Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol2/iss2/1

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in essay: critical writing at pomona college by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.
essay: critical writing at pomona college is an online, open-access journal published in Scholarship@Claremont. essay is an initiative of the Pomona College Writing Program and is part of a larger network of online, open-access publications supported by the Claremont Colleges Library. Pieces that appear in essay are peer-reviewed by Pomona College faculty and Writing Partners.

**Editorial Board**
Pam Bromley
Tom Lin ‘18
Alana Friedman ‘16
Kara Wittman

**Managing Editors**
Pam Bromley
Hyeji (Julie) Cho ‘19
Tom Lin ‘18
Stephanie Liu-Rojas
Samantha Resnick ‘19
Kara Wittman

**Board of Reviewers**
Potomna College Writing Partners

**Winter 2014**
Natasha Anis ‘19
Hyeji (Julie) Cho ‘19
David Cremins ‘18
Emma Fredgant ‘17
Andrea Green ‘17
Tom Lin ‘18
Natalie McDonald ‘19
Paige Pepitone ‘19
Rachel Tils ‘19
Yuxi (Candice) Wang ‘19
Olivia Wood ‘19

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol2/iss2/1
table of contents
In Knead of Interpretation: Reimagining Marie Clements’ post-dramatic play *Burning Vision* through the interpretive signpost of bread.

by Zed Alexander Hopkins

Chinese Speakers in America: Diglossia as Style

by Kang (Franco) Liu

Food Fight: Violence and Exploitation in Fruit Still Life

by Aidan Maurstad

That’s Absurd! (Or is it?)

by Tulika Mohan

The Government, in Love.

by Chunghwa Suh

A Moderate Approach to Extreme Altruism.

by Brendan Terry
The origin story of the essay as a form is perhaps familiar: in the late sixteenth century Michel Eyquem de Montaigne took the word from the French essayer, “to try,” to describe the writing with which he was experimenting in his retirement from political life: roaming, curious, digressive; associative, critical (most of all of his own ideas and perceptions), and deeply, devotedly engaged with the self, the world, and the self in the world. Since that first volume of *Essais* in 1580, the essay has been defined, written, read, and redefined over and over again across the continents. For some it is a free, ecstatic way to explore the self; for some it participates in describing the fabric of a nation; for some it is an urgent intellectual and political force; for others its critical, playful essence resists definition, and in so resisting, resists totalization. For all, it is, as the essayist Gabriel Zaid puts it, “the laboratory itself, where life is put to the test in a text.”

We celebrate here excellence in that rich diversity of writing that tests the world and its ideas, engages critically both with the received and the new, and works in prose through urgent and complex arguments, thoughts, and perceptions. The essays in essay represent only a small portion of the fine critical writing here at Pomona College; we honor these for their critical insight, analytic precision, and rhetorical force, as well as for their playfulness, daringness, and willingness to experiment. The essays in this special issue honor work that Pomona College students completed in the Fall 2016 ID1 seminars. As the journal moves forward, each fall issue of essay will feature essays written in the previous fall semester’s ID1 seminars.

The ID1 essays represented in this volume go through a rigorous selection process: they are nominated by faculty members teaching ID1, the first-year Critical Inquiry Seminar at Pomona College. They are then read by a group of the Writing Partners working in the College’s Writing Center and narrowed down to a small selection of finalists. Finally,
the winning papers and the honorable mentions are selected by the Writing Program faculty. We would like to thank all of those individuals involved in the process, and to thank as well the writers represented in this inaugural volume. Without further ado, then, we are delighted to introduce this issue of *essay: critical writing at pomona college*.

Friday, April 27, 2018
Claremont, California
In Knead of Interpretation: Reimagining Marie Clements’ post-dramatic play Burning Vision through the interpretive signpost of bread.

BY Zed Alexander Hopkins

The rise of post-dramatic performance has caused a monumental shift in the relationship between the audience and the dramatic text. The theatrical form is no longer poised on the assumptions of audience passivity and structured narrative, but instead relies on the “percipience” of the audience in their individual “quest for coherent meaning” (Fenton 108). While this new era of “formlessness” has given birth to new possibilities within theatre, it has also created a sense of “interpretive anxiety” for the audience—that is, an anxiety derived from the complexity of the evolving dramatic text and the overwhelm that such complexity can induce (Fenton). Marie Clements’ ecologically focused post-dramatic play Burning Vision manifests much of this anxiety through a heavily fragmented narrative structure and a multifaceted socio-historical context. As a director trying to treat this anxiety as it is imposed onto the audience, David Fenton suggests that the theatrical device of signposts can be used (84). Mokotow defines signposts as “the use of a sign or symbol to help remind [the audience] of the ideas at hand”. Clements masterfully writes many visual and symbolic signposts into her work, the most notable of such being that of bread. The following discussion explores the ways in which the signpost of bread functions within Burning Vision as a counterweight to the interpretive anxiety that Clements deliberately stimulates in an attempt to guide the audience toward some form of catharsis.

At its most basic level, the signpost of bread functions as a didactic re-
flection of character. Most notably Clements uses bread to bring focus to the dramatic weight of Fat Man’s character. He is quite possibly the most obscure and confusing character within this piece. The interpretive anxiety that is generated by Fat Man’s narrative is primarily engendered by his unimpassioned tone and fragmented narrative arc. However, it seems that this feeling of uncertainty in relation to Fat Man has been deliberately pursued by Clements in an attempt to subject him to the audiences’ subconscious metonymy. His hyper-realistic references to “beer,” “Kraft dinners,” and his “living room soldier” ideals create an image of a man (or nuclear-test dummy) who is so unpalatable to the audience that they objectify him by categorizing him as the objects with which he is so absorbed. His being a nuclear test dummy furthers this disassociation with the human form, making him unrelatable or in many cases unreachable for most audience members—thus producing interpretive anxiety.

The treatment of this anxiety is seen quite clearly through the role of bread as a reflective signpost. This anxiety is treated primarily through the association of Fat Man’s image with other images of the play to create contrast and juxtaposition. Drawing on David Fenton’s suggestion that signposts should be represented as palimpsests (83—that they must create in themselves an intertextuality with the other moments of the play—we can see a resonance between Fat Man and Rose. Clements uses the reoccurring image of bread to create a didactic representation of human growth, by juxtaposing these two characters. While we are led to accept the fact that Fat Man is in reality a ‘test-dummy’ and not human, we see Rose as a near-realist archetype for a working-class women. The two timelines blend delicately through Clements’ weaving of narrative progressions, creating a unified representation of what we might consider the ‘American condition.’ We see Rose described as a “perfect loaf of bread” (Clements, 2003), representing the admirable ‘ingredients’ of the American culture. Conversely, Fat Man is a product of capitalist ideology, a mixture of the American culture of consumption and conformity, representing the more corrosive ‘ingredients’ which compose our American identity. Clements frames both of these characters’ stories within close
proximity to each other for this exact reason; enticing the audience to view the full breadth of our American identity.

In understanding this we can see a parallel between Rose’s opening scene and Fat Man’s. In Rose’s opening scene we are introduced to the importance of bread in Rose’s life and the ingredients that are essential for it to rise in the oven, while Fat Man’s opening scene depicts him standing in a monochromatic living room, appreciating his television and La-Z-Boy chair (the ingredients that make up his life). The signpost of bread creates an association between the characters and also functions as a metaphor for American ideals. We can see how bread acts as the reoccurring identifier between sub-narratives, allowing the audience to draw parallels between characters and the socio-historical background they represent.

The next level of analysis leads us to view bread as a symbol for commodification, finding the liminal spaces within sub-narratives in an attempt to evolve the play’s social commentary. The roots of this play are built on a hierarchy of commodity: from the initial trade-offs of gold for the LaBine Brothers and bread for the Indians, to the exhaustion of environmental and human capital to extract the precious ore, this play seems to be littered with allusions to capitalist hierarchy. It is once again the complexity of the overlapping timelines and the sheer variety of commodities referred to throughout the play that generate the anxiety of Clements’ map of socially charged imagery. Clements often references food resources, fish, touch, love, and life as separate commodities within the text.

However, superficially, she gives the audience no way to sort or categorize the relevance of these images. We see the Miner and the Radium Painter exchange both love and touch in a similar way to Rose and Koji, while also being exposed to images of commodity exchange in the form of business, consumption, and power. Yet we still cannot identify these images as symbols for broader meaning. The signpost of bread acts more like cement than an overarching symbol between these fragmented images in that it guides the audience’s focus without feeding them the answers. In these circumstances, the image of bread
creates a parallelism between humanity and its commodities. The final image of the play catalyzes this realization in its depiction of several human characters turning into sacks of flour. This moment makes a wide array of symbolic suggestions, most simplistically attributing a human quality to bread and further implying that humans are being used as commodities under the capitalist ideals represented by the LaBine Brothers. Furthering this, bread acts as a unifying symbol for commodity and the way our commodities define us as individuals. This is exemplified in the parallel between Rose’s obsession with bread and the Widow’s obsession with her dead husband’s clothes. It is as if these commodities become a part of the characters (as do many of the other commodities within the play). Like our own flesh, bread becomes a symbol for how commodities are a part of us. This in itself also comes to represent another range of ‘ingredients’ that make up each character’s social perspective.

Going further, we see Clements using bread to signpost a deeper critique of the ignorance within a capitalist society, wherein the lower classes are left misinformed and misrepresented. An excellent example of this is when Rose says that “there’s no harm if [dust] gets in dough,” reflecting her inability to comprehend the true damage caused by uranium extraction. The generous and kind gesture of baking becomes a process of accidental poisoning. This image of bread as a matter that absorbs from its environment links to the ‘Radium Painter’ who is unknowingly killing herself by painting watches for the war effort. The signpost of bread continues to uncover a blissful ignorance that ultimately leads the audience to one of the most profound realizations of the play: that they, like bread, are commodities to those who are above them in the social hierarchy.

The final layer to the signpost of bread is its ability to inspire a genuine empathetic connection between the audience and the characters onstage. While the uniqueness and dramatic complexity of the play’s characters is praiseworthy, their overlapping presence and complete separation from the common stereotypes of contemporary realism aggravate audiences’ interpretive anxiety. Superficially, many of these characters are near-impenetrable by the audience’s gaze alone, requir-
ing an evolving association with the piece’s thematic structure to be understood—even more so if they are to be empathized with. This is not to say that these characters are inaccessible to the audience, but merely that they work against the audience’s preconceptions of a character-audience relationship. This is largely due to the diversity of the cast and their non-linear timelines, which in their very nature are implemented to disorientate.

In overcoming this anxiety, the signpost of bread seems to attribute significance to the moments within all of the characters’ sub-narratives that resemble one other. One of the most profound of these resemblances is Rose’s moment of obsessive bread preparation and the Widows’ obsessive stare into the flames as she holds her husband’s remaining clothes. The miscellaneous timelines of these two characters become opposing life cycles as one women awaits her time to join her husband on the other side of the flame and the other prepares to bake bread for her lover from that same flame. It is in this coincidental association that we see the true weight of these characters and their role within the opposing narrative arc. These moments show how each character reflects every other, suggesting that their individual ‘recipes’ have been constructed with similar ‘ingredients.’ The signpost of bread acts as a metaphor for humanity in the way that it encapsulates the stories of each of these characters, framing them as products of a flawed and corrupt system, longing for something more. It is through this realization that the audience finds clarity in these characters and their interwoven timelines. The layered association of meaning invites the audience to look into their own feelings of longing and purpose, thus stimulating an empathetic vulnerability toward the characters.

The true weight and dramatic value of the interpretive anxiety stimulated by the post-dramatic form can be validated only by the effective implementation and expression of signposts. In *Burning Vision*, the use of bread as a multi-functional signpost allows the audience to overcome the sometimes fallacious and numbing effects of interpretive anxiety. Bread is applied as a didactic reflection of character, a symbol for commodification and an overarching metaphor for human connectivity. Inevitably the culmination of these functions sheds light
on a deceptively well-crafted and complex signpost that is and will continue to be at the crux of future readings and renditions of this play.

Works Cited


The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China defines China as a *tongyi duominzu guojia*, a “united country with diverse nationalities.” Here, “nationality” refers to *minzu*, an ethnic group with a common territory, history, culture, and sometimes even language different from those of other groups. Amongst 56 such ethnic groups across China, the Han are nationally recognized as the only majority, taking up 91.51% of the national population, while the other 55 are considered ethnic minorities (National Bureau of Statistics). The Constitution further states that all *minzu* are equal and enjoy equal status and independent administrative rights within respective autonomous regions. Such constitutional provisions, as reflected in national policies, grant ethnic groups the latitude to preserve their distinct language cultures, under the consensus of a united Chinese national identity. However, for the Chinese-speaking Han people, linguistic diversity within their cultures has been largely trivialized and suppressed by Chinese linguistic hegemony.

In fact, “Chinese” is not a monolithic linguistic entity but rather an umbrella term that includes all variations of the Han Chinese language. Such variations are mostly regional, often provincial, and are therefore named *fangyan*, meaning “regional speech,” or “dialect.” Since 1912, due to the mutual unintelligibility between most dialects, numerous phonetic schemes have been developed by the Committee for the Unification of Pronunciation, under the Ministry of Education. These schemes aim to facilitate the standardization of a unified spoken language, better communication across regions, and project a united national identity (Zhang 565). In 1932, the Beijing dialect became officially recognized as the basis for the national spoken language, later named *Putonghua* (Mandarin). The new standard pronunciation, from then on, was defined as “the speech of natives of...
Beijing who have received a middle-school education,” and was further endorsed by obligatory school education and *Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi*, or the Mandarin Proficiency Test (DeFrancis 76).

This decision to bring the Beijing dialect to the fore requires Chinese speakers to conform to Beijing Mandarin phonology, which includes *erhua*, or rhotacization. Since such linguistics features are only native to speakers of Beijing dialect and some other Northern Chinese varieties, promotion of such linguistic features puts speakers of other Chinese varieties at a disadvantage as they have to learn the prescribed usage of an unfamiliar dialect to be understood outside their original speech communities (Zhang). Therefore, under the Chinese language policy, upbringing and habitation in certain regions presuppose access to particular language resources exclusive to said regions, and such access is oftentimes bound by inequality (Dong 6).

Following the standardization process and the government’s endorsement of Mandarin as the national spoken language, China Daily reported in 2004 that 53.06% of the Chinese population is able to speak Mandarin to some extent, and according to the Ministry of Education in 2004, the percentage climbs to 80.44% in major provinces. The gradual rise of Mandarin as well as the remaining variations in different regions and ethnic groups all point to diglossia as a prominent feature of Chinese multilingualism. The term “diglossia” describes multilingualism occurring at a societal scale. It refers to the language situation in which at least two varieties of a language coexist in one linguistic culture and share domains of linguistic behavior in a complementary distribution (Schiffman 116). This distribution of language varieties is also stratified, and within said distribution, the domains involved in the speech community are ranked from high varieties (H) to low varieties (L) (Fishman). Domains such as public speaking, education or other prestigious usage are categorized as H varieties, whereas conversations, jokes, and other informal discourses are L varieties. To better illustrate the linguistic relationship between H- and L-domains in Han Chinese, I reference Fishman’s taxonomy of language varieties and adapt it to the diglossic situation of the Chinese language (*Table 1*).
Table 1: Distribution of H- and L-variety domains in modern China.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H / L</th>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Standard Mandarin</td>
<td>higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(international) media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>public events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Regional dialects</td>
<td>home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>country areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>local media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In such a taxonomy, both varieties are genetically related to each other. The H variety, Mandarin, is categorized as written or formal-spoken usage. The L variety, regional dialects, marks Mandarin as the language of the more powerful section of the society and thus contributing to the Mandarin hegemony of the Chinese language (Schiffman).

To trek deeper into the influence of Mandarin hegemony on Chinese speakers of L varieties, I conducted ethnographic interviews over the phone with three Chinese speakers, two of whom are female.1 The two female interviewees are originally from northeast China. The third interviewee is a male from Nanjing, a city located in southern China. All three have personally gone through domestic (internal) and international (external) migration that resulted in their language shift. On the facing page (Transcript 1) is a partial transcription of my interview with Song,2 the male interviewee from Nanjing.3

---

1 Most of the data for this paper were aggregated through interviews conducted mainly in Chinese, and were then transcribed in Chinese first and translated into English. To preserve the authenticity of our interactional exchanges in Chinese, the original Chinese data are presented first alongside my English translation in this paper.

2 All names have been anonymized to protect the interviewees’ privacy.

3 I initiated this sociolinguistics research project with an interest in proving a widely
## Transcript 1: Excerpt from interview with Song.

| 1 | Song: | 我老家是黄桥的。小学才转到南京的。 |
|   |   | I grew up in my hometown, Huangqiao. I moved to Nanjing when I was in elementary school. |
| 2 | Intvr: | 哦OK。那你会讲老家那边的方言么? |
|   |   | Oh OK. Then do you know how to speak the dialect in your hometown? |
| 3 | Song: | 会、会吧。我其实不总说都要忘了、只是和爷爷奶奶说话的时候才说。 |
|   |   | Yeah, probably. To be honest, I almost forget how to speak the dialect because I don't speak it very often, only when I talk to my grandparents. |
| 4 | Intvr: | 那你都说什么方言啊? 你不说南京方言也不总说老家方言。 |
|   |   | Then what dialect do you speak usually? You don't speak Nanjing dialect, nor do you speak Huangqiao dialect [very often]. |
| 5 | Song: | 我基本上就说普通话。当时从小学起开始学的。 |
|   |   | I basically only speak Mandarin. Since I started learning Mandarin at elementary school. |
| 6 | Intvr: | [普通话]和老家的方言差别大么? |
|   |   | Is [Mandarin] very different from your dialect? |
| 7 | Song: | 嗯、挺大的。我记得当时学的特别费劲。最主要不学的话我没法跟别人交流啊。同学当时还笑话我，但是现在都习惯[说普通话]了。[⋯]在我爸妈在南京工作一段时间之后也开始说普通话，在家我们也基本上不说老家的方言了。 |
|   |   | Yeah, very different. I remember it was very difficult to learn. What's most important is that [I] can't communicate with anybody if I don't know Mandarin. My classmates used to mock me, but now I'm used to [the language]. [...] My parents also learned how to speak Mandarin after working in Nanjing for a while, we basically don't speak dialect at home anymore. |

reported trend that my generation of young Chinese students, especially female ones who pursue higher education in more developed urban areas or foreign countries, tend to abandon their native tongue, and thus conducted most interviews with female peers. However, as the interview process progressed, my data started to drift away from the original research question and revealed more interesting facts about Chinese linguistics landscape from the particular perspective of Chinese students overseas; that's when I decided to include another male speaker, Song, into the interview process.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol2/iss2/1
In the interview, Song shared with me his experience of learning a more standard way of speaking and relegating his native tongue to a secondary linguistic resource. In line 7, he voices the personal struggles and limits on social communication caused by his dialect when he first moved to a more urbanized city, Nanjing (“can’t communicate with anybody,” “classmates used to mock me”). As evinced in his account, his regional dialect led to marginalization and even stigmatization as he entered a new speech community where Mandarin dominates the speech community. His physical migration therefore becomes an upward migration in the hierarchy of Chinese diglossia, indicating how regional speech communities are also stratified, similar to diglossia framework, given the different linguistic resources within these communities. The mockery from his classmates also informs us of the ideology of inferiority carried by L varieties under the Mandarin hegemony.

As I moved on with other interviewees, I came to realize the major difference between their narratives and Song’s. While Song’s language shift occurred as the result of internal migration (from a rural county to an urban city in Jiangsu province, China), others focused on their external migration experience, namely coming to the US for higher education, and how such an experience reshaped the way they wield their Chinese linguistic resources.

My second interviewee, Miao, was born and raised in Harbin, a city in northeast China. She is currently a freshman at a university in Virginia, and speaks Mandarin, Dongbei dialect (a Chinese variation spoken predominantly in Northeast China), and English. When she was in high school in Harbin, she used to juggle both Chinese varieties in different domains: she would speak perfect Mandarin when delivering a speech as a student representative in public, and code-switch back to her Dongbei dialect in front of her family and local friends. This compartmentalization in her Chinese language under different situations thus exemplifies and showcases her conscious knowledge of the previously-discussed distribution of Chinese varieties. However, after two months in the US, she has transformed from a polyglot who maneuvers up and down the language hierarchy to a
monoglot of the Dongbei dialect (*Transcript 2*).

**Transcript 2: Excerpt from interview with Miao.**

|   | Intvr: | 1 Intvr: 现在在 国外还讲中文么?  
Do you still speak Chinese now that you're in the US? |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | Miao: 讲啊。干啥不讲啊? 还成天说东北话呢!  
Sure. Why not? I also speak Dongbei dialect all the time! |
| 3 | Intvr: 真的么? 跟中国学生么?  
Really? With Chinese students? |
| 4 | Miao: 啊呗。  
Yeah |
| 5 | Intvr: 那他们能听懂你说东北话么?  
Can they understand your dialect? |
| 6 | Miao: … 能吧，我管他们呢。他们好像还觉得挺逗的。  
… Probably, I don’t care. They seem to find it funny somehow. |
| 7 | Intvr: 我感觉我都好久不说东北话了。因为在Pomona大家都说普通话  
I feel like I haven’t spoken Dongbei dialect since forever. Because Chinese people here at Pomona all speak Mandarin. |
| 8 | Miao: 因为我想说啊。  
Because I want to. |
| 9 | Intvr: 啊？  
Huh? |
| 10 | Miao: 在这儿的中国女生儿开口就台湾腔! 就… 贼傻逼! 贼嗲! 还矫情! 我可受不了、我怕被他们给我拐跑喽!  
Other Chinese girls here speak Chinese with a Taiwanese accent! It’s… super stupid! Super *dia!* And pretentious! I can’t stand it, I don’t want their accent to influence mine! |

Of note is her use of Dongbei phrases and words: 干啥, *gansha*, why/what, usually used when the speaker is annoyed or irritated; 成天, *chengtian*, all the time/all day long; 啊呗, *abei*, yes; 管, *guan*, care; 贼, *zei*, very⁴; and 傻逼, *shabi*, stupid, stupid people; rather offensive.  
Beyond particular word choices, her pronunciations of other words mark her as a native Dongbei speaker. She pronounces 还 as *hài*, not

---

⁴ This definition is unique to the Dongbei dialect. The word means thief in Mandarin.
hai as it is in Mandarin. The verb 覺得, to think, reckon, she pronounces jiaode, true to the Dongbei dialect, as opposed to juède, as it would be in Mandarin. Lastly, her dialect shows through her use of the Dongbei-specific hedge-word 就, jiu, a mitigating word to lessen the impact of her utterance so as to render her speech felicitous in a discourse. She explains the motive behind her intentional language shift in line 8 and 10—her fear of adopting a Taiwanese accent as she interacts with “other Chinese girls” at her university. Additionally, in line 10, Miao expresses a strong aversion towards the Taiwanese accent with a noticeably more emphatic speech pattern (sentence-level emphasis as transcribed by exclamation marks). Here, her remarks echo the attributes Taiwanese Chinese indexes under the Mandarin hegemony. To further illustrate such indexicality, here are two examples culled from a widely used dictionary of Mandarin and an ethnographical research:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 1.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>形容撒娇的声音或态度。</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Describes a voice or attitude of talking and acting likes a spoiled child or little girl.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“嗲” (dia). From the Dictionary of Standard Mandarin.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 2.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost half of them {participants of the research} describe Gang-Tai accent with an adjective “嗲” (dia). The adjective “嗲” was also associated with a sensation of soft, tender, girlish, sissy or cutesy by some of the respondents. Besides “嗲,” more than one third of the participants have an impression that other modal particles, especially when drawn long and spoken in a soft tone, are frequently used in Gang-Tai accent, such as “啦” (la), “嘛” (ma), “耶” (ye), “囉” (luo).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Both examples on 嗖 (“spoiled child, sissy,” Example 1) and Miao’s word choices of 傻逼 (“stupid”) and 矫情 (“pretentious”) manifest the linguistic ideology under the hegemony, with which Chinese people form stereotypes about certain dialects and, by extension, their speakers. Due to an influx of Taiwanese pop culture—in the form of TV, music (featuring mostly maudlin ballads), and reality shows—Chinese people, especially teenagers, have begun to associate Taiwanese
Chinese speakers with the personalities of Taiwanese TV characters or singers and label them with ideologies in Example 2 (Yu-Tien 12). Miao never used the modal particles listed in Example 2, nor did she draw out her last syllables. Her linguistic performance of the Dongbei dialect stands in deliberate contrast to the Taiwanese accent in an attempt to construct her identity on a linguistically ideological level, one that steers clear of being labelled “stupid” or “pretentious.”

Xin, a 21-year-old female from Harbin⁵, voiced a similar intention to project a particular identity and differentiate herself from other Chinese students.

Transcript 3: *Excerpt from interview with Xin.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Xin:</th>
<th>[…] 我在国外的时候特别爱说东北话!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Franco:</td>
<td>为什么?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3  | Xin: | 因为… 就… 可能因为身边都是南方人吧 {中国南方}. 我得拿出来点东北女汉子公司气势来!
| |  | Because… *it’s*… probably because I’m surrounded by southern [Chinese] people. I have to appear more masculine as a Dongbei heroine!

Xin shares the same language and education background as Miao, and here, demonstrates a similar linguistic performance of the Dongbei dialect—for instance, in her use of 就 as a hedge. She also articulates the reason for her language shift in line 3—to differentiate from her Southern Chinese schoolmates and to construct a “masculine,” “Dongbei heroine” identity.

**Example 3**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>哎呀妈呀，我还是女神? 你可拉倒吧，我是一女汉子。</td>
<td>Oh my god, me, a goddess? You must be out of your mind. I am a female heroine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A female character in an 二人转 sketch titled 《女神和女汉子》 Goddess and Female Heroines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Spring Festival Gala 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁵ Harbin is a the provincial capital of Heilongjiang, a developing province in northeast China.
Example 3 is an excerpt from a二人转, an *errenzhuan*, a form of sketch comedy with roots in Dongbei culture that is now a nationally popular comedy form. This particular sketch aired on national television. The nationwide broadcasting of *errenzhuan* reflects the popularization of Dongbei culture, and, specifically, the Dongbei dialect. Male characters in *errenzhuan* are usually self-sufficient farmers or unskilled laborers. Female characters, on the other hand, are mostly portrayed as hot-tempered housewives, yelling and cackling. Such performances, in general, invoke impressions—if not stereotypes—of Dongbei people, thereby indexing them and their language as “salt-of-the-earth,” “humorous,” and “crude.” The term that Xin uses for “heroine” is 女汉子—a word which particularly signifies women who defy social expectations of femininity. It is now a widely-used neologism and can be directly linked to the use of the Dongbei dialect in the *errenzhuan* sketches airing on national television ("唉呀妈呀 (oh my god)" and “拉倒 (out of one’s mind)"). Xin’s choice to speak in the Dongbei dialect should therefore be interpreted as a performance in accordance with the social ideology that dictates the speech patterns of a “heroine.”

In their decision to speak the Dongbei dialect, both Miao and Xin exhibit agency in their own experience of navigating through Chinese diglossia in the US. They recognized the social saliency of their linguistic resources—in the form of the current popularity of Dongbei culture, exemplified by the *errenzhuan*—and further realized the indexical potentials of these resources to construct their own unique style amongst Chinese students. Their reference to neologisms and deeply-rooted linguistic ideologies also highlights the dialogic work of language. Linguistic resources at our disposal live “socially charged [lives]” and often carry tastes of their past uses and users (Bakhtin). Miao and Xin’s deployment of linguistic resources with imbued meanings is therefore a strategic move to ensure that their performances, as well as their self-claimed identities, are recognized by others in order to distinguish themselves from other Chinese students (Butler).

All three interviewees featured in this research paper are aware of their
Chinese diglossia as they negotiate and communicate their dominant identities in front of other Chinese speakers despite their different objectives. For Song, successful assimilation into the Mandarin-speaking student body is a strategic move to gain power from speaking an H-variety Chinese language. His narrative allows us to examine, on an individual level, the presence and effect of the Mandarin hegemony in China, which favors H-variety speakers and dialects of central/urban areas. Below are three other prime examples of this hegemony:

**Example 4**

字正腔圆 (zìzhēng qiāngyuán). Standard pronunciation and smooth intonation. An idiom describing characteristics of Beijing dialect, also used to compliment one’s standard Mandarin pronunciation.

From the Dictionary of Standard Mandarin (Zhang, 2008).

**Example 5**

The use of the national common language and script shall be conductive to maintaining national sovereignty and dignity, be conductive to national integrity and unity, and be conductive to the construction of socialist material and spiritual civilization. [translation adapted from Rohsenow (2004, p. 41)]

From Article 5 of the Law of the National Commonly Used Language (Guojia Tóngyòng Yúyán Wénzì Fǎ).

**Example 6**

说普通话,写规范字,做文明人,扬爱国情。Speak Mandarin; Write Standard Chinese; Be civilized/educated; Be patriotic.

From the official slogan for “National Mandarin Promotion Week.”

In example 4, the fact that such a characterization of Beijing dialect is now considered as a criterion of desirable Mandarin speech illustrates the hierarchical structure of Chinese linguistic hegemony. Among all Chinese speech communities, dialects of urban centers are more powerful, with the Beijing dialect being the most powerful, while those of rural and inland areas are often discriminated against (Dong 8). Under such a hegemony, Chinese language has increasingly become “amenable to redefinition as a measurable skill, as opposed to a talent, or an inalienable characteristic of group members” (Tan 345). The
nationalistic implication of said hegemony is also seen in example 5 and 6, which connect linguistic competence in Mandarin to one’s “national integrity” and “spiritual civilization.”

For Miao and Xin, their choice to speak a certain dialect seems to be driven only by their desire to differentiate themselves from other Chinese speakers and to achieve new dominant identities, such as the “heroine.” In their narratives, the Chinese linguistic hegemony is apparent in their recounting of linguistic ideologies borne by different Chinese varieties—for example, the perception of the Taiwanese accent as “stupid.” However, their migration away from China, the focus of where such hegemony operates, to the US, where no overarching Chinese language policies exist, led them to orient towards the hegemony differently and deploy linguistic resources that would have otherwise been avoided. When immersed in an expatriated Chinese speech community, where English is used in most daily communication, Chinese comes to mean different things to its speakers as it becomes less associated with national identity or degree of civilization and more of a shorthand for interaction with other Chinese speakers. In this vein, their diglossia becomes a resource with which they perform a range of identities at their discretion, and the Dongbei dialect they know by heart starts to take on a stylistic potential that is no longer reduced to an L-variety, suppressed by national language policy.
Notes:

Transcription Conventions.

- clause final (for Chinese Transcription)
- clause final (for English Transcription)
\ short pause (for Chinese Transcription)
, short pause (for English Transcription)
! sentence-level emphasis
? tag question or question intonation
… long pause
[ beginning of overlap
] end of overlap
{…} researcher’s comment
[…] researcher’s omission
@ laughter
Works Cited.


Franco Liu ‘20 undertook this research project for Professor David Divita’s Fall 2016 ID1 course, Language and Gender. This piece received an honorable mention out of thirty ID1 papers under consideration that year. Also, as an international student, Franco is glad that the English skills he’s accumulated from watching Desperate Housewives have finally paid off.


Ori Gersht’s *Pomegranate* opens on several fruits arranged to mimic Juan Sánchez Cotán’s *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, with Cotán’s quince noticeably replaced with a pomegranate. Then, in slow motion, a bullet pierces the pomegranate, ripping it nearly in half. It is clear how the beginning of the video resembles still life: the fruits are physically ‘still’ and unmoving. However, the end of the video also resembles a still life, though it uses a different effect to create its ‘stillness.’ The video ends when the pomegranate is at the highest point on its pendulum swing, the moment perfectly between ascent and descent. In this way the pomegranate exhibits the *vertige* effect often found in still life paintings, in which fruits are suspended in some way so that, if time were allowed to move forward, they would fall. This is how the end of the video creates ‘stillness’: rather than the kinetic stillness of not moving, the end invokes a temporal stillness of being frozen in a single moment. Indeed, while the slow downward trickle of the few pomegranate seeds that remain at the video’s end might seem to negate the *vertige* effect, they in fact only add to it: the seeds give proof to the pull of gravity that the pomegranate is defying.

While both the beginning and end of the video cultivate a sense of ‘stillness,’ the video’s use of sound sets up the end as the ‘true’ still life. For while, kinetically, the beginning of the video is perfectly still, it is accompanied with a low rumbling. This audio, preparing the viewer for the incoming bullet, gives the video a nervous animation, sabotaging its stillness. On the other hand, the end of the video is silent, a silence made conspicuous by the loud ‘whoosh’ of the bullet that precedes it. In this way, the beginning of the video feels like a pimple about to be popped, full of pressure and anticipation, while the end feels like a popped pimple, full of relief and stillness. The beginning still life then becomes what Harry Berger Jr. defines in his
book *Caterpillage* as a “McGuffin...a particular event, object, factor, etc. initially presented as being of great significance...but often having little actual importance” (2). Berger then borrows a metaphor from T.S. Eliot to compare the McGuffin to the “bone” thrown to the “watchdog of the mind” to distract the viewer of the painting from its “deeper business” (2). If the video’s beginning is its “McGuffin,” then the ending must reveal its “deeper business.”

The most convincing evidence that the end of the video is the true still life and the beginning is a “McGuffin” (2), and the evidence that reveals the “deeper business,” is the placement of the pomegranate. At the beginning of the video, the pomegranate is hung to the right of the cabbage. This is incorrect going by the model of the Cotán piece, as Cotán’s quince was hung to the left of the cabbage, forming a perfect downward arc through the fruit. The pomegranate, however, does assume its ‘true’ position at the end of the video, at the top of the pendulum swing created by the gunshot. Therefore, it can only be reasoned that the final frame of Gersht’s piece is the real still life, and the moments leading up to it are the still life’s creation, making the piece a sort of fruit-based snuff film. In this way, Gersht is saying...
that fruit still life is built upon violence, that it is only through an act of overt violence that a still life can be made. Indeed, the snuff film aspect also gives the piece an air of voyeuristic exploitation, the idea that pleasure is being derived from the violence visited upon these fruits. This is the thread that runs through the paintings in this collection—violence is perpetrated on fruits so that they can be exploited for voyeuristic pleasure.

In contrast to the overt violence in the Gersht video, the violence in the Cotán original is much subtler. Indeed, at first glance, with a color scheme of mostly dull yellows and greens set against a black background, the piece looks a bit dour, even drab. The most obvious instance of violence can be seen with the slice of melon placed next to, assumedly, the melon it was taken from. This placement echoes something that Frank Palmeri identifies as a marker of violence in game still life paintings in his essay *A Profusion of Dead Animals: Autocritique in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Gamepieces*. When describing one painting, Palmeri points out how a dead boar exists “at the stage where the recognizable form of the animal coexists with the cuts of meat it is becoming” (1). It is easy to see how the melon and melon slice can be viewed in the same way as the boar and the cuts of meat, as, while many would identify a melon as food, slicing indicates that it was prepared, butchered even, and turned into a more recognizable food product.

However, the simple slicing of a melon is not an especially conspicuous or out of the ordinary instance of violence in fruit still lifes. The more interesting instance of violence can be seen when looking at the melon slice in relation to the cucumber. Both are placed perilously far off the edge of the niche which contains the fruits. This placement is an example of the *vertige* effect. If time moved beyond this moment, the pair would plummet into the unknown depths beyond the frame of the painting. The hung fruits also look to be on the precipice of falling. While they may appear to be safe at first, suspended in a way which is not gravity defying but instead readily physically explainable, this notion falls apart when examining the way the strings are tied around the fruits. On the quince, the string is only tied around the
quince’s stem. The stem is uniform in thickness throughout—there is nothing stopping the stem from sliding completely through the knot. On the other hand, it is impossible to tell how the cabbage is secured by its string, as all we can see of the string is the knot. It is just as possible that the string is safely wrapped around the entire cabbage as it is that the string is tied around a single leaf. Indeed, it is even possible that the string does not secure the cabbage at all, and the cabbage would fall uninhibited if time moved forward. Moreover, the conspicuous downward arc formed by the fruits gives the whole of the piece a feeling of downward motion.

The drama in this piece, then, comes from the fruits on the verge of falling. Indeed, everything about the piece’s composition seems to point to an impending ‘splat.’ The temptation here may be to read this as a vanitas painting that depicts the triumph before the fall and the dangers of overabundant riches. However, this painting is

conspicuously lacking in overabundant riches. Indeed, the grey-yellow color scheme and imposing black background convey a sense of sparseness that, if anything, conflicts with the typical vanitas narrative. A better explanation for the fruits’ impending fall can be found by turning back to *Caterpillar*. When discussing flower still lifes, Berger points out that the “posing” of flowers in flower still lifes is “imposed,” that “flowers don’t come willingly to their pose” (89). This is just as true of fruits. While it may seem perfectly obvious, fruits do not have the ability to place themselves on a ledge, or hang themselves from a string. This begs the question, how did the fruits assume these poses? Indeed, Berger’s assertion that the posing is “imposed” necessitates an ‘imposer:’ an unseen entity that actively and intentionally placed the fruits to assume these poses.

The necessity of an imposer then suggests a narrative for how these fruits came to be posed, an ‘occasion’ for the painting. While there are certainly possible readings in which the imposer is not intentionally malevolent, one aspect of the painting negates those readings and reveals the true intentions of this imposer: the fact that the fruits are in a niche. This means that, even in the world of the painting, the fruits are on display, an ornamental, decorative one at that. And the fact that this is an intentional display by the imposer means that the *vertige* so heavily present in this painting is also an intentional effect by the imposer. The painting is so wholly compositionally geared towards implying a tantalizingly close fall that it is impossible that the fall is not the deliberate focus of this display. Moreover, the fact that this is being displayed in a decorative way implies that one is supposed to take pleasure from viewing it. This is reminiscent of the “snuff film” voyeurism in Gersht’s piece. However, here the pleasure is not taken from the performing of violence, but rather from the threat of it. The occasion for this painting, then, becomes a wholly exploitative one. The imposer intentionally placed these fruits on the verge of falling and intentionally threatened them with a form of violence that would result in their destruction, solely for the purpose of displaying them and taking voyeuristic pleasure from their peril.

While the previous works have only presented fruits as victims of
violence, Alejandro de Loarte’s *Still Life with Game and Fruit* presents other victims as well—namely, the ‘game.’ At first, the ‘game’ may even appear to be the primary victims, as they take up most of the space in the painting. The game depicted is not anything out of the ordinary for game still lifes: a fish, two hares, and five fowl. Four of the fowl and two of the hares are hung from the top of the frame. One hare in the process of being butchered is turned toward the viewer, so that the cut in its belly can be seen, the fur surrounding the slit tinged red with blood. The piece demonstrates Palmeri’s concept of “recognizable animals” being seen alongside the food they are becoming, not only with the butchered belly of the hare, but also with the huge rack of meat hung in the center of all the “recognizable forms of animals.” In other words, the violence done to the pieces game subjects is readily apparent, easily recognizable.

And yet, the staging of the subjects pushes against this reading. While the hanging animals may initially imply that this food is being stored for later consumption, closer inspection proves this is not the case.
All of the game in the painting forms a symmetrical pattern, with the basket of quinces and pomegranates on the table serving as the axis of symmetry. The animals and meat hung from the ceiling are not only symmetrical around the fruit, but also form a triangle that frames the fruit basket. Moreover, the bird and fish on the table both lie at an angle so that their heads are pointing towards the fruit. All the game in the piece is serving to draw the viewer’s eye to the basket of fruit in the center of the table. The fruit is the literal center of attention.

Therefore, like in the Cotán, the posing of these animal corpses to perfectly frame the fruits suggests that this is a display put together by some imposer. After all, just like fruit and flowers, dead animals do not have the agency to pose themselves, and certainly not to pose themselves in such an artistic way. The question then becomes, “Why deliberately frame the fruits in this display?” This question can be answered when looking at the violence enacted on the fruits. Like the hare, the pomegranates have also been ‘butchered,’ their blood-red seeds lying exposed. Indeed, the parallel between the rabbit and the pomegranates is furthered by the fact that the color palette for the pomegranates is nearly identical to that of the rabbit: The pomegranate seeds match the rabbit’s bloody insides, the white inside of the peel matches the white belly, the yellowish brown outside of the peel matches the rest of the rabbit’s fur. Moreover, the bodily way in which Loarte painted the seeds makes them look like intestines: not only do they have the color of innards, but they also have the mushy, almost liquid texture. Indeed, some rows of seeds strongly resemble the coiling tubes of intestines. By appropriating the visual language of violence in game still life, Loarte makes it clear that, in terms of the violence done to them, the fruit here is game. But the fruit is not just game. The lavish display made by the profusion of dead animals makes it clear that this basket of fruits is a trophy. The fruits are the ‘prize kill’ that the imposer is most proud of. Here, the voyeuristic pleasure is not being derived directly from the violence done to the fruits, but from the aesthetic beauty of their mutilated bodies.

One thing that has been lacking from the instances of voyeurism in the previously discussed paintings is, ironically, the voyeurs. While
we are shown the displays, there has not yet been a depicted audience taking pleasure from them. This is different in Blas de Ledesma’s *Still Life with Cherries and Flowers*. First, let us look at the yellow flowers. Their bright color makes them stand out against the black background. They are placed high above the cherries, and they very noticeably lean in over the basket. They look like they are watching the cherries, leaning in to get a better view. Why? What is it that they are trying to get a better view of?

![Image of Still Life with Cherries and Flowers by Blas de Ledesma](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol2/iss2/1)


The answer becomes clear when looking at the cherries. The basket is filled to the point of overflowing with cherries. There are cherries shown at all stages in this overflow: some cherries are safely confined within the basket, others have been shoved out and are lying on the table, others still are clinging with their stems to the rim, almost as if they are holding on for dear life. A note about these cherries is that their hanging on is only accomplished by the fact that they are connected to another cherry at the stem. As a result, they are pulling another cherry down with them. Indeed, the two pairs of cherries lying on the table imply the probable end for these hanging pairs.
Violence in this painting, then, looks like cherries being pushed out of the basket. Importantly, the painting is showing this instance of violence as it is still going on. The viewer does not see the bloody aftermath like in the Loarte, but the act itself. The cherries being pushed out of the basket is an event that can be watched, like a fight in an arena. The basket itself emphasizes this reading, as its wide, cylindrical shape strongly resembles that of an ancient Roman arena. This resemblance can be seen when comparing the basket with Jerzy Strzelecki’s picture of the Colosseum titled *Colosseum*. Indeed, change in the wicker pattern on the basket from the bottom to the top mirrors the change in the pattern of the Colosseum’s façade from the bottom to the top. If this basket is a colosseum, then that makes the cherries the gladiators. Moreover, the arena theme can be seen again when looking back to the flowers, as the flowers are arranged in rough rows that resemble arena seats. It now becomes clear why the flowers are leaning in: They are the audience to this battle. They are the voyeuristic spectators taking pleasure in watching the cherries shove each other out of the basket, and they are leaning in so that they can get the best view.

And yet, as Berger points out, the cherries do not have the agency to shove each other, or at least not to ‘willingly’ shove each other. Indeed, the ‘shoving’ is due to a lack of space, which the cherries cannot control. But this is exactly the point. For the same lack of agency that prevents the cherries from committing this violence also prevents them from not committing the violence. They are forced by the physics of their own bodies to take part in this battle. The unwillingness of the cherries makes the gladiator narrative of the painting even more appropriate. So, in this posing, the cherries are being doubly exploited. Not only are they made the victims of violence, but they are also forced to be the unwilling perpetrators of violence on other cherries.

Jean-Siméon Chardin’s Basket with Wild Strawberries, obviously visually similar to the Ledesma, presents a slight variation on the violence seen in Cherries and Flowers. While the damage done to the fruit in Cherries and Flowers is caused by fruits forced out of a space, the damage done in this painting is caused by fruits forced into one.

Jean-Siméon Chardin. *Basket with Wild Strawberries*, 1761. Oil on canvas.
Chardin depicts a massive heap of strawberries piled into a wicker basket. The heap is even more overpowering in this painting, as the berries tower high over the top of the basket, whereas only the very highest cherries were visible in Cherries and Flowers. However, no strawberries are being pushed out of the basket, instead they are being pushed further into the space that is too small for them. And the effects of this pushing can be clearly seen in the strawberries. There are small places on the edge of the basket where strawberries are being crushed into the basket and the wicker is beginning to be stained by strawberry juice. The strawberries themselves look mushy, like they are losing their solid shape, slowly congealing into a jam. This calls back to Palmeri’s idea of seeing the “recognizable body” transitioning into a food product. Indeed, the liquid blurriness of the strawberries is made apparent by the defined solidness of the peach and the cherries. Even the water, an actual liquid, has definite crispness to it, further emphasizing the transitional state of the strawberries. So, while the cause of harm is slightly different, it would appear then that the strawberries are like the cherries in action along with appearance, unwilling perpetrators of violence against themselves. They are crushed by their posing, unable to counteract the force of gravity.

And yet, there is another key difference between this painting and *Cherries and Flowers*: the action of the flower. In *Cherries and Flowers* the flowers represented voyeurs, hungrily leaning over the violence below them. But here, the flower is turned away from the violence. Indeed, it is almost falling off the table, and would fall off if it were not tethered to the basket. The flower here looks not only disinterested in the violence, but as if it is actively trying to escape it. If the flower cannot be read as a voyeur, then how can it be read?

The flower’s affixation to the strawberries is key here. For this means that, in terms of the “occasion” of the painting, the flower was not merely placed on the table, it was attached to the strawberries, fixed to them so that not even gravity, which is crushing the strawberries, could tear it away. Indeed, this is a painting in which Chardin could not have simply dangled the flower off the edge of the table, invoking the *vertige* effect, as the role of gravity is defined and made explicit.
by the fate of the strawberries. This means that the flower is for the strawberries. Looking at the flower, with its ghostly white petals and green stem, it looks funereal. Indeed, as Berger points out, this flower’s status as being ‘cut’ makes it emblematic of death—death is inherent in its existence. The flower, then, is not meant to mark the pleasure taken in this violence, but rather commemorate it solemnly, even regretfully. So while this piece is very similar visually to the Ledesma, its treatment of its main fruit subjects is completely the opposite. It presents an alternative to the voyeurism and exploitation that Ledesma’s cherries were subjected to. Indeed, Chardin, like Gersht, is picking up on the idea of violence being necessary for the creation of fruit still life, but pushing against the idea that this violence must be flagrantly exploitative.

To sum up, each of the paintings so far has treated violence as an integral part of fruit still life. The Gersht even portrayed violence as necessary for the creation of still life. The Chardin too treated violence as necessary, though it eschewed the voyeuristic aspects of the other works. However, the question that has not been answered is, why? Why is violence so necessary to fruit still life?

Louise Moillon answers this question in her painting *Still Life with Cherries, Strawberries and Gooseberries*. Evidence of violence is readily apparent in the painting. Several of the cherries, mostly towards the back edge of their bowl, are marked and bruised. Notably, one of the cherries on the front edge has a large hole in it, probably eaten away by some insect. The strawberries are also noticeably bruised, with one in particular marked by a large, white spot. These are certainly subtler markers of violence than in other paintings; however, they are still markers. Indeed, one cannot talk about bruised fruit without adopting a bodily, violent language. While the particular violence that caused these marks is not apparent, this issue will be resolved later. Most important for now is that the cherries and strawberries appear battered and bruised.

The gooseberries are different, however. They appear to be unmarked, unblemished, ideally perfect gooseberries. Indeed, a number of factors would make even spotting blemishes on the gooseberries difficult. For one, their dark brownish-green color is much more flattering than the cherries and strawberries’ bright red. For, as bruises mostly manifest in dark brown spots, it would be nearly impossible to distinguish a bruise from the dark browns of the gooseberries. Moreover, the gooseberries are circled by large leaves. These leaves shield the gooseberries from the light that readily exposes the bruises on the strawberries and cherries. The gooseberries can hide in the dark, while the strawberries and cherries cannot.

Moreover, the gooseberries are contained in a wicker basket, while the cherries and strawberries are in porcelain bowls. Notably, these porcelain bowls themselves depict bowls of fruit. In other words, the strawberries and cherries, which are conspicuously not idealized depictions of fruits, are contained within idealized depictions of fruits. Not only can the strawberries and cherries be compared against the gooseberries, but they can also be compared against their very containers.

In short, everything about this painting makes the strawberries and cherries noticeably imperfect when compared with the idealized gooseberries. But what is even allowing the comparison between
the two groups in the first place? It is their segregation into separate bowls. If the fruits were mixed together, unsegregated, it would be impossible to get an idea of each group as a whole. However, because they are segregated, it is impossible not to view them as a whole, and judgments of individuals so easily become judgments of the whole.

Another effect of this segregation is the formation of sides. Note that the cherries and strawberries are segregated from each other as well; however, it seems natural, even necessary, to link them. For, as discussed earlier, they are very similar to each other and wholly the opposite of the gooseberries. The formation of sides necessitates the comparisons allowed by segregation. Viewers are invited to compare the gooseberries with the strawberries and cherries to see which is better. In other words, the same differences that allow the strawberries and cherries to be compared negatively with the gooseberries also force the strawberries and cherries into a sort of comparison-based battle with the gooseberries.

The main violence being depicted here, then, is not physical, but representational. Moillon has posed these fruits so that their representations are constantly being compared against one another. Moreover, she gives the losers of the representational battle physical scars, implying that a blow done in this representational battlefield is as damaging to the fruit as an actual blow. In this way, Moillon is saying that representation itself is violence, that the creation of still life is itself an act of violence. This is Moillon’s answer to the question of why violence is necessary in fruit still life. The creation of a still life necessitates comparison of the real against the ideal, and this is an act of representational violence against the real.

Again, none of the fruits have the agency to actively take part in this battle. But also, this same lack of agency prohibits them from not taking part in the battle. They cannot escape their posing just as they cannot choose it. The gooseberries are being exploited here just as much as the cherries. Though the gooseberries are the representation of perfection, it is not through their will or consent that they are projecting this perfection onto the cherries and strawberries. No matter
what role they play, no matter what narrative is constructed, when fruits are posed they are exploited.

WORKS CITED.


Chardin, Jean-Siméon. *Basket with Wild Strawberries*. 1761, oil on canvas.


de Ledesma, Blas. *Still Life with Cherries and Flowers*. 1620, oil on canvas, High Museum of Art, Georgia.


Moillon, Louise. Basket of Plums and Basket of Strawberries. 1632, oil on panel, Musee des Augustins de Toulouse, France.


That’s Absurd! (Or is it?)

By Tulika Mohan

When I heard President-elect Trump say ‘bigly’ (or big league? Phoneticians are hard at work unraveling this modern mystery), I was immediately reminded by a similar, brutish figure in the 19th century mispronouncing ‘Merde’ in a crowded theatre in Paris. Theatre of the Absurd led to the creation of some of the most fascinating characters ever portrayed on stage. I do believe that some of the techniques and philosophies of that era still pervade through society today, and I hope to keep reworking these ideas to fit situations of our current social and cultural realities.

By juxtaposing the Absurdist movement in theater in the 19th century with the campaign and subsequent election of billionaire businessman Donald Trump, we can demonstrate that the ‘absurd’ is dynamic, constantly changing as society evolves.

Editor’s note: This essay has been adapted to fit on these pages. Pages on the left-hand side are to be compared to those on the right-hand side. The essay follows.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol2/iss2/1
'Merdre!' screeched Pere Ubu on the opening and closing night of *Ubu Roi* (translated to either King Ubu or King Turd), Alfred Jarry's most popular play. It featured the greedy and bizarre Pere Ubu feeding the Polish army an excrement covered toilet brush and consequently inviting the common people over to his palace for a massive orgy (Alfred).

Unsurprisingly, his play caused a riot in one of the most upscale theaters of Paris on December 10, 1896, with many people running out of the theater. In fact, this was a typical phenomenon around that time. Several similar plays, defined by their nonsensical dialogues, cyclical plots, subversion of language and logic, and lack of meaning, fascinated and frustrated audience members and critics alike. The type of language demonstrated was a far cry from what was usually seen in Shakespearean or Elizabethan plays—absurdist plays possessed an almost dissonant quality, like they were toying with time. This increased suspense and anticipation for the audience, who were understandably very annoyed when the climax was something glib and meaningless.

These plays were later grouped together under the term 'Theater of the Absurd,' which was coined by literary critic Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay of the same name. Written by primarily European playwrights, these plays were shaped in the claustrophobic bubble of oppression, following the needlessly devastating destruction of the First World War.

For an actor, moving between a traditional acting role to an absurd dramatis personae from an absurdist play is no easy feat. In traditional theater, the character that the audience sees onstage is not the character initially envisioned by the playwright. Rather, it is a new character, a hybrid created by combining the essence of the role with the actor's behavior and mannerisms. The actor would attempt to understand the background, ambitions and the intent of the character, creating a purpose if need be, in order to truly portray the character for the audience. In this way, the actor quickly gets lost in the role, and it's...
“You’re fired!” cackled Donald J. Trump to Sam Solovey in the first season of *The Apprentice*, a reality show that propelled him into the eyes of the public, and consequently shaped the character of the President-elect. It was a stroke of good fortune for both Trump and Mark Burnett, the creator of *Survivor*, to have met each other.

When they met to discuss the potential structure of the show, Burnett explained that the show would showcase the Trump empire better than any advertisement or business deal would—viewers would see his casinos, his hotels, his golf courses, and his apartment. They would finally have a chance to understand the life of the ostentatious business mogul. Of course, the show also required Trump to be the judge, jury and executioner of the contestants, who were all eager for a chance to work in leadership positions in Trump’s profitable businesses. Trump was initially hesitant about signing on to a television show. For a long time, Trump had been derisive of reality television, claiming it was for bottom-feeders of society (Kranish).

Though he was concerned about the time commitment the show represented, he also knew it would be a powerful means of showcasing his brand. Finally, Burnett convinced him to sign on by telling Trump that by starring in (and producing) his own TV, Trump would no longer be a product of journalists’ headlines and edited interviews. He would be in control of his own narrative.

For the entirety of his run on the show *The Apprentice*, Trump refused to memorize any lines. He would read the basic outline of the episode in advance and improvise it during the actual shooting of the show. His catchphrase “You’re fired!” was in fact ad-libbed, its iconic status cemented when the production crew cheered immediately afterwards.

As the show continued on for 14 seasons, Trump began to develop his signature style of speaking. The opening montage featured a subversive image of Trump in his limo with a homeless man on a bench
difficult to discern whether it is the actor or the character that bids
the audience adieu at the end of a performance. In contrast, there is
no ‘meaning-making’ process in theater of the absurd. Characters of
absurdist plays don’t bother concealing their motivations, which are
usually governed by a single thought without any regard for the con-
sequences. How does the actor justify her character’s actions to herself
(and, in turn, to the audience) if the character is irrational, impulsive,
and not grounded in reality?

The only solution is for the actor to isolate and then remove the ‘ide-
al’ self that she has built up over the years, based on interactions with
and social cues from the myriad individuals and elements in their en-
vironment. She then transforms into the ‘black sheep’ of society, who
is not only capable but actually willing to act on deviant thoughts. By
indulging her deepest, most outrageous instincts, she is free from the
burden of societal expectations, of acting ‘normal’.

In this way, she becomes an amalgamation of her most authentic
thoughts, perhaps even revealing her truest self to the audience.
The character of *Ubu Roi*, for instance, was a caricature of the baser
human instincts. He makes himself King of Poland and proceeds to
kill everyone without batting an eye, all while the overall ambience
of the production comes across as eerily childlike. Jarry expressed our
unfiltered psychological states by objectifying them onstage (Ahmed).

Understandably, the theater of the absurd was initially met with
incomprehension and rejection by audiences and critics alike. In fact,
after watching Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, one critic summed
up his experience by quoting one of the lines from the play, “Noth-
ing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful” (Bennett). At
first, people flocked to see *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Soprano* by
Eugene Ionesco simply because it was fashionable to express outrage
about them at parties. Soon, however, they became eager to dissect
each scene of the play, to understand the purpose behind creating a
plotless production with grotesque characters and awkward, arrhyth-
mic dialogue.
outside. It was essentially a gigantic promotion for his brand. On the pilot episode, he boasted, “I’m the largest real estate developer in New York. I’ve mastered the art of the deal and have turned the name Trump into the highest-quality brand. And as the master, I want to pass along some of my knowledge to somebody else.” He used brief, declarative sentences, pulled off both playful and vicious taunts to the finalists with equal aplomb, and fascinated the audience with his dramatic sense of timing. “I’ve never had lessons,” he said proudly, “I’ve always felt comfortable in front of the camera. Either you’re good at it or you’re not good at it” (Kranish).

The success of his TV show renewed questions about which aspects of Trump’s public persona reflected his true self and which were pure showmanship, aspects he perfected to draw in the public. Trump sometimes scoffed at the idea that he’d created a separate or different character that he played on the public stage, sometimes insisting that the things he said on TV were intended simply to provoke or entertain.

The show was a runaway success. It was the seventh most watched show of 2004, averaging about 21 million viewers every week. *The Apprentice* transformed Trump from a typical Richie Rich to a straight talking, Simon Cowell-esque politically incorrect truth teller, a persona that he carried into his candidacy for the highest public office in the country. Trump always had politics at the back of his mind—he considered running for presidency in 1988 and 2012 as a Republican, and actually ran a presidential campaign in 2000 for the nomination of the Reform Party.

When he at last secured the nomination of the Republican Party in July 2016, still performing and perfecting the persona he had played on *The Apprentice*, the media was left wondering what reasons were behind his long-running interest in politics.
Thus began the formulation of possible theories for what the absurdist playwright wanted to convey to the audience. Critics compared the techniques used in absurdist plays with other theatrical productions from different time periods and then focused on the similarities between the absurdist plays that were staged in the late 1950s and modernist plays that were staged around the end of the 19th century. The literary and artistic movement of Modernism became more prominent after the First World War, as more and more authors and artists began doubting and reassessing the foundations of civil society. For instance, Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabla* and *The Wild Duck* were performed as though an audience were not watching. In fact, actors went through rigorous training to ensure that they wouldn’t acknowledge or even make eye contact with the audience present in order to preserve this carefully constructed illusion of realism (Harrison). Critics also found it useful to focus on the works and techniques of Bertolt Brecht, who may be the most obvious influence on the theater of the absurd. Brecht outlined the principle of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the estrangement effect, which involved “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them” (Thomson). His techniques often involved harsh, bright stage lighting, or the pronouncement of stage directions. Brecht paved the way for absurdist theater, which aims to provoke the deepest level of the audience’s awareness—to push them, frighten them, make them consciously assess their reactions to the happenings onstage.

Martin Esslin’s use of the word ‘absurd’ alludes to Albert Camus’ 1942 essay “Myth of Sisyphus,” in which he argues that Sisyphus, condemned to push a boulder up a hill for all eternity, can be understood as happy. He knows that his task is absolutely meaningless and embraces that realization. He no longer has any illusions about his purpose in the world (Camus). Jean-Paul Sartre famously observed that “we are nothing and in action become conscious of that original nothingness.”

Absurd strategies were therefore a method to cope with and come to terms with a universe devoid of meaning and logic. Martin Esslin
The mainstream media, for most part, implied that the suggestion that Donald Trump could become the 45th President of the United States was simply absurd. As the campaign continued and Trump seemed to become a viable candidate in the eyes of many, the media changed their outlook. Trump had been a spectator in the political arena for decades but made his way to the fore by becoming a major donor to the Republican Party. However, believing his candidacy to merely be a publicity stunt to revive a dying reality TV show, the media refused to take him seriously. However, the country did not—he gained ground in several states that should have been sure wins for Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party candidate and one of the most qualified individuals in US history to run for office. David Keene, the former chairman of the American Conservative Union, admitted, “It’s almost comical, except it’s liable to end up with him as the nominee” (Haberman). The press dismissed Trump’s initial lead as temporary, believing his success was largely due to his celebrity status. However, Trump’s unprecedented win led to the media’s hasty analysis of his past motivations and reasons, in an attempt to understand how and why he had resonated with so many people at a national level. They ‘discovered’ that politics had been Trump’s end game all along. Some believed that the ambition of becoming president was ‘birthed’ at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner, where President Obama ridiculed his show The Apprentice, and Trump’s belief in the conspiracy that President Obama was not born in the United States (Schulman).

By linking incidents, events and conversations, the media wove a narrative that explained their failure of anticipating Trump’s historic win. They dug up statements he had made years before, speculated over Trump’s ‘casual’ dinners with political advisors and polling agents such as Kellyanne Conway, and his famous endorsement of the 2012 Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, at a Trump property in Florida. The media’s control of the narrative extended in both directions, with famous talk show hosts like John Oliver and Samantha Bee as well as the cast of Saturday Night Live trivializing the possibility of his victory even weeks before the election results were revealed. They reached
attempts to explain the motives behind absurdist plays, nothing that “the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre and Camus express the new content in the old convention, the theater of the absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed” (Esslin).

It should be noted that it took theater critics over 60 years to articulate why these plays stood in such stark difference to traditional theatrical productions. Researchers and critics continue to probe the matter, to see if they can predict when the next unorthodox theater style comes to the fore, what shape it will take, and what norms it will disrupt.

Critics echoed the words of the playwright Joe Orton from his play *What the Butler Saw* (1969): “You can’t be rational in an irrational world, it’s not rational.” By tracing the roots of theater and finding traces of established techniques in absurdist plays, critics gradually came to accept the theater of the absurd as a well-researched and precise art form that they had anticipated all along.

Today, people rush to see re-stagings of famous absurdist plays in their local theaters. These productions are enjoyed, not reviled, and techniques that were considered abhorrent are now emulated. The use of crass language, lack of plot, and clown-like characters is now considered to be high-brow, purposeful sophisticated art. What was first considered ‘absurd’ was gradually accepted as convention, no longer breaking the wall as it did before. The absurd is not solely a political and cultural movement from the 1960s. Rather, it is the continuous subversion and embracement of what mainstream society considers normal and expected.
heights of political parody never before summited, continuing to ridicule Trump after his narrow victory.

To this date, people remain in disbelief about the election results. Campaigns on Change.org to restructure the executive branch of the government and dismantle the electoral college have attained considerable Internet traction. At the same time, reporters continue to tug at the seams of political history, attempting to find a similarly disreputable figure from the past that had won against all odds. Others hastily begin writing biographies of the President-elect, guaranteed to fly off shelves. The questions that political pundits and elites must answer seem insurmountable—was this election just an aberration in the well-researched and measured voting behaviors of Americans, or does it set a new precedent for how campaign strategies will work in swing states? Was becoming president a long-time ambition of Trump’s, as the media suggested, or was it a series of random actions made by the businessman that somehow resonated with the public?

While a large section of America mourned for their nation, many rejoiced. For them, this unabashedly blunt, anti-establishment businessman with the goal of building a wall between US and Mexico and creating a Muslim registry was a long time coming. They believed America was finally returning to her roots, correcting the prolonged deviance that the last few decades represented. The country would return to the ideal political and economic system that had been envisioned by the Founding Fathers. This fraction of the American voters looked past Trump’s derogatory remarks about minorities, women, and the differently abled, remarks which had come under serious scrutiny a few years prior. Eight years ago, the mere idea of a biracial president of the United States might have been absurd. History, with all its triumphs, failures, twists, and ironies, tells us everything and nothing at once. It reveals several possibilities, both plausible and implausible. Which of these is more likely to occur—if at all? The future is unknown but imaginable, and humanity will continue its obsessive fascination with predicting it.
Thus we observe that absurdism is a fluid concept. Since time makes permeable the boundaries between the absurd and the normal, we can hypothesize that everything that exists within the realm of possibility is absurd. Alternately, and more optimistically, we can state that nothing is absurd and anything is possible.

Works Cited.


Schulman, Kori. “The President’s Speech” at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, 1 May 2011, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/01/president-s-speech-white-house-correspondents-dinner.


I have been thinking about love. Usually, when I think about love, I think about specific people in my life. Potential love, lost love, the forgotten, the unrequited, the I-don’t-know-why-but-I-can’t-stop-thinking-about, and everything in between. These spaces create my personal discourse: it is informed by the boundaries I set within the sphere of my relationships, how I identify sexually, and the other rules or guidelines I use to think about love. For example, even though I don’t know Joe very well, I think a lot about Joe.¹ And the way that I think about Joe is organized around a myriad of elements that come together to create a fantasy Joe; the person I think about is completely different from the person who exists outside my head. We don’t have a lot in common. He’s three years older, he grew up in the States, he plays sports, and he carries himself with the casual, confident manner of a handsome white male with above-average intelligence. I am at once unable to relate to Joe and completely drawn to him. I will spend hours thinking about him, poring over details on social media and trying to absorb some of his enigmatic essence of ease. I try to define specific aspects of his personality that manifest in his public persona. What do his hashtags say about him? How does he caption his Instagram photos? Why does he always make that face in his Snapchats?

And all the while, I have been thinking about love. I chose to write three essays about monogamy because relationships have always fascinated me. For the past month, I have been researching, writing about, analyzing, and critiquing the way our society deals with love on a large scale. This research has impacted my personal discourse. The more I learn about sexuality—the different motivations behind how we define it, the oppressive power structures that change its meaning, and the many ways it is prone to change—the more I question my discourse.

¹ Names have been anonymized.
What, exactly, is my infatuation with Joe founded upon? In what ways do I think about him? Why do I continue to think about him, even as I am very aware that he’s just not that into me? To Joe, I am just a moment: fleeting in the days we see each other, nonexistent in the days we don’t. But to me, Joe is a haze, drifting through my mind constantly.2

The bias in my first essay, in which I posed the question of whether or not monogamy “works,” came through as a result of my obsession. The topic was a way of pushing back the part of me that was defining myself through Joe; I was seeking the opportunity to reinvent myself, in a sense, through the essay. I had already decided that monogamy was a flawed social construct; I chose to define myself through my rejection of normative monogamy, and thus the influence of society on my sexuality. Monogamy was an evil social structure imposing its boundaries on me. But I now realize I am the naïve public that wants to believe the “repressive hypothesis” that Foucault criticizes in his History of Sexuality. Foucault argues that the public is more inclined to believe in the repressive hypothesis in order to see our sexuality as something powerful, something revolutionary. The repressive hypothesis attaches an aspect of political liberation to sexual discourse. It encourages the idea that openly talking about or engaging in “illicit sexual behavior,” or “perversions,” is a way of protest.

But Foucault tells us that, in fact, our very conception of sexuality is founded upon society; sexuality cannot exist without its human, social history. And this history is shaped by the very political structures we convince ourselves we are fighting against. Hence, the idea that we are using sexuality to fight against repressive power structures is null. We cannot see sexual discourse solely through the lens of the repressive hypothesis; we cannot seek to escape power structures through sexuality, because our understanding of sexuality is a manifestation of those structures. My rejection of monogamy—and my self-righteous belief that this rejection somehow set me apart—does not mean what I want it to mean.3

2 Commonly known as “a pathetic crush.”
3 I ask myself, will I ever find the magical element to my personality that can make
So what is monogamy, and how does it work? Why is it that, even as I thumb through the foundational text of polyamory, Dossie Eaton and Catherine A. Liszt’s *The Ethical Slut*, I secretly panic at the idea of Joe being with anyone else? Normative monogamy has enforcers all throughout our society, at all levels: the church, conservatives, hopeless romantics, Jennifer Aniston; even young people who try to reject everything “mainstream” recognize monogamy’s importance.\(^4\) It is one of the few social institutions so firmly embedded in our culture that it is practically part of our subconscious.

In her article “Against Love,” Laura Kipnis traces the inextricable ties between love and monogamy: in society’s eyes, to reject monogamy is to reject love. Monogamy’s allure can be equated to that of love. Who doesn’t romanticize the idea that someone out there is made for them, that they will find *one* person with whom they find a connection above and beyond anything else in the world?\(^5\) If we refer back to my original question regarding whether monogamy “works,” this mentality provides an answer: yes, monogamy works and will always work as long as we hold out the human desire to be special. Today, our aggressively capitalist society enhances this mentality. We strive to be the best. We compete. We protect our assets. We are raised in a way that enforces this behavior; it only makes sense that we would treat our relationships the same way.

I therefore began to trace back my own beliefs and let myself be swept into the romantic allure of monogamy. Admittedly, I do see something beautiful about being someone’s “everything.”\(^6\) It may be me “cool”?

\(^4\) When I asked my 15-person ID1 class whether they wanted to get married someday, 13 people raised their hands; it was interesting to see how normative monogamy is still alive and well amidst a generation growing up with a 50% divorce rate.

\(^5\) Emphasis on the word “find”—part of the romanticized notion of love is very involved in the search. Every romantic comedy relies on this narrative arc; it makes the payoff (the discovery!) all the more satisfying.

\(^6\) However, admitting this feels like a kind of submission to the brainwashing that society enforces upon us. The feeling parallels to agreeing with society’s beauty standards (I fawn over the most stereotypically “pretty,” emaciated, blonde, leggy models); it means that I am agreeing with the racism and sexism inherent in those standards. Perhaps the romanticizing of normative monogamy is not as clearly
a source of pride, being able to fulfill someone’s every desire. It is this quality that Esther Perel, a psychotherapist who specializes in relationships, addresses in her TED Talk about infidelity: cheating hurts differently today, because our expectations of love (and consequently, ourselves) are so vast. When we engage in a monogamous relationship—really, truly let ourselves believe in the concept and the bond—we choose to believe that we are a little bit perfect. As Perel puts it: I am this person’s best friend, greatest lover, intellectual equal, I am this person’s very favorite person. This status is a huge ego boost.

For the emotionally vulnerable, the desperate for any kind of nod of approval, monogamy offers an opportunity to find ourselves. In a way, it is the ultimate validation. This is perhaps why marriage is seen as life’s “happily ever after”: it marks not only the ending point of the search for love, it also marks the ending point of the search for ourselves. There is, however, a risk: “infidelity has a tenacity that monogamy can only envy.” In the sphere of monogamy, if another person enters the picture, it’s not just the relationship that shatters. Our very sense of being—and all the validation built upon the relationship—is destroyed.

Thus, the people who reject monogamy are often painted as emotionally unavailable, scared of love, unable to take a risk, overly defensive—damaged. In some cases, this depiction might be valid. If I tell myself that I don’t need to be someone’s one-and-only, I will not be privy to the pain and heartbreak of infidelity. However, I loathe the notion that self-preservation is the only reason people choose entrenched in the evils of society, but it runs along a similar vein.

7 See: “depressingly universal qualities of teenage girls.”

8 In the TV series “Bojack Horseman,” one of the characters talks about our “age of stagnation.” She argues that everyone reaches this point at which they stop growing, and that for most people, it happens when they get married: “You meet someone who loves you unconditionally and never challenges you or wants you to change… and then you never change.” While certainly not true for all marriages, I believe that there is validity in the notion that we find some finality in our sense of self once we make the decision to stay committed to someone forever.

9 Perhaps this is the ultimate “heartbreak.” The very pain that infidelity brings is encapsulated in the term: it “breaks” what is most intrinsic to us, that which symbolizes our livelihood, our capacity to love (not just others, but ourselves, as well).
non-monogamy. It diminishes the non-monogamous lifestyle and paints it as a lesser alternative, one that is chosen only by those who are “too messed up to be normal.” This marginalization is what Judith Butler writes about in “Competing Universalities”: with every definition comes the outlying group, and with every argument that the definition is “universal”—that monogamy is love—the outliers are further abstracted and alienated.

We must therefore call into question our very need for definitions. If categorization will always lend to marginalization, how do we un-categorize? When I began to look at monogamy as an issue, I simply saw it as a shallow duality. The debate in my head was between monogamy and polyamory, and which was “better.” But this binary thinking is the problem: as Butler articulates, “the very categories that are politically available for identification restrict in advance the play of hegemony, dissonance and rearticulation” (“Competing Universalities” 150). By only looking at an issue from two opposing sides, we are accepting the current categorizations in play; we restrict any change and possibility for growth.

Butler uses the discussion around sexuality as a method of further understanding how we can protect the marginalized and change what she calls “the horizon of hegemony.” Based on perspective, the horizon line changes: social norms rely on positionality—we are able to repurpose and redefine them. It is not enough, however, to simply subvert norms. Changing our definitions of social structures only continues to marginalize and dehumanize others. We must reject the boundaries of definition and categorization—blurring the very lines that confine us in the first place. We can look at the development of our society’s understanding of sexual orientation as an example: establishing categories of “homosexual” and “bisexual” as “socially acceptable” within our discourse does not protect these identities. Such distinct categorization continues to encourage our need for comparison, to establish one identity as “better” or more “normal.” However, when we look at sexuality as a spectrum and not a choice between different entities, these comparisons are not so easily drawn.
Language needs to allow resistance to language. Butler argues that our very sense of self is founded upon the paradoxical nature of norms that are “done” to us, and our attempts to live around them. But if these norms make life is unlivable (the way that a binary understanding of gender does to many), we must question them, pry them apart, and understand how we can change them to allow for inclusivity. It is important to note that Butler does not regard all social norms as negative. She acknowledges that certain norms afford a degree of stability that is required to engage in a livable life. The issue of norms becomes problematic, however, when the state and legislation become involved: “what is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some” (Undoing Gender 8). My question thus transformed from whether monogamy “works” to whether the state should be involved in its enforcement. How effectively monogamy functions within our society or within specific relationships is But when we see how monogamous marriage is tied with legislation, and how marriage is the only legally recognized form of romantic kinship, it becomes a problem.

Of course, there is the argument that marriage and monogamy are not actively enforced by the government. Polyamorous culture is alive and well among today’s youth. However, with state recognition, marriage becomes the exclusive way of establishing romantic kinship within our society. The spousal rights, paternal rights, details regarded in wills, taxes, insurance, and everything else makes marriage a requirement. And if love and kinship are factors of a ‘livable’ life—which was the very argument used to advocate for gay marriage—then its normative status makes life unlivable for all those who oppose it. Butler writes that

10 Although, it is important to note that most polyamorous relationships are still founded on a loose basis of monogamy; in Emily Witt’s memoir Future Sex, the triad of Elizabeth, Wes, and Chris is more of a duo with an addendum. Chris and Emily get their “happily ever after” and end up married. They still keep their other lovers in rotation and are open both emotionally and sexually to people outside their marriage, but there is a clear bond between the pair that exists nowhere else. Hence, they at once reject and yet still adhere to normative monogamy.
efforts to establish bonds of kinship that are not based on a marriage tie become nearly illegible and unviable when marriage sets the terms for kinship, and kinship itself is collapsed into “family.” The enduring social ties that constitute viable kinship in communities of sexual minorities are threatened with becoming unrecognizable and unviable as long as the marriage bond is the exclusive way in which both sexuality and kinship are organized. (Undoing Gender 5)

The state is essential in defining our society’s terms of love and family. Monogamy is a social construct. It does not work for everyone, and it is not the ideal standard of love that we have made it out to be. For some, it is more restrictive than productive. The state’s endorsement of it is part of the “unwanted legislation of identity” that is being dismantled with issues of sexual orientation and gender.11

But if not marriage, then what? Perhaps we should leave that decision to private citizens. I am aware that dismantling the institution of marriage could have unforeseen societal impacts. It is embedded in our culture, and a litany of laws would have to be amended or repealed. But what I like to imagine is a version of myself, in the distant future or in a parallel universe, where non-monogamy is not ‘non-monogamy,’ where relationships are not defined according to gender, number, or any other divisive factors. I like to imagine a future me, uninhibited by social norms, free of the state’s influence preaching the exclusive priority of monogamy above all else.

This is the “remaking of the self” that Butler talks about in Undoing Gender. In the future, she writes, “the self must be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself” (Undoing Gender 7). I hope to be able to love without the fear of being replaced, without the notion that someone’s affection for me is undermined by their affection for others.

I run away from myself by believing certain institutions, or the eradication of them, will elicit some kind of change in my being—my insecurities, unhappiness, and everything else. So I still have some kind of...

11 Cases like Lawrence v. Texas, which struck Texas’s anti-sodomy law, acknowledged that the state had no business governing the private sex lives of its’ citizens; likewise, we must ask, why does it have the right to govern the way we love?
essential belief in the repressive theory. I try to see a light at the end of the tunnel, what I imagine as “sexual liberation.” While some spend their lives pursuing the promise of eternal peace awaiting them at the end of their lives, I pursue an impossible freedom from the influence of society. Perhaps my understanding of Foucault—and, concurrently, my understanding of freedom—needs to be further developed. But this is my discourse. It is still being defined.

We have gained much from steadfast, relentless categorization, identification, and a stream of discourse that seeks to flesh out each “perversion,” each category of sexuality: we are informed. We are cognizant of deep aspects of what makes up our desires. But in this steadfast analysis and governance of human sexuality, the hegemonic horizon remains fixed: our laws and definitions protect few, and make life unlivable for many. Change requires a different approach. We must try to reach inclusion and universality through different methods, the return to anonymity. Detachment is the next step in our state’s relationship with our relationships. The government distanced itself from sex (relatively speaking), now it needs to do the same with love.

Works Cited.


A Moderate Approach to Extreme Altruism.

BY Brendan Terry

In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Peter Singer advances a “Strong Principle” of moral action that has prodigious implications: “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it” (231). Singer’s Strong Principle is a hotly contested, influential topic in Utilitarian ethics. As Singer himself recognizes, “If [the Strong Principle] were acted upon, even in its qualified form, our lives, our society, and our world would be fundamentally changed” (231).

The Strong Principle requires moral agents to be extremely altruistic. It is Singer’s theoretical keystone to the most radical practical realization of his argument: affluent people (by global standards) have the duty to donate money to charities that effectively assist the world’s poor until they themselves are nearly as poor as the people whom they send money to help. The Strong Principle makes three main claims in support of such a duty. It explicitly stipulates that one’s capacity to help is proportionate to one’s moral responsibility to help, and it implicitly suggests that one’s duty to help others is not lessened by physical distance or whether one is among millions capable of providing assistance (231).

Though I agree with these conclusions, I consider the Strong Principle to be based upon a deceptive predating assumption, introduced at the start of Singer’s essay: that “suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad” (231). In a previous paper, I demonstrated that this predating assumption embeds in its characterization of “bad” the moral imperative that Singer presents in the Strong Principle (from which he derives all of his conclusions). Thus, Singer assumes his own conclusions, or begs the question. This opens

1 The essay has over two thousand citations to date.
his argument to technical objections that undermine the philosophical grounds of his call to action. However, I contend that the Strong Principle is worthy of alternative supporting arguments because it radically conceives of extreme altruism as a moral obligation (Brock).²

To consider altruism in a moral sense, I must clarify what I judge to be moral concerns, or what I mean by “morality.” I agree with Bernard and Joshua Gert, who argue that morality is an “informal public system that all rational persons, under certain specified conditions, would endorse.” An informal public system is a normative system that is knowable by and rational to follow for all to whom it applies; it also, roughly stated, does not involve an authority that definitively decides how it functions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed description of under which specified conditions rational agents must operate to agree upon a morality, a significant condition worth noting here is that all agents must be sufficiently informed (Gert).

I also consider the Strong Principle to be a moral rule, since it provides clear guidelines to evaluate our actions in relation to harms, and I am persuaded by Gert’s observation that “moral rules do seem to limit their content to behavior that directly or indirectly causes or risks harm to others.” The Strong Principle has a societal aim—to mitigate severe suffering—so it also conforms with the claim that “having a certain sort of social goal is definitional of morality” (Frankena).

From the perspective of morality as an informal public system and the Strong Principle as a moral rule whose goal is to mitigate severe suffering, we can begin to analyze the Principle’s merits in a shared context. Consider it again: “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” One could object that the Strong Principle supposes allowing harm is very morally wrong, but one reasonably could believe only doing harm is very morally wrong (Woollard). Under this interpretation, the Strong Princi-

² This is Gillian Brock’s characterization of the Strong Principle.
people’s position is generally cast as consequentialist—Singer is himself a consequentialist. As Fiona Woollard and Frances Howard-Snyder write, “consequentialists believe that doing harm is no worse than merely allowing harm while anti-consequentialists, almost universally, disagree.”

However, I would argue that the Strong Principle does not explicitly indicate that doing harm is equal to allowing harm. In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer only suggests that allowing harm, in extreme circumstances, can be very morally wrong. Someone who accepts that allowing harm is even slightly morally wrong would likely accept that allowing extreme harm could be very morally wrong; for example, such a person, consequentialist or not, may believe that letting someone die is generally very wrong. Indeed, because the severe suffering that Singer examines is tantamount to death, and since that suffering is quite practically preventable (through donation to certain charities, for instance), the aspect of the Strong Principle which claims that “allowing harm is morally wrong” seems tenable (“What Makes a Charity Effective?”).

Another objection to Singer’s Strong Principle is that it proposes too extreme a form of “obligatory beneficence” (Beauchamp). In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” Singer predicts such an objection, so he proposes an additional weak principle: “If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it,” (emphasis added) which adheres to:

the more or less classic idea...that a person P has an obligation of beneficence to help another whenever the other is at risk of significant loss of or damage to some basic interest; P’s action is necessary (singly or collaboratively) to prevent this loss or damage; P’s action (singly or collaboratively) is likely to prevent the loss or damage; and P’s action does not present significant risks, costs, or burdens to P while the benefits that the other

---

3 As Tom Beauchamp writes, “the language of a principle or rule of beneficence refers to a normative statement of a moral obligation to act for the others’ benefit, helping them to further their important and legitimate interests, often by preventing or removing possible harms.”
person can be expected to gain outweigh any burden that P is likely to incur (Beauchamp).

Of course, Singer’s Strong Principle opposes this traditional view since it suggests that one has a moral obligation to help alleviate suffering until one reaches “marginal utility, the point at which, by giving more, one would cause oneself and one’s dependents as much suffering as one would prevent in [others]” (Singer 234). So the Strong Principle suggests a moral obligation to give even when there are significant “risks, costs, or burdens to P.” Only once one reaches marginal utility, where one’s capacity to assist becomes negligible, does one no longer have the moral responsibility to assist. Thus, the acceptance of marginal utility as a practical limit to one’s obligation to help appears to be the theoretical keystone of the Strong Principle. I will reduce this to the question of altruism vis-à-vis egoism: if I am affluent and have a high standard of living, what could morally oblige me to be as highly altruistic as Singer proposes?

If I were highly altruistic, I would not be significantly influenced by how helping others could benefit me. I would choose to help people based on how much they needed help rather than how much I desired to help them—I would help impartially. Indeed, self-interest would be an insignificant consideration in establishing the morality of my actions (Kraut). This could perhaps lead me to break social expectations of decency. For example, if I were highly altruistic (and informed), I probably would not choose to buy gifts for my other affluent friends—which would lose me social capital and be difficult emotionally—because that money could be used to help people who severely suffer.4

More absurdly, if I were to come across a hungry homeless person in the street, I might choose not to give him a couple dollars’ worth of

4 As a sidenote, a common empirically-dependent response to extreme altruism is that the suffering can and ought to help themselves. Though some use this claim to argue against altruism altogether, most use it to argue against a moral obligation to be extremely altruistic. However, in a recent literature review entitled “What Makes Charity Effective?” I presented convincing evidence that people who severely suffer cannot be expected help themselves to escape from such suffering.
food, which would make me feel callous and have other consequenc-
es, because I would know that my money, with the appropriate elec-
tronic fund transfer, could help a person almost dead from starvation
half a world away.

In one classic defense of impartiality in moral decision-making, Ben-
tham, Mill, Kant, and Sidgwick argue that “when we think morally
about what to do, reason takes a god’s-eye perspective and sets aside
the emotional bias we normally have in our own favor, or in favor of
our circle of friends or our community” (Kraut).

While this view could defend the Strong Principle, I do not find it
especially compelling because while it captures why one ought to help
others, it does not directly respond to my question: “Why should I,
given my natural self-interest, help others?” Kraut expounds: “It is as
though we forget about locating ourselves as this particular person;
we abstract away from our normal self-centered perspective and seek
the solution to a practical problem that anyone similarly impartial
would also arrive at.” How could anyone reasonably be expected to
act morally, if this were the case?

In another classic defense of impartiality, Hume, Schopenhauer, and
Smith argue:

> It holds that there is something extraordinarily valuable in the sentimental
> bonds that take hold among human beings—a feature of human life that is
> overlooked or distorted when morality is understood solely or primarily in
> impersonal terms and from a god’s-eye point of view. In favorable condi-
> tions, we naturally and emotionally respond to the weal and woe of others;
> we do not and should not look for reasons to do so (Kraut).

This stance, however, condones the ignoring of reason by moral
agents. Therefore, importantly, it does not fit Gert’s definition of
morality as a normative system that is both knowable by and rational
to follow for all to whom it applies.

I offer a position somewhat between the two presented above, and my
conclusions promote the same morality as the Strong Principle: “if it
is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without
thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” My argument is in short that individuals must reason from their innate emotions to a morality that encourages essentially pure altruism (D’Agostino). I postulate that we as human beings are fundamentally distinct persons, not simply part of a larger social organism that has a duty of self-preservation. I also posit that morally right actions do good for an entity that holds significant intrinsic value (e.g. a person). These predating assumptions serve to clarify what I mean when I refer to “other people” and their moral status. I assume that, in the vast majority of cases, others experience severe suffering in extremely negative ways “similar” to how I would experience such suffering myself. Secondly, I assume that a person’s subjective experiences have significant immanent value for that person. Thirdly, I assume my subjective experiences to be valuable in and of themselves; restated, my subjective experiences hold objective value.

Combining assumptions one and two, I conclude that the immanent negative value of my own severe suffering would be extremely significant for me. Combining assumptions two and three, I conclude that, objectively, each person’s subjective experiences have significant immanent value. Now I will make an empirical claim: with a given amount of assistance, the extremely negative subjective experiences of the severely suffering can be improved incomparably more than my significant, yet not as extremely negative or positive, subjective experiences. Combining conclusions one, two, and the empirical claim, I finally conclude that, morally, since I ought to take actions that do good for what holds significant value, as a relatively affluent person I have an obligation to help those who suffer severely to the point of marginal utility.

My argument does not rely directly on a bird’s-eye-view of morality, or irrationally following one’s emotions, or most tenets of consequen-

---

5 Here, I answer “[t]he justificatory problem...of satisfactorily answering the question ‘why be moral?’” My approach “is reductionist in a pretty straightforward sense: it derives moral reasons from non-moral ones.”

6 I wish to differentiate myself from the view, espoused by David O. Brink and T.H. Green, that “individual human beings are mere fragments of a larger social whole.”

7 For more on immanent (intrinsic) value, see Zimmerman.
tialism. Instead, it reasons from widely accepted premises to support the first conclusion (that one’s capacity is proportionate to one’s obligation), the second conclusion (that distance is unimportant), and the third conclusion (that one’s obligation persists whether or not others also have that obligation) in Singer’s Strong Principle. Though I will more rigorously defend my argument in later work, it offers, even now, a more explicit justification for Singer’s Strong Principle than he provides himself. Our duty is indeed to perform actions of extreme altruism; that is, those of us who are relatively affluent ought to assist those who suffer from terrible, yet preventable, disease and poverty until we are near their level of suffering, too.

Epilogue

An abstract position like the one I’ve taken in this paper can be so counterintuitive that it seems highly implausible even if it has no glaring philosophical flaws. To better understand such an argument, philosophers often consider it with less abstraction by representing it with one or more thought experiments. A complex philosophical argument can be evaluated through multiple linked thought experiments. With ethical thought experiments, I find it helpful to consider myself as one of the actors and to narrate the experiments in the first person; this method respects the intuitive fact that moral decisions often feel personal. Below, I put forward a narrative of interrelated thought experiments that, I hope, makes Singer’s Strong Principle more intuitively acceptable.

Out of nothingness, I was called into being, a floating man, in a dark sky high above the Earth. There was no wind, my limbs were splayed, and my body was so calm that I could not even perceive my own breathing or heartbeat. I had no physical experience; I discovered a great joy in being free from the pains or pleasures of experience. Still, I was somehow aware of my own existence; it seemed that my “self” arose out of my consciousness, unprovoked. In this moment of realization, however, I felt the air that buoyed me up suddenly give way, and I plummeted down from the heavens.8

---

8 This thought experiment is adapted from Avicenna’s 9th-century thought experi-
I plunged into ocean depths and opened my eyes. They burned with 
salt as my body was gripped by cold. Water rushed into my nose; a 
chill shivered up my spine. I writhed my way upwards and, when I 
surfaced, I coughed out water between gasps for air. Across the starlit 
waters, I glimpsed land nearby. I made my way toward it. During 
this swim, I reminisced about the peace I had felt as a floating man; 
this peacefulness had been upended by my plunge. Despite this, I 
did not feel my sense of self fade as my physical experiences intensi-
ﬁed—it merely found new forms of expression (in the consideration 
of my surroundings). Lost in these reﬂections, I did not notice the 
water turn brackish, and was thoroughly surprised when I reached 
the banks of an estuary. I stood, waded ashore, and began to walk 
upstream.

At dawn, I perceived a building in the distance. As I got nearer, I saw 
that the building was a medical clinic. I decided to enter and inquire 
as to where I might be, but, before I reached the door, it swung open 
and a doctor sprung out to greet me. “You must be tired from trav-
eling,” she said; she then sat me down and fetched me a muffin and 
a glass of water. There were ﬁve half-dead patients in the clinic, and 
they all stared at me with gaunt faces and ghostly eyes. They seemed 
intrigued by me.

When the doctor returned with my water, I asked her if she could 
save the patients’ lives. She responded: “Each is in need of an organ 
transplant; one needs lungs, one intestines, one a liver, one a pancre-
as, and one a heart.” Then she watched me with expectation, as if I 
would suggest what to do next. But I sat mute. Surprised, she contin-
ued: “You ought to know that I will do what’s right.”

I stared at her timorously; she leaned toward me and grabbed me by 
the arm. Reacting to the unexpected strength in her grasp, I leapt to 
my feet and asked her what she was playing at. She simply stared at 
me and said, in measured tones, “You must sacriﬁce yourself! As the 
Good Book says, ‘We, as human beings, are part of a social organism; 
the social self establishes what is moral, in that right actions do good
for the social self.’ My five patients, who are respected leaders in their respective communities, will fully recover after their transplants. You can exchange your one life for five others. Your family will not suffer from worry that you were murdered; they will think that you died on a pleasurable adventure through the wilderness. When you sacrifice yourself, you will do a great good.”

All five patients nodded. Though they were in desperate need and the doctor’s argument appeared sound, I still could not convince myself intuitively that I ought to sacrifice myself to save those patients. So I protested to the doctor, and to the patients, that I had a moral status as a conscious being which protected me from the obligation to sacrifice my own life. When I saw their looks of disgust, despair and rage, I realized that they might murder me (without my consent), so I turned, fled the clinic, and ran into the bush.

After I had hiked far enough to make my escape, I came upon a beautiful glade. I looked to the sky above and was overcome with the same joy in existence that I had experienced up there: “There is value just in being, and morality must respect being; all humans, in their being, have this intrinsic value, which gives each of us profound moral status,” I reflected. As I reached the end of this thought and dropped my gaze earthward, I was surprised by a sharp cry. As I reflexively turned toward the noise, I saw a small boy crawl out from behind a nearby rock, grab a handful of grass, and eat the grass—all while cautiously watching me. He looked to be nearly dead from starvation.

I imagined how he must feel, and I saw that my opportunity to help him applied to my recent reflections: “It would be very morally bad to allow this being, who holds such great intrinsic value, to suffer,” I told myself. I ran over to him, and he told me quietly that he would quite like some apples to eat from the tree above, but he didn’t have the strength to climb it. Without delay, I clambered far up into the branches to reach the fruit, then dropped several apples to the ground for him.

When I climbed down and walked over to him, I saw that, though
he was famished, he ate the apples very slowly. As he ate, I naively
told the boy that, since I had come into existence a short time ago, I
was ignorant of his society. He did not find this peculiar; rather, he
reached a hand toward me, grabbed my own, and drew me over to sit
down next to him. He then recounted for me a history of the world,
as he knew it—a narrative which lasted into the hours of darkness.
Afterwards, he fell asleep beneath the apple tree; I could not sleep, so
I gazed at the stars and thought of what questions I would ask the boy
in the morning.

At dawn, I fetched for us more apples for breakfast. When I saw that
the boy’s appetite was sated, I asked him if he knew of many other
people who severely suffered as he did. He answered, “In my society,
very many, perhaps one in five.” I then asked about the four out of
five people who did not suffer so. What did they do for the suffering?
He replied, “Those people give people like me apples, but only out
of generosity. Sometimes they give money to organizations, called
charities, that feed us.” I asked him if he considered me to be one of
these people, and he answered perceptively, “It cannot be so. For you
did not give me those apples out of generosity.”

I told him that he was right, that I felt obliged to help him and not
generous in doing so. Furthermore, until the time came when I would
snap out of existence like I had snapped into it, I would consider my
greatest obligation to be to aid anyone who suffered severely. I would
help as many as I could, even people I would never meet, because
they each must have intrinsic value—in their own existence and ex-
periences—similar to my own; I would help until to help would lead
me to severely suffer or risk death.

Extreme altruism is intuitive if one, as a relatively affluent person,
knows people who severely suffer. Without personal connections,
though, our intuition tells us that we are not obligated to help those
we do not know. If actions consistent with extreme altruism are not
intuitive, does that mean that they ask too much of moral agents? If
we learn that our intuitions are misguided, should we still let them
decide our moral actions?


