ways in which it grapples with villains, real and imagined. To begin with, the story, in one sense, belongs to its title character, Oscar, yet the narration of the story does not belong to him, but to Yunior, who, by all accounts, is much more "typically Dominican." Oscar, as we find out, is overweight, nerdy, a virgin. We are informed, in brief, of his fall from grace as adolescence arrives: "scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious; and his interest-in Genres!-which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L" (17). Yunior is superficially more "normal" than Oscar, but Díaz draws parallels between the two in ways both subtle and pronounced. Presented as something of a meathead throughout much of the novel, one notes that familiarity and ease with which Yunior discusses all the obsessions and fascinations ("Genres!") that are part of Oscar's social rejection. Early on, Yunior muses: "Perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but

he couldn't" (21). Díaz's use of the term *otaku* here is compelling; currently understood to refer to a hardcore fan of Japanese animation, comic books, video games, the word evolved from a re-appropriated, second-person honorific. Usage of the word in an enduring relationship indicates a certain social awkwardness; a Japanese author used it to refer derisively to unpleasant comic book fans (Morikawa 2-3). Yunior's usage of the term in conjunction with his tacit admission that he is more like Oscar than he cares to admit reflects the ways in which Díaz uses the figures of both Oscar and Yunior as methods of examining the lingering "villains" of colonialism. Within the world of the novel, the forces at work on the Dominican diasporic community are traced, by Díaz, all the way back to the first beginnings of Western colonialism in Africa and the Americas. Here we see shades of Said expressed in the ways that the colonized culture absorbs and reacts to the values and cultural dictations of the colonizer, as Díaz, through Yunior, identifies links between the American-backed Trujillo, Dominican-American enclaves and their overriding social norms, and the formation of identity in "typical" Dominicans like Yunior versus suspect, atypical "others" like Oscar. Yunior does, of course, come to be something of a friend to Oscar, but the lines between the two are stark and are reinforced by Yunior himself, who strives to typify the ideal of a young, hot-blooded Dominican man. Díaz appears to be commenting on the concept of inherited trauma, which he attaches to the term *fukú* in his novel, to represent a sort of existential curse that is said to hang over Oscar and that some superstitious Dominicans believe may pass from generation to generation. While *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* intimates that Oscar's *fukú* is a holdover from those persecuted under

the Trujillo dictatorship in the old country, so too can Yunior said to be inheriting

his own trauma in his relentless, testosterone-laden lifestyle, steeped as it is in

relentless sexual conquest and infidelity. As Yunior tells us, with something

approaching cautious admiration: "If you think the average Dominican guy's bad,

Trujillo was five thousand times worse...if the procurement of ass had been any

more central to Trujillato the regime would have been the world's first culocracy..."

(217) Similarly, in describing Oscar's life after college, Yunior offers up echoes of the

brutality and victimhood in the preceding chapter: "He started sending his stories

and novels out, but no one seemed interested...A year later the substituting turned

into a full-time job. He could have refused, could have made a 'saving throw' against

Torture, but instead went with the flow" (263). Díaz goes on to explicitly explore the

notions of inherited trauma on a much broader scale than either of the two

characters alone. In describing the strange retreading of his traumatic childhood,

Yunior writes of Oscar witnessing kids like him being bullied: "In the old days it had

been the whitekids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was kids of color

who performed the necessities" (264). The contrast between the two men can be

read as a replication of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. If

Yunior represents the ideal of Dominican heteronormativity, then prevailing social

notions dictate that Oscar is the opposite. He may be the focus of the novel, but in

the world set within the novel, and the tight-knit communities that populate it,

Oscar is, at best, a tragic figure, and at worst someone who typifies everything a man

should not be. Díaz's decision to tell Oscar's story through a bystander amplifies the

degree to which Oscar is othered within his own community, even as Yunior grows

sympathetic and even admiring of Oscar. Because Oscar is the other, he is the villain

that has been exorcised and his story is no longer his own. The echoing nature of

this colonization (we might call it the *fukú*) is revealed in the nested nature of the

novel: Trujillo comes to power as a direct result of the U.S. occupation of the

Dominican Republic in 1916, and his stranglehold on the country leads the country

to a certain kind of limited prosperity, but at a great price. The method by which

Yunior and Oscar both attempt to define themselves as individuals follows a similar

pattern, though Yunior is the only one of the pair who finds any results. Both seek a

kind of refuge in the subjugation of women; Yunior cheats relentlessly, even on

Oscar's sister while she is pregnant, and Oscar's imagination is often captivated by

feverish domination fantasies, rooted perhaps in childhood memories of sitting in

the kitchen surrounded by his sister's girlfriends, who openly gossip about sex and

relationships and make cruel jests at his embarrassment: "It wouldn't have been so

bad if these chickies hadn't treated Oscar like some deaf-mute harem guard,

ordering him around, having him run their errands, making fun of his games and his

looks; to make shit even worse, they blithely went on about the particulars of their

sex lives with no regard for him...Hey, he would yell, in case you're wondering

there's a male unit in here. Where Marisol would say blandly. I don't see one" (26-

27). The path of trauma is nearly impossible to chart here, between Yunior's subtly

sexist re-telling of the incident, the inherent male-privilege oriented position of

Oscar's outrage and embarrassment in the first place, to the women's disdainful

treatment of Oscar and their debasement of his masculinity.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is, though somewhat bleakly focused on *fukú* and the cyclical nature of things, far from content with accepting the fallout of colonialism as is. Díaz's book is an exercise in using the medium of literature and the form of a novel as a method of breaking down repeating cycles of corrupting trauma and colonialist fallout, and he addresses these goals with a variety of conceits. Maria Lauret contends that Díaz's language, fed through the narration of Yunior, serves as a translingual text of great power, one that may be a key to properly understanding the true scope and power of history. The first lines of the novel--"They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú Americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú-- generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (Díaz, 1)--beautifully prop up the first bookend of Díaz's heartbreaking tale of Oscar, who can be read as a sacrifice made in the name of expanding the ways members of the American diaspora think about themselves and their place in the world in relation to identity. As Lauret writes: "Pregnant with portent, then, this beginning boldly and beautifully rewrites the history of the Western hemisphere..." She goes on to argue that while Yunior's narration is a distinct and unique representation of a truly Caribbean voice, "to try and pin *Wao* down in such a geoliterary way is to miss--precisely--the fluidity and the translingual, transnational reach of Yunior's voice, which connects the Caribbean with the growing diaspora of Latin@s in the United States, and whose Spanish/English bilingualism renders it

truly a voice of the Americas, plural" (494). This is not to say that *Wao* is at its heart

a novel that is cynical about cultural assimilation or suspicious of celebrations of

cultural identity, but that Díaz's tale can be read as a caution against bulldozing one

in the name of the other. Oscar's more unique--"othering"--qualities, too passive and

organic to even be termed "resistance," are the same qualities that the reader

eventually finds in Yunior as well, but external behaviors and adherence to cultural

norms and ideals renders the former as a "villain" and the latter as a "hero," in terms

of representing the dominant social values of a given community or culture.

However, as the novel progresses, and through his own words, we divine that

Yunior is not so different from Oscar, and by the novel's close, he has more or less

turned into what Oscar might have been, given a little more love and a little more

luck. Once again, we've drummed up that old chestnut, so banal that it occasionally

creeps its way into childish platitudes, yet so truthful and accurate that we often shy

away from it in criticism for fear of appearing too obvious; the villains we create are

often manifestations of that which we wish to deny or exorcise within ourselves.

What makes *Wao* more thrilling from a theoretical standpoint is that this conceit,

though present as far back as Milton or Shakespeare, makes up the very foundation

of Díaz's pages, words, and invented slang.

Consider that the novel's climax comes when Oscar essentially embraces the

"heroic" move of going back to the Dominican Republic to fight for his love, and

winds up dead in a cane field for it. Consider also that this ending is telegraphed to

Oscar in the final chapters of the novel, but to no one else. When Clives expresses

amazement that Oscar has returned: "It's the Ancient Powers, Oscar said grimly.

They won't leave me alone" (315). Consider that when Oscar is told by the terrified

Ybon to go home to the states before he is killed by the capitán, Oscar responds that

he is home, and when she clarifies, he asks: "A person can't have two?" (318)

Further consider that in this, the chapter entitled "The Last Days of Oscar Wao,"

Oscar is apparently headed straight for doom, desperately pleaded with by everyone

from Ybon to Yunior, who want him to cease what he is doing and return home

before he winds up dead, but Oscar continues, and it's in these days that he writes,

writes, writes, finally taking authorial ownership of his own story in more ways than

one ("Twenty-seven days. Wrote on each and every one of them, wrote almost three

hundred pages if his letters are to be believed" [320]). Finally, consider Oscar's final

words to his killers: "He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd

been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told

them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would

probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck

by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over

there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd

be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can

be" (321-322). At the end of it all, Oscar's story is one of transcendence and

subversion, and Díaz's novel serves as a template for how the literary exorcism

might be exploited to not only speak truth to power, but to overcome and reassign it

in meaningful ways. Díaz and his treatment of Oscar are representative of the

endless possibilities that a conscious manipulation of the concept of "literary

exorcism" may be employed to engage with and comment upon the application and

journey of power throughout culture and texts. The author is intensely aware of the ways in which "social regulation" shapes and manipulates the lives, values, cultures, and reactions of those on the receiving end, and while Díaz on the one hand seems to bleakly acknowledge that such forces are inescapable, his novel's conclusion opens up new possibilities for textual challenges to dominating social pressures and cultural ideas. The basis by which both the characters and readers of *Wao* react to Oscar and Yunior is rooted in deeply ingrained assumptions about social acceptability, but the exorcism performed by the end of the novel boldly proclaims that these assumptions do not control us in irreversible ways.

       The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a multivalent novel, but all of the branching and connected narratives, the wonderfully drawn characters spanning generations, the meditations on who we are, where we come from, and where we go from here, they all push on the notion of what it is to be a hero or a villain in a very pointed way, one that forces the reader to grapple with the realization that how we read and write is dictated by the way we consider villains and heroes. Further, the ways in which we do or do not accept the binary terms of these literary figures has a lasting impact on the way we conceive of the world around us, and dictates the scope of our vision when it comes to grappling with the political ideas that are transmitted to us simply by existing in the world, let alone reading or writing. *Wao* is not a book that is ambivalent about morality or ethics, but rather, Díaz uses the figures of Oscar, Yunior, and others within his novel to press on the notion that the ways in which we position villains in both our literature and the lens with which we view the world may have as much to do with cultural dominance and authority as it

does with our own ideas of right and wrong. Díaz's work is exciting because it reveals a different kind of literature that allows readers to inspect and re-evaluate some of the more tried and true aspects of traditional literature itself while also telling a vibrant and compelling story. It is not unusual to hear authors in this day and age express mild distaste at the idea of being considered "political" or "one with an agenda," but as has been exhaustively argued, the very nature of storytelling comes with an agenda of sorts. We have come a long way since the days of Milton and Shakespeare, and need not couch our beliefs and politics in thinly-veiled metaphor in order for them to be treated as art. However, moving forward, it would be in our best interests to acknowledge that the ways in which we read and write (and by association, the ways in which we grapple with villains and heroes) are connected to how we think, and receive the world and each other. There is, perhaps, not a clear and pressing need for all readers and critics to approach every piece of literature as an opportunity to dissect every angle of every villain in order to determine the ways in which the political machinations of the author may be churning, but I would argue that such scrutiny has value, and consideration of these relationships is vital in the world of literary criticism, and helpful in forming a more open-minded and useful method of dealing with divergent opinions and sociopolitical beliefs as they present themselves within the world of fiction. In the final pages of *Wao,* Yunior discusses some of the dreams he has had of Oscar since his death, and one vision in particular communicates the open-ended possibilities of expanding one's mind and thinking about not just villains, but the entire nature of identity, in mutable terms: "Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a

closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run

from him, and for a long time that's what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that

Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his

mask his eyes are smiling" (325).

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