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The reliance on memory in the age of memoir has become a topic of skepticism, especially in the wake of controversies like James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. As readers, though, we often are too willing to suspend disbelief in favor of the thrill of the story; we want the gritty details to be true. But what happens when a subject, upon sitting down to write her memoir, realizes she has no memory, no connection to the recorded details of history? This conflicted relationship to history and personal experience is a common theme in much African American and minority literature in which the subject struggles to exist in a present that is a consequence of history. The protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, for example, in trying to assert his voice as an African American in the pre-civil rights, mid-twentieth century America fades into invisibility and ultimately ceases to exist altogether. Or Audre Lorde, in writing *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, subtitled, “A Biomythography,” struggles to come to terms with the incongruous and often painful details of her own experience in relation to historical and social narratives about women of color. Taking on the difficulty of history for marginalized subjects, the challenges of memory even under favorable conditions, and the unreliability of narrative (or recognizing narrative as another tool reinforcing the status quo of white hegemony), Pamela Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel* is an experimental, fictional work that critiques identity-related experience, mimics the representation of self in the media and in society in

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1. Frey published *A Million Little Pieces* in 2003 as a memoir, went on Oprah and sold over two million copies, and then was invited back to the show and confronted by Oprah after a report confirmed that many of the details in the book had been fictionalized. Oprah and many readers were upset that he had claimed that the stories in the book were true when many had in fact been embellished or fabricated. He admitted to the lies and confessed that he originally tried to sell the book as fiction.
general, and struggles to find a clear notion of how one goes about presenting memory and past experience in a written text. Not only is *Pamela* a critique of the genre of autobiography itself, but it further argues that narrative autobiography is especially problematic for people who have no access to history outside of those narratives culturally constructed for them. Lu’s narrator, P—all of the characters are designated by single letters—tells us, for example, that for her and her group of Asian American friends, “history,” as narrated for them, “was not ‘based’ on anything”; rather, “our virtual existence sponsored itself and did not conform to any standard of correctness or realism, because such an original standard did not exist” (20). The theme of virtual existence is built throughout the text as the narrator theorizes memory through a type of anti-autobiography. If one can document events as recorded history, the difficulty of creating a text based on memory is foregrounded through the narrator’s knowledge that her experiences and memories have been constructed by way of mainstream consumer commodity culture. Lu’s narrator constructs her own past through the formal strategies of the text itself: there is no clear narrative progression; there are gaps between reported events and situations and the continuous commentary that runs through the text. What stands in the place of meaningful memory in this text are experiences, events, and conversations that are recalled, but not inhabited; the past moments are not brought to life through detail and image in the present moment, but instead seek to prove that there can be no genuine, remembered experiences for the socially constructed subject, even while one believes in the search for those experiences. This postmodern situation becomes a conundrum in which the narrator desires subjective admittance to a past to which there seems to be no access.

There a loss of identity and self-understanding at work in *Pamela* as a fragmented subjectivity emerges. The narrator’s commentary throughout serves, in part, to reinforce the lack of understanding, and the fragmented identity stands in for any sense of coherent identity. P’s awareness that there may be only constructed, often incoherent, selves comes to function in place of a lucid narrative identity. Her meta-narration theorizes her as a (non)narrative subject aware of its own construction through ideology and hegemonic forces: “Our silence and invisibility was of the utmost importance to the state of the nation because the very suggestion of us challenged and undermined the simplicity of narrative on which the national identity depended” (29). Lu’s narrator functions as one reporting a life instead of remembering; in other words, she seems to understand that a lack of real memory combined with too much culturally constructed memory offers little foundation on which to set the present,
and therefore creates anxiety around any possibility of moving into the future. This is enacted in the circular, non-progressive nature of the narrative: there are no starting or ending points to this story. Lu foregrounds language and the formal properties of the text as a way to critique the unquestioned reliance on memory in autobiographical texts, and she presents a narrator who is anxious, over-intellectualized, parodic, and campy, yet is always cognizant of the persistent critique of subjectivity of the modern subject. Lu’s narrator takes on the theoretical terminology in order to both enact and critique that theory. The text foregrounds a sense of anxiety that seems to be in relation to the act of writing autobiography. For the marginalized subject with a conflicted relation to history, she asks, is there in fact a self to write and to read? And it is the very nature of the modern subject as having little more than a fragmented present existence divorced from history, and the history of one’s own memories, that troubles the subject’s ability to remember outside of her role within media and commodity culture. 

*Pamela* challenges the notion of personal memory as a foundation on which to base a subjective present existence, but also submits that there can be no present existence, no sense of coherent identity if there is no memory—even with its historical and social complexities—on which to base this self.

The structure of the text enacts the function and process of this kind of complex memory—the combination of personal and often problematic historical/social—that is under scrutiny; it also calls attention to the difference between real and imagined past events and the fact that we (“we” the readers of the novel, and “we” the remembering subjects of our own lives) often can’t tell the difference. It is not the difference between real and imagined that is important, but the recognition of that difference and of the slippage between them. The imaginary or the virtual is highlighted, calling attention to the virtual aspects of memory representation as well as to texts that purport to represent past experience. Events reported are at the mercy of the uncertain subjectivity of the narrator, and because none of the characters, including the narrator, are developed fully, the details are incomplete. This makes it difficult for a subject to speak or perform her identity. For example, early in the text the narrator remarks, “I did not have a personality that I could effectively project outward, and in my worst moments, I did not have a personality at all. I was a very poor impersonator of myself in public” (13). The difficulty comes through the recognition that if there can be no authentic experience, there can be no authentic memory; this also serves as a critique of the idea of ‘authenticity’ as an impossible endeavor in itself. The fragmented postmodern subject may have a sense of a past which is not her past necessarily, and this further entails a lack of personal connection to her
own history. For example, P explains:

… we found it natural, if not imperative, to be assaulted and overwhelmed by memories which were not our own but which we nevertheless carried as though they had actually happened to us. In this sense, the history of our lives was always the history of something else. We were forever displacing ourselves in the chain of events without knowing who exactly was doing the displacing, and our lifetime goal, if we desired success in the conventional sense, consisted not in getting to know ourselves, but in getting to know ourselves less. (33)

This kind of near-identification recurs throughout the text, and is most pronounced when the narrator and her friends try to make sense of their individual ethnic identities, as Asian Americans, in the context of an accumulation of cultural myths about ethnicity. Whether the past is real or imaginary, remembered or forgotten, it is fundamental for the articulation of a subject in the present. Through her narrator, Lu can be said to also point to the greater historical trauma of modernity, and to show how a text is unable to account for a self whose (ungrounded) present moment is underdetermined by a lack of memory.

The relation to the past is also infected by contemporary media culture as Pamela at times conflates traumatic history and its mediated representation. As P explains, “Just as R experienced the grim humor of situations whose anxieties predated her, so she appeared at times to inhabit the outline of a self formed half a century ago—that is, R was not a WWII survivor but she might as well have been; she was not a great moment in history, but she played one on TV” (69). One thing that is apparent here is the continuity of past in present; R is inhabiting a self from the past as if she cannot be held responsible for it in her own present. In a way, specific historical moments take on lives of their own as they are passed around through stories, texts, and media and come to form vital elements of individuals’ existences. The great moments in history, or, what we have decided they are, are played over and over on TV, as if they were scenes from our own lives. Different messages and memories circulate in any variety of ways, and we consume, repeat, and circulate them.

Lives and memories are constructed in no small part through our media saturated society, and instead of simply accepting that one’s identity may be based on myths and illusions, Pamela asserts that a marginalized subject, whose stories are culturally constructed for her, might instead negotiate that social construction of experience and claim a present of her own to inhabit. The subject’s power over her past, and therefore over her present,
is manipulated at every turn. “It was as if television had trained us to be nostalgic from the start,” the narrator explains, “so that we yearned for childhood while we were still children and continued to be nostalgic for the present moment before we had finished living it” (31). For the narrator and her friends, the sense of the loss of something they never even had in the first place comes to take the place of a present based on first-hand experience and social involvement. There is no present because there seems to be no past outside of the mediated narratives of identity. The marginalized subjects here have been both made invisible and are created through mediated narratives, the consequence of which seems to be a lack of access to the present in terms of their own experiences and identifications. The mediation of experience further aids in the perpetuation of capitalist consumer culture as the commodity displaces memory by way of the erasure of its production and labor history. In *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Richard Terdiman invokes Marx and the idea of “genesis amnesia,” or the forgetting of the origin and history of commodity production through “the process of reification” by which the history of commodities, the “memory of their production from their consumers, as from the very people who produced them” becomes hidden (12). Further, Terdiman writes, “to understand what we have made, we have to be able to remember it. Because commodities suppress the memory of their own process, they subvert or violate this fundamental tenet of the mnemonic economy” (12). The loss of memory helps the capitalist system to articulate its subjects as consumers. If there is only a notion of the commodity in the present, then each new commodity will have an autonomous life of its own. In place of a history of production and identificatory experience, consumer culture is constructed through the mediation and commodification of identity, inhibiting any present-tense understanding of memory and the past. Lu is examining what happens to subjects who are either cut off entirely from their own sense of history, or who only have a sense of history created as an ideological social formation which serves to keep subjects embedded within the capitalist structure.

The present for which the narrator and her friends yearn resembles a sort of virtual existence, based on imagined ideas circulated throughout mainstream culture. It is a present made of pieces that always fail to add up to a whole, their experiences held together by their desire to have a past that culminates in some type of authentic present. Recognizing the impossibility of authenticity, the characters exist in a continuous state of desire in which there is no unity of narrative, no unity of identity, no real context for identification. Of her situation, the narrator explains, “Such was the promise of a manicured lawn, a two-car garage, and a swastika on every corner, and life
there paralleled the experience of a badly written sentence, whose construction consisted of numerous phrases, each of which amounted to a complete sentence in itself, but whose sum total was less than its parts, an idea amputated in mid-thought, a non sequitur” (42). She draws an analogy between racist history and poor writing, exemplified within a series of sentences that ultimately add up to nothing. Lu seems to ask how it is that one is supposed to function in the present, and move into the future, in the face of this distorted narrative—a narrative based on lies and false connections—and that links the promise of social mobility to the perpetuation of racism.

We can see how the actions and descriptions of the characters, as narrated by P, serve to enact the complex ways in which Asian Americans struggle to make sense of their present lives in relation to the historical narratives always already interpellating them, in Althusser’s terms. For example,

For C wrote with all the awful clarity and slenderness of someone who had grown up Asian in Indiana, the memory of anger and that daily experience of coming home single to watch the double of his face peel away from itself in the mirror now sublimated into a stunning command of the English language that manifested itself as poetry, or a series of eloquent, articulate stabs at reality . . . . If C worked in the sanctity of silence, then YJ was always living and writing against a blind wall of cacophony that existed somewhere between plain sense and the din of cultural expectation and popular music . . . .

As a consequence, she occupied the contemporary position of always being foreign to herself. (16-17)

Although awareness may be explicit or intuited, the action (or consequence) of double consciousness shows the physical and emotional battle of existing in a world in which one doesn’t really exist, and in using language that isn’t one’s own. The incongruence between poetry, eloquence, and metaphorical stabbing alerts readers to the violence done by way of assimilation. Further, YJ, as the narrator explains: “occupied the contemporary position of always being foreign to herself”; if the contemporary is the space in which awareness is possible, the cost of that is “writing against a blind wall of cacophony,” signaling that neither silence nor noise can alleviate the tension between the “plain sense” of subjective experience and the dominance of media-perpetuated cultural expectations.

French historian Pierre Nora, who writes on relations between memory and identity, may be useful for further working through Lu’s project; Nora theorizes the relation between “real memory” (which only existed in pre-historic cultures) and that tainted by contemporary media culture. He writes: “Indeed, we have seen the
tremendous dilation of our very mode of historical perception, which, with the help of the media, has substituted for a memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage the ephemeral film of current events” (7-8). He explains that because “history” records and archives the past, we now only have a kind of memory that cannot occur outside of its cultural context, and he uses this theory to further consider the role of representation in relation to different kinds of memory, and what one might do with memory in the context of one’s historical situation. Nora continues:

How can we fail to read, in the shards of the past delivered to us by so many microhistories, the will to make the history we are reconstructing equal to the history we have lived? We could speak of mirror-memory if all mirrors did not reflect the same—for it is in difference that we are seeking, and in the image of this difference, the ephemeral spectacle of an unrecoverable identity. It is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer.

(17-18)

In the gap between what we are and what we are no longer, we find the irrecoverable identity which is the only identity we can remember. The original event cannot be reproduced, but only represented. Remembering, recovering, and documenting memory is a process of decipherment. This awareness is key to the representation of memory in relation to identity because one has to read herself through difference, through the space of what is no longer recoverable. Lu is keenly aware of just this: her text is a hybrid process of deciphering and representing memory as a means of further theorizing the construction and function of identity.

An important example of this representation and theorization occurs in the middle of Pamela, in which, in a moment of meta-fictional commentary, the narrator and author become confused, and a discussion of the text itself arises in which the author takes over the text to theorize memory and the process of its documentation as autobiographical writing. She calls attention to the separation between narrator and writer, between the self of the past and the self of the present, and the difficulty of communication between these different versions of self. The narrator, and the text, is always in and of the past and that past stays within the confines of the document of text; the present can recognize, but not connect with, the past self of text. For example, the narrator explains: “I found the story of myself to be endlessly fascinating, with its catalogue of histories, repressions, and picaresque cast of characters . . . . It was a classic story of joy, disappointment, and discovery, and I often reread my favorite parts
in my spare time, vicariously living . . . as if I were actually P going about her business in a world more believable than my own” (57). At the end of this passage, the reader is unsure who is speaking. Is the narrator divorced from her own sense of self when she reads her accounts in writing? Or is the writer including her own comment on the estranging nature of witnessing one’s life documented in the text? The author/narrator further explores the relativity of this situation: “There was the subjunctive of the real character speculating about the imaginary situation, the fictitious character speculating about the real situation, and then of the fictitious character speculating about the even more fictitious situation, which could prove to be either totally unimaginable or, equivalently, as unimaginative as the plain facts” (57-58). The contingency and possibility, the merging and movement between fact and fiction, memory and speculation, experience and the text as the documentation of experience, complicate (and articulate) the reading experience. The text is the construction of the already constructed experiences of a shifting narrator-self who is unsure of her own place in the writing/reading of the text. Like Lu’s characters living double or multiple lives as both ignored and ideologically constructed subjects, awareness is both crucial and potentially debilitating. But her characters are continually in process of theorizing and living both their media constructed and “real” experiences through creative and social endeavors.

For example, Lu’s audience-narrator explains, “I could hardly read my story without at least on some level reading myself into it,” and further, “if I was at risk of suddenly becoming P in the midst of a plausible situation, then P was similarly at risk of becoming not me but Pamela, a project that I had invented to include both P and me, and that was expanding, day by day, into a larger persona than either of us could handle” (58). The movement between Pamela (the text), P (the narrator/main character of the text), and “me” (the writer of the narrative) in the documentation of the text is explicitly exposed, and confused; “Pamela threatened to subsume us in a state of suspended animation, stranding P in the past and me in the present . . . . P was an act of memory but Pamela was an act of homicide” which assembled “the particulars of my private existence into a form suitable for larger display” (59). The form suitable for display is the (autobiographical) text. Although a writer is presumably in control of its construction, the text can itself take over and ultimately function on its own terms; the “real” experiences of the subject are subsumed by the text itself. Moreover, this section from Pamela suggests that the temporal movement is completely disturbed when the life is presented as a text of memory and the lines demarcating the tenses become frozen in print. Lu writes, “I had terrible fears of being abandoned not only by Pamela but by that abbreviated
version of Pamela, P, who survived the present tense by avoiding it altogether and prolonged the past by inflecting it into a space of indefinite duration, like a note of music stretched out and played repeatedly to make a landscape” (60). The past is prolonged to the exclusion of the present; although the writer/narrator reading the document of the past can relate and enjoy it as story, there is a physical analogy here of the text as the container of the past. The narrator, P, is able to avoid the difficulty of the “reality” of the present tense, but this only has negative consequences for the writer/narrator who is further separated into irreconcilable parts of herself (Pamela, P, me). If the past cannot be accessed except through reading it as (possibly someone else’s) story, it is also possible that the self of the present tense can have no authentic experiences as those are always turning into past experiences, which cannot be accessed. It is not then a past of useful memory, and therefore elides the present altogether; on a textual level, the writer, the real, is elided by the narrator-self and the text-as-life, as these come to stand in for any other sense of authentic experience. At the end of this section the writer/narrator states, “If P was the wallpaper to the house that was Pamela, then I was the resident who paced restlessly through the halls, shutting the storm windows all around and watching the rain happen not to me, but to my house” (61). In only one sentence, Lu points to the layers of identity through the negotiation of memory/past and present. “I” lies within, or under, the layers of house and wallpaper; Pamela is the structure, P is the decoration or culturally constructed subject, and “I” is that which paces and watches life happen, always in process of negotiating her own identity.

Lu speculates about the possibility for history and memory in literature, asking through formal writing practice: are there alternative means of representing the past? Is there a way to rearticulate the coherence of time and subjectivity? Terdiman is especially interested in the “deeply historicized relation between the problem of memory on the one hand and the representation of experience on the other,” particularly in literary or historical texts (ix). He marks a difference between precapitalist societies and the modern time, and also between cultures that remembered past events naturally, and how memory shifted with the rise of historiography and the documentation of memory. In the natural memory process, for example, memories and past experiences circulate among the present moment and there is less distinction between past and present. When memory is documented as history, the text contains and defines the memory as past and it becomes less accessible. Terdiman defines this “memory crisis,” particularly for the period in Europe after the Revolution and the move into the nineteenth century, as “a sense that their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In
this memory crisis, the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated” (3-4). It becomes a crisis because “memory is the modality of our relation to the past” (7). Further, Terdiman asserts that “memory stabilizes subjects and constitutes the present. It is the name we give to the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and in individual experience” (8). If there is no memory, or if there is a fear for the loss of memory, the effect may be on the continuity of the subject, and of a culture, as it moves from past into present. The instability of identity and subjectivity in *Pamela* acts echoes a kind of memory crisis. The consequences as they play out for Lu’s characters can be seen to enact Terdiman’s contention that “memory functions in every act of perception, in every act of intellec­tion, in every act of language”; or in this case, the lack of access to memory is apparent across perception, thought, and language (9). *Pamela* calls attention to this theorization of the function of history, and thereby the simultaneous crisis of history, as a crisis of memory in a late capitalist, postmodern time of forgetting. For Terdiman, “what is at stake is nothing less than how a culture imagines the representation of the past to be possible, for the problem of representing the past is really the representation problem itself, seized in its most critical locus in experience” (32). In *Pamela*, Asian American experience is shaped and articulated in the context of capitalist modernity. If there is no way out of this type of structuring of experience, the text seems to suggest, then we must find narrative alternatives for representing experience. Lu’s characters, and her own commentary, work through their own memories (or lack of) and experiences (real and virtual) in order to theorize and practice a greater range of possibilities for representation.

As Lu’s text theorizes its own construction as an investigation of memory, it might then be set alongside a literary text arguably the most commonly referred to in discussions of memory theory, Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, the first volume of his seven-part novel *In Search of Lost Time*. A reading of *Pamela* as a text of memory, in comparison to Proust, highlights certain aspects of the representation of memory. For example, in *Pamela*, feelings are often employed in place of the specific details of memory; this is not unlike Proust’s Swann, who can only remember his feelings in response to a sonata, and the sonata’s general architecture, before he hears it again and imprints the detail of its sound on his memory. In a way, *Pamela* is like the moment before Swann hears the sonata for the second time; the past events recorded are little more than structure, there is no detail, nothing to fill in the basic architecture. There is feeling and sentiment throughout *Pamela* about the past, but what is lacking are the details that bring a document of memory to life. Although the writing gestures toward the details of the past, toward what is missing
or under the surface, it calls into question the very possibility that there is anything under the surface to get to. It might be argued that Pamela presents the idea of memory only on the surface, as little more than a type of voluntary memory, before the Proustian moment of diving further in when he bites into the madeleine. But if Pamela enacts memory as little more than surface material, it is the narrator who suffers the consequences, who is unable to form a coherent sense of her own identity—and readers are thus unable to form a coherent sense of the narrator; Lu uses this as a strategy to destabilize “identity” itself so that as readers we become involved in the process of working through, and reworking notions of how Asian, and other American minorities, identify.

Further, Lu uses other formal textual strategies to represent the properties of past, present, and future spatially, enacting the problem of simple, linear notions of the progressive movement of time. We are always in space and in time simultaneously, and when we recognize the difficulties of the present moment as constantly shifting forward from the past but never quite moving into the future, this can contribute to a distorted sense of space-time, and the complex layering of past and present in any moment or image. The narrator tells us, “for a while I had been struck by the passage of time as a spatial passage, which drowned me at random intervals in old familiar places I had never been” and then tells of a particular moment in which she witnesses the visual details of a memory of a garden from childhood while looking out the widow of a train. She explains: “I was not remembering the garden itself, but the most accurate perception of it, that is, I was remembering the exact feeling of my eyes and mouth and the exact position and tension of the muscles in my arms that would have occurred had I actually been in a garden in the residential section of Pasadena with my mother 22 years ago, which I had not” (31). What is important is the feeling, and the experience of memory, even if there is no original event with which it is actually attached. This scene calls our attention to the power of narrative as first the memory is narrated: “I had grown accustomed to riding my train with a book in one hand and looking out the window from time to time to rediscover the magnolia garden my mother and I had passed while walking through a Pasadena neighborhood when I was two: the shade of sky and fleeting shape of sidewalk were exactly as I remembered” (31). Afterward, the narrator admits that this memory has been fabricated. The point is to remind us not to take the writing of memories at face value, but in realizing that they are always narrated with varying degrees of truth, the desire for the authenticity of memory in autobiographical texts is one desire that always falls short.

In a kind of post-Benjaminian way, this text offers no utopian potential because there is never a concrete
sense of past and memory from which to move into the future. However, it is the knowledge of this difficulty, this fluctuating sense of what it means to have a past that is filled with memory, that is hopeful and that opens a space of possibility. The text asserts that one can still have experiences, even while having a lack of memories; and the text itself can be an experience, especially in the writing and the reading of both form and content. This thus comments on our postmodern condition in which, instead of having any sense of history, we are distracted by commodity-driven, media culture; we live through a constant production of memory-less/content-less ideology through which subjects are restrained from relating meaningfully to historical events. Personal memory, and experience constructed through dominant narratives, merge and intersect only to complicate the notion of experience. Products of late capitalism, these postmodern Asian American subjects are products, and victims, of a continuous present moment; they cannot remember. This inability to remember results in an inability to identify, to have identity. The fragmented, marginalized subject is over-articulated into a subject without a meaningful past, and the search for that past results in an awareness of lack, and a suspicion of what might be called experience, and a need to document that experience. Without a present grounded in a remembered past one can only question her own sense of identity. Lu’s narrator explains: “Every generation preoccupied itself with the struggle to produce something new—a defining moment, action, or style that would mark it as unique and constitute an answer to the question of ‘Who are you,’ or more often, ‘Who were you?’ (43). The tension between the past and its documentation contributes to an anxiety about the potential for some coherent sense of present. “It seems at times that we were the only present thing in our moment, where our moment was nothing more than a wishful standard masquerading as present reality and thus more suitably situated in the future tense” (91). This, in fact, is not actually about the future at all, but critiques the present moment as “wishful” and “masquerading as reality,” and therefore only imaginary, just as the future tense is always only imaginary.

_Pamela_ ends in a virtual space: “For some time I remained sunk in my seat, fingers clenched around the plastic armrests, until the sensation advanced and passed through me, leaving me afloat once again in the perpetual predawn light and more than willing to let the whole subject drop, in the midst of a moment that technically never existed” (98). The subject to which the narrator refers may be the transcendent feeling of “being overlapped” and experiencing the compression of her “thoughts, actions, feelings, preoccupations, and regrets” (97), or it may be to the book as a whole. If this incident on the plane never occurred, nonetheless we have the record of it here. If
the events of the book never happened, still we have the text that documents these events; we have a text of (non) memory that theorizes memory, experience, and representation. In view of our contemporary society’s obsession with memoir and biography, we need texts that open further possibilities for exploring memory in terms of its social and cultural contexts, and that question our allegiance to dominant narratives that falsely identify us as citizens. If it is a strategy of hegemonic power structures to impose narratives that are without real content for marginalized subjects, then it is a necessary endeavor for writers like Lu to disassemble these narratives and create other possibilities for remembering, narrating, and identifying. The danger otherwise is of simply going along with what the institutions have cultivated within us. Or, as Terdiman writes:

Such representations of the ghostly presence of the past have this in common: that—in the same way that under capitalism Marx had claimed that the power and creativity of the worker seem to pass into the tool—they seek to explain how in the modern period memory appears to reside not in perceiving consciousness but in the material: in the practices and institutions of social or psychic life, which function within us, but, strangely, do not seem to require either our participation or our explicit allegiance. (34)

The text that theorizes memory in such a way is working against being subsumed into larger cultural and historical narratives, and creates a new space for theorizing experience, offering another possibility for cultural identification. As a kind of anti-autobiographical text, *Pamela* functions as an alternative narrative of experience, an account of a culturally marginalized group in opposition to the status quo of their invisibility; and this Lu does through disruptive, textual strategies that call attention to the lack of memory and experience for subjects indoctrinated in a narrative, media-saturated, fabricated present tense. In its lack, the text actually offers a positive model of speaking, and acts as a space for the narrator to voice her examination of personal and social/cultural identity. Group identity here manifests in a collection of individuals’ stories “about” their Asian American experiences, reinstating them as social subjects while refusing to collect them into a singular identity.
Works Cited


“I can’t even look her in the face now”: Invisible Trauma in *Slumdog Millionaire* and *City of God*

Hannah Dow

It is difficult, if not impossible, to represent another person’s trauma without turning it into spectacle. This is the primary idea that Wendy Hesford confronts in her book, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms*. In it, she studies the rhetorical frameworks that various visual media create when they render subjects as victims for a Western (usually American) audience’s gaze. Hesford interrogates these frameworks in order to see “how human rights discourse constructs humanity and its capacities through spectacular rhetorics…and how the visual field of human rights internationalism often functions as a site of power for and normative expression of American nationalisms, cosmopolitanisms, and neoliberal global politics” (3). In this project, Hesford ultimately suggests that a Western, “universalist vision” of human rights privileges some representations of suffering over others and, consequently, constructs “hierarchical scenes of suffering” (37). Interestingly, these “hierarchal scenes of suffering” often fall along gender lines, and Hesford addresses the problem of representing rape and women’s traumas later in her book.

In a chapter called “Witnessing Rape Warfare,” Hesford writes that “rape as spectacle exemplifies the pervasive visibility of women as rape victims in international news media and U.S. public discourse, and the emphasis in women’s human rights campaigns on violence against women” (95). Written accounts in news media and human rights campaigns tell us that the lives of women, primarily those who live in the global South, are not only difficult, but violent, too. For example, of the estimated 35 million people living in slavery today, about 70% are women, many of whom are trapped in the sex industry (Hill). But women around the world do not just face
violence and sex trafficking. Many written accounts also suggest that the world’s economy relies on abusing women’s labor: “SAPs [Structural Adjustment Programs] cynically exploit the belief that women’s labor-power is almost infinitely elastic in the face of household survival needs…. poor women and their children are expected to lift the weight of Third World debt upon their shoulders” (Davis 158). Thus, while human rights activists (like Blythe Hill, whose TEDx Talk on women’s trafficking I have quoted above) make it clear that life in the global South is difficult for everyone, it seems apocalyptically so for women.

Hesford uses the phrase “crisis of witnessing” to describe what happens when rape becomes a spectacle, and the associated risks of “representing trauma and violence…to the impossibility of empathetic merging between witness and testifier” (99). Hesford alludes to Gayatri Spivak’s question of whether or not the subaltern can speak when she mentions how “[f]eminist critics have pointed to the problem of having the privileged speak for rather than with the oppressed…and to the equally problematic assumption that the subject can speak only for herself” (Hesford 99). It is impossible for a privileged subject to speak for the oppressed subject, yet it is also impossible for the oppressed subject to speak as an individual on behalf of all oppressed subjects. And yet, Hesford does not say we cannot be witnesses, but rather that we must recognize the “paradoxes of representation involved in becoming a rhetorical witness of rape warfare” (100). Because of the impossibility of representing real trauma and eliciting authentic empathy, it might seem preferable to avoid representing it altogether.

However, avoiding the global issue of “rape warfare” is more problematic than trying to represent it, because doing so further inscribes women to subaltern spaces, placing them at the “limits of archival and ethnographic recognition” (Roy 224). Although Ananya Roy here refers to slums as the site of subaltern urbanism, it seems possible to suggest that representations of women occupy a similar space—at the limits of recognition—in other accounts. In filmic accounts of the global South, women’s complex roles in urban economies are often overlooked, and sometimes idealized. Roy proposes subaltern urbanism as a way of “[w]riting against apocalyptic and dystopian narratives of the slum” in order to “provid[e] accounts of the slum as territorial of habitation, livelihood, self-organization and politics. This is a vital and even radical challenge to dominant narratives of the megacity” (223). The “dominant narratives” we see in written accounts and film alike can be challenged by looking more closely at the roles women play in slums across the world. While it is necessary to understand the impossibility of true representation, in this paper I hope to interrogate the absence of both female trauma and exploitation in filmic representations of the global South. I will argue that such absences are not due to a concern for falling into
Hesford’s “crisis of witnessing” or the impossibility of representing suffering, but rather, that the invisibility of women's trauma instead derives from an unwillingness to engage with such issues in favor of relegating women to status quo positions that reinforce a “universalist vision” of human rights and hegemonic ideals (Hesford 37).

I will look closely at the ways women are represented in two films: Danny Boyle’s Oscar-winning American film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and *City of God* (2002), a Brazilian film by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund that attained wide universal appeal. What these films have in common is their absence of complex female roles or engagement with serious issues that pertain to women. The issues that are glorified instead are uniquely male concerns: the violence and crime that derive primarily from drug trafficking. When women are given speaking roles, they speak as romantic interests to their respective male protagonists. In my analysis, I hope to show that both films, in refusing to address women’s rape and trauma among other issues, use women characters as props for male protagonists to assert their masculinity.

**Slumdog Millionaire: Women as Virgins, Love Interests, Moral Compasses**

*Slumdog Millionaire* is an award-winning, rags-to-riches story about a boy named Jamal who, despite his upbringing in the Bombay slums, finds himself a winner on the Indian version of the television show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* The film was produced by Hollywood director Danny Boyle, and yet scholars have suggested that *Slumdog Millionaire* is “a product imitative of Bollywood film” and “produced in an attempt to commodify Indian culture and capitalize on Bollywood fare, namely through its appeal to Western audiences” (Cox and Proffitt 44, 45). In their article, “Mimicking Bollywood in *Slumdog Millionaire*: Global Hollywood’s Newest Co-Optation of Culture,” Nicole Cox and Jennifer Proffitt identify the main features of Bollywood cinema, while also noting the impossibility of truly identifying all of Bollywood’s own influences and origins. A traditional Bollywood movie, Cox and Proffitt outline, includes the development of a romantic relationship, which is subsequently met with a conflict that is ultimately overcome, when the couple comes together again at the end (50). This narrative arc is present in *Slumdog Millionaire*: Jamal pursues Latika, his childhood friend and persistent love interest, throughout the entire film. In the end, he wins both her love, as well as great fortune.

This traditional Bollywood storyline seems not too far removed from that of a Hollywood romantic comedy, wherein a man and woman fall in love, have their relationship threatened in some way, but still end up happily ever after. These narrative arcs almost always contain within them traditional gender roles as well; the
couples are heterosexual, attractive people, the woman is distinctly feminine, the man distinctly masculine, etc. In regards to the notion of traditional gender roles, Cox and Proffitt note that “SDM also contains elements that incorporate traditional Indian values alongside Western ideals. SDM’s version of Western culture provides modernity, accompanied by traditional gender roles. Seemingly at odds with traditional India, this new Bollywood is Westernized…” (50). Although they insinuate that these “traditional Indian values” are in conflict with “Western culture,” the film’s “Western ideals” are still very traditional. For example, Latika plays roles that are secondary to men: she is Jamal’s love interest, Maman’s prized virgin, and Javed Khan’s subservient girlfriend. Despite the fact that Latika shows courage as a child when she first meets Jamal and Salim, her entry into adolescence almost instantly imprisons her in these submissive roles. She is not only subservient to Maman and Javed, who are clearly villains, but even to Jamal, who must rescue her from them both. If Slumdog Millionaire can be classified as a sort of mock-Bollywood film, this may account for its reluctance to engage with women’s issues. As in Hollywood romantic comedies, this “happily ever after” narrative does not set out to critique gender roles or stereotypes, but instead uses them to wield a pathos-driven, “feel good” story.

This “feel-good” film was not met uncritically. Cox and Proffitt touch on one of the central issues with the “crisis of witnessing”; in speaking for the oppressed, the privileged subject creates an inauthentic experience of the oppressed. The authenticity of Slumdog Millionaire has been contested and criticized by many, which indicates a public awareness of the impossibility for Western subjects to represent non-Western ones. For example, some viewers have noticed the powerlessness Latika experiences as she becomes an adult. In an article titled “Seduced ‘outsiders’ versus skeptical ‘insiders’?: Slumdog Millionaire through its re/viewers,” Shankuntala Banaji interviews various subjects in order to analyze the mixed reviews the film received, both in India and abroad. In one interview, a forty-eight-year-old South African woman living in the United Kingdom says: “[Y]ou can tell full well that it is made by a man, and for men and it has very unexceptional characterizations of masculinity and femininity… They just drop her [Latika] in the middle…She is the bravest character and then suddenly she is a nothing, a pathetic woman who needs to be saved by someone who looks much younger and weaker than her” (16-17). The interviewee, whom Banaji refers to as “T,” also comments on Latika’s physical appearance, saying: “I didn’t want her to be shown so beautiful when she grew up—it is very hard to stay looking like that when you live the life she lived, so it was all a lie” (17). In these ways, “T” calls attention to the ways Latika’s character reinforces Western
hegemonic values: even though she is “the bravest character,” once she grows up, she is powerless, and must wait for a man to rescue her from the hands of other men.

Indeed, as soon as Latika enters puberty, she is no longer Jamal and Salim’s brave third musketeer. When the two boys decide to find her (at Jamal’s request), she is still working for Maman, the man who kidnapsp and occasionally handicaps children and forces them into a life of begging in order to make a profit for himself. When Salim and Jamal find her, Latika is a dancer at a large brothel on Pila Street. The scene that shows Jamal and Salim wandering on Pila Street and entering the brothel is an acknowledgement that sex work exits in India, but nothing more. Despite the fact that 800,000 women and children are estimated to be victims of human trafficking, 80% of whom are forced into sex work, as well as the fact that “India has been identified as one of the Asian countries with a severe CSE (commercial sexual exploitation) trafficking problem,” Slumdog Millionaire concedes to the presence of prostitution in India, but does not engage with the issue in a meaningful way (Joffres).

Latika is not (yet) a prostitute, because her virginity makes her too valuable. As Maman says angrily to Jamal and Salim when they come to rescue her: “You really thought you could just walk in and take my prize away? Latika, come. Have you any idea how much this little virgin is worth?” (Slumdog Millionaire). That Latika’s worth derives from her virginity is a very traditional understanding of a female, rather than male, concern. The value of a woman’s virginity is one that is held even today among many societies, both Eastern and Western. In the United States, for example, many religious organizations espouse female virginity—a practice that dates from medieval times and the writings of religious philosophers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Even though profiting from a virgin dancer is something most contemporary societies would frown upon, the “worth” of a virgin girl is not an unfamiliar concept.

Slumdog Millionaire’s rhetorical choice to juxtapose a beautiful young girl’s prized virginity in contrast with the nameless, even faceless, sex workers all around her, promotes the importance of virginity at the expense of concealing the deeper issues women and even children face. The film does this both explicitly, through the cinematography of the brothel scene, as well as implicitly, through a conservative ideology about prostitution. First, the scene shows Jamal and Salim emerging through mist as they enter Pila Street. The street is crowded, and prostitutes stand on a balcony with their faces in shadow. Inside the brothel, the boys wander through its narrow hallways, where couples behind flimsy curtains find little to no privacy. These images are cut with those of a dancing
Latika wearing a blue lehenga (long skirt), a color that often represents both virginity in Western traditions like Christianity, as well as Vishnu, one of the principle deities of Hinduism. In the background, the sounds of babies crying and a loud overture of Indian music mix with the more pleasant sound of bells from Latika’s skirt. The accumulation of these images and sounds creates a juxtaposition between Latika’s virgin worth and beauty with the unsavoriness that surrounds her. The film makes it clear that Latika’s value derives from her virginity, because Maman keeps her separate from and treats her better than his other sex workers. The film’s attention to Latika’s virginity seems to be an attempt to make her an even more sympathetic character to the audience. If she is a virgin, she is innocent, and if she is innocent, then she deserves to be rescued from her situation. The attention to her virginity forces Latika into playing a gender role, rather than a starring role, in SDM.

Moreover, the brothel scene espouses a conservative critique of sex work. It refrains from commenting on the fact that while some women are enslaved in sex work, others choose it willfully as a way to make a living when there are few other options. As Hesford writes, “contradictions that characterize women’s experiences within the global sex trade…compel us to read the geopolitics of recognition rhetorically…to account for the colonial and imperial stories of global sex work and the technologies that continue to position sexual subalterns as objects of sight and surveillance” (150). In mostly ignoring the issue of sex work altogether, Slumdog Millionaire does not allow us to enter this conversation at all or to see the ways colonialism’s traces are responsible for enslaving women in the sex industry. And while Latika “belongs” to Maman, there is no indication whether or not the other prostitutes do, or whether they have chosen this life for themselves. By positioning Latika’s virginity as a most valuable “prize” in comparison to the unpleasantness of prostitution, the film itself then becomes the visual medium through which these “sexual subalterns” are “objects of sight and surveillance.”

Later in the film, we once again see a grown-up Latika portrayed as a submissive female. Jamal tells Latika he will wait for her at the train station every day at 5:15 until she is ready to be with him, but she refuses, saying “It’s too late” (Slumdog Millionaire). However, after garnering the courage to escape from Javed’s house, Latika does decide to meet him. At the station, the camera shows Jamal waiting on a balcony above the train platform while Latika wanders beside the train, looking for him. Jamal calls her name, and when they finally see each other, the camera pans between their faces, shooting upwards toward his, and downwards toward hers. In this way, the camera serves to metaphorically represent the gendered qualities of this rescue scene. Significantly, this very scene recurs throughout the film in Jamal’s flashbacks, creating a constant reminder of Latika’s subservience, powerlessness, and
continual need to be saved. Ultimately, the arrival of Salim and a few other young men who work for Javed thwarts Jamal's plan to rescue Latika at the train station. They drag her away from the train and into a car before Jamal has the chance to catch them. Thus, each aspect of this scene, both at the level of plot and camera angle, functions to reinforce Latika's helplessness as she moves between captivity and rescue at the hands of men. In both the train station and brothel scenes, Latika's captivity and rescue serve as plot devices by which male characters, including Jamal, assert and develop their masculinity.

Another significant way the film evades engaging with women's issues is in the role Jamal's and Salim's mother fulfills. First, the film does not say why she is a single mother, leaving viewers to guess whether she was abandoned by her husband, widowed, or else divorced. As some scholars have noted, family units in slums can be very fragile, and thus Salim's and Jamal's situation is not unique: “This…in arrival cities around the world is not uncommon: the transition to urban life places a terrible strain on marriages” (Saunders 18). The film gives nothing of the boys' family background, so there is no way to know whether Salim and Jamal were born in the Dharavi slum, or how long they have been living there when the film begins. In any case, the issues their mother faces: providing for two young boys and herself while living in a slum (even a relatively established one) while also facing loss or abandonment or divorce, are only implicit. The film shows her performing domestic duties such as laundry, bathing and disciplining her children. In the film's brief interval in which she appears, she does not speak much or often, performs only domestic chores, and does not even have a name.

Furthermore, the boys' mother's death is just one of many unfortunate events in their lives. It is one that conveniently provides an answer to a question Jamal is asked on the game show. Her death also symbolizes the only other significant role women play in the film; while Latika fulfills the role of love interest and submissive female, Jamal's mother represents a sort of moral compass. She dies at the hands of a violent anti-Muslim mob, and it is not until after her death that the boys embark on a life of crime. Although this involves mainly petty theft at first, as Salim grows older, he becomes involved with the gangster Javed Khan, which leads to his unabashed gun and drug use. Seemingly, Jamal inherits his mother's moral compass, as he emerges from his impoverished childhood without committing any terrible crimes or addicted to drugs.

In sum, *Slumdog Millionaire's* women characters uphold traditional female traits and duties like docility, passivity, and domesticity. At best, the film only alludes to the issue of prostitution as if it, like drugs and violence,
is just another symptom of poverty. Although it could be argued that Slumdog Millionaire does not deeply engage with any of the real issues facing the global South (drugs, violence, crime, poverty, illness and disease), the problems women face seem especially ignored. Mitu Sengupta explains that the film was lauded (and criticized) “for its potential to give voice to poor and marginalized children,” or, in other words, was both praised and condemned for its attempt to speak for the oppressed (599). Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that Slumdog Millionaire’s failure to engage with or portray women’s oppression and complex roles in India’s slum economies derives not from any fear of speaking for the oppressed, but an unwillingness to engage with these issues at all.

City of God: When a Woman’s Rape Becomes a Man’s Problem

Like Slumdog Millionaire, City of God is another award-winning film that received critical acclaim when it appeared, first in Brazil (2002), and then around the world. City of God does not portray the rags-to-riches, “Cinderella-like” escape from the slum, but rather the complete opposite, but almost equally improbably notion: how the pervasiveness of gang violence and drug trades in the favela prevents anyone from leaving. A much more violent depiction of life in the global South than Slumdog Millionaire, City of God still shares SDM’s reluctance to discuss women’s roles and suffering, but for different reasons that seem to be related to genre. While SDM’s imitative Bollywood style is reminiscent of the Hollywood romantic comedy genre, City of God has been said to fall within “the gangster genre,” reminiscent of the “Warner Bros gangster films of the 1930s’, ‘with shootings a plenty,’” wherein women were seen and not heard (Vieira xi). If its origins lie within the gangster genre, then it makes sense that violence of all kinds, including domestic and sexual violence toward women, is more prominent in City of God than in Slumdog Millionaire. That the film is based on real events might account for its “traumatic realism,” which “succeeds in capturing…the cultural fascination with, and historical demands for, trauma’s documentation” (Hesford 71). Its sensational violence seems to be employed as a way of putting masculinity on display, while ignoring the complexities of “real life” in Rio de Janeiro. Like SDM, City of God also lacks much critical commentary that interrogates the relationships between representations of gender and violence.

The first acts of violence toward women appear toward the very beginning of the film, when the Tender Trio, an amateur gang of thieves, decides to rob a motel frequented by prostitutes. The gang does not want anything but money, though they do act violently toward the motel clerk, a woman who says, “You should be studying or working. You don’t even look like hoodlums” (City of God). In response, Clipper says, “Shut up! What a pain in the
and in a close-up shot of the woman’s face, the camera shows him stuffing a cloth into her mouth and tying it around her head (*City of God*). Later, the film reveals that everyone in the motel was killed—not by the Tender Trio, but by Li’l Dice, who later takes the name Li’l Zé. The film portrays the Tender Trio as a somewhat endearing gang of hoodlums, especially in comparison to the gang violence that later ensues; they do not kill people or use their guns except as scare tactics. However, the motel robbery demonstrates a pointed and deliberate attack on the institution of sex work; it insinuates that it is permissible to steal other people’s money when it is exchanged illegally. The reason the Tender Trio is punished for this crime is not because they steal, but because they are believed to have murdered the motel workers. The motel attack is an implicit attack on women because the film makes it acceptable to steal from members employed by the sex industry, most of whom are women who may have no other way to make a living.

Attacks on women in *City of God* are further complicated by the issue of race. In an interesting article titled “I’ve killed and I’ve robbed. I’m a man!: The Brazilian Racialized Imagined Nation and the Making of Black Masculinity in ‘City of God,’” Jaime Amparo Alves notes that “still missing is an integrated analysis on gender, race and violence in Brazil” (323). And while her article’s concern is with the way black masculinity is constructed in the film, she also makes occasional, significant points about gender and violence toward women, noting that “[r]apes, death and drug-trafficking, are the elements around which the narratives of black (and white) masculinity are structured in the movie” (Alves 321). Alves points to the character Benny as evidence of the ways black and white masculinity are constructed. He is “the coolest gangster in *City of God*,” whose skin tone is light enough that he can move (physically and metaphorically) between the white and black characters in the movie and maintain peace between Li’l Zé and Carrot, the black and white drug lords, respectively. Meanwhile, Benny himself “passes through a self-transformation in the way he dresses, his hairstyle…and his personality…He is also able to date beautiful women like middle-class, light-skinned Angelica, while Little Zé has to pay for sex or rape women” (321). Angelica is one of few women in the film who has a speaking role, and as Alves implies, her class privilege and physical appearance lend a credibility to and even assist in constructing Benny’s masculinity. As a light-skinned, middle class young woman, Angelica can escape having to witness much of the violence and serious drug-trafficking present in the *favela*. Like Latika in *Slumdog Millionaire*, Angelica’s role in the film is mainly to serve as a love interest for various characters, as well as a moral compass to Benny when she urges him to leave the life of crime behind: “We could go
away from here. This violence sucks” (*City of God*). Somehow, she and Benny are able to arrange to leave, but he is shot and killed at his own going-away party. Once Benny dies, Angelica disappears from the film, which insinuates that because her role as his love interest is over, there is nothing left for her to do.

Angelica is not the only light-skinned, middle class woman who experiences a relative position of privilege and speaking role in the film. Marina is a newspaper reporter who gives Rocket his first real photographic success by publishing his work. She also gives him his first sexual experience. Marina exercises relative privilege in comparison to other women in the film because she does not live in the *favela*. Marina has a successful career, lives in an apartment in the city, and in these ways represents the ways in which “whiteness” serves as insulation from the *favela’s* violence. Even still, despite the fact that Marina seemingly plays a comparatively more complex female role, she is still no more than a “good lay,” if even that:

STRINGY: What about that lady journalist? Was she a good lay?

ROCKET: More or less.

STRINGY: You didn't like it?

ROCKET: I don’t think journalists know how to screw. (*City of God*)

Rocket is the film’s protagonist, narrator, and the one who manages to escape *favela* violence through his love and talent for photography; in this, Rocket is the one viewers “root for.” He “becomes a good person, a docile boy despite the hostile environment of the *favela* and his family’s own financial hardship” (Alves 321). He is trustworthy. Like Jamal, he comes across as morally superior to the others because he does not succumb to drugs or violence. However, Rocket has the final say both in the above exchange, and in the film as a whole (he is the narrator) and yet, even if we were to excuse the fact that he is a teenage boy who just lost his virginity, the way he speaks about women is concerning because he is the one male character in the film who rises above the *favela’s* degradation. Consequently, the film’s gesture toward portraying a more complex female character fails; it uses Marina only to bring about the male protagonist’s sexual and professional success as he constructs his masculinity.

The film’s failure to portray complex female characters extends well beyond Angelica’s and Marina’s roles as love interests. What complicates Hesford’s “crisis of witnessing” rape and trauma in *City of God* is skin color; the darker female characters occupy more marginal (non-speaking) roles than lighter-skinned ones, and the film’s most pronounced occasion of sexual violence toward women is enacted on a black female body. While the light-skinned
female characters exercise relative privilege, if not agency, the dark-skinned characters seem to suffer most.

It is interesting to observe the language Alves uses in the previously quoted passage that compares Benny to Li’l Zé: Benny is “able” or permitted to date Angelica because his good looks, light skin tone, and warm personality give him access to her middle-class status. But because he is ugly, Little Zé “has to” resort to either prostitution or rape, as if his sexual instincts are animalistic and he simply cannot refrain from sex. In fact, the film does make it seem as though Li’l Zé has no choice; when Benny suggests that a girlfriend would help to mellow him out, Li’l Zé reacts in the only way he knows how: not by seeking an emotional connection with a woman, but by using force to get what he wants. As Alves suggests, the film positions Li’l Zé as a “hyper-sexual” and almost bestial black man (321). At Benny’s going-away party, Li’l Zé asks a girl to dance, and she tells him she is there with someone else. Because he is “[h]urt in his masculinity, Zé humiliates his boyfriend, Galinha…by making him take off all his clothes and dancing...Later on, Zé…and his gang invade Galinha’s house, rape his fiancé (that this character is not given a name is telling of the place reserved for Black women in the movie)” (Alves 322). As Alves highlights, this rape is the most pronounced act of violence toward a woman in the film, and the woman who is raped has no name and is altogether denied authentic subjectivity: she is only ever called “sugar babe,” and “girl” (by Li’l Zé), and “honey” and “baby” by her boyfriend, Galinha (Knockout Ned).

Cinematically, the rape scene figures a “visual absence yet auditory presence of the material body” (Hesford 103). The scene cuts choppily between a black screen and images of a black body, while in the background she screams and cries “Let me go!” and Li’l Zé says, “Just enjoy it.” The absence of the female body but presence of her voice “represents the psychological dislocation associated with traumatic experiences…and a dislocation of another sort—namely, the historic absence of rape as a human rights violation within international law” (Hesford 103). As Hesford explains, rape was not considered a global human rights violation or a crime of war until as late as 1996 (103). The absence of rape as trauma is here situated within City of God; the nameless victim almost never speaks, nor does the film even say what happens to her after she is raped. We can only assume she is abandoned by Knockout Ned once he becomes a gangster. The young woman’s trauma is directed away from her, and becomes a male issue instead.

After the rape, which occurs while Knockout Ned is forcefully pinned to the ground by one of Li’l Zé’s men, Knockout Ned says, “I can’t even look her in the face now. Why didn’t that fucker kill me?” While we can
guess that some of his despair has to do with feeling sympathy for his girlfriend, Knockout Ned’s words are actually about himself and indicate more of a preoccupation with the way that, in taking possession/advantage of his girl, Li’l Zé damages and compromises Knockout Ned’s masculinity. Ned implies that it would be better to be dead than to live with such a wound to his masculinity. Further evidence that Knockout Ned feels this way lies in the events that follow; to avenge the fact that Li’l Zé’s gang subsequently kills Knockout Ned’s brother and fires gunshots at his home, he joins Carrot’s gang—not to seek restitution for his girlfriend’s rape—but in order to assert his masculinity and avenge his brother’s death: “That bastard killed my brother. I can’t let that go” (City of God). In this, the film subsumes and negates female trauma by turning it into male trauma. In the absence of portraying the female victim on whose body real violence is enacted, City of God refrains from commenting on the possibility of representing trauma or violence toward women. Rather, women, like guns, are props men use in order to assert their masculinity.

I have chosen to analyze these two films because of their respective positions as “internationalist and nationalist discourses”; Slumdog Millionaire is a Hollywood representation of India, and City of God is a Brazilian representation of its own slums. Yet, both are films that “legitimize certain identities and social relations over others”—namely, male over female identities (Hesford 37). Both representations paint the global South as a man’s world: masculine identities are constructed and legitimized through power and violence. In both films, male villains like Li’l Zé and Javed Khan gain money, women, and recognition through the use of force and violence, while heroes like Jamal and Rocket gain these same things by overcoming the hostility of their environments through legal means. However, by minimizing, eliding, and occasionally making invisible women’s traumas, the films, as I hope to have shown, do not refrain from Hesford’s “crisis of witness,” because they do attempt to speak for the oppressed. It is not that female rape and trauma are absent from the films, but rather, that the issues operate as plot devices in order to assist male characters in asserting their masculinity. Among other social issues, such as drug use and gang violence, rape and female subservience are at the bottom of the “hierarchical scenes of suffering in which social and legal recognitions take place” (37). It is Hesford’s call to action that we “human rights scholars and activists need to address the disjuncture between human rights’ universalist vision and the hierarchical scenes of suffering…” (37). I concede that Slumdog Millionaire’s and City of God’s elision of female trauma refrains from the more egregious issue of turning rape into spectacle and sensationalizing violence toward women in the same
way the films glorify violence between men. Yet, the silence on women’s matters points to a failure to question
the “universalist vision” of human rights. Therefore, the reluctance to represent women’s rape and trauma signals
both films’ respective adherence to the “universalist vision” that maintains unchallenged hegemonic approaches to
women’s roles and traumas around the world.
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Ex Machina: Possessing and Repossessing the Body

Susan Flynn

The imagined risks of a world controlled by technology and the attendant changes in the cultural landscape have long informed the science fiction genre. If our current era has espoused data as the defining measure of humanity, the resultant concerns are rightly centred on who has ownership and control of what that data can create. The current Hollywood fascination with science, which sees it oscillating between ingenious and miraculous, presents it as a panacea to all of our physical “ills.” Complicit with and feeding into the public’s vision of science and its scope, science fiction films are informed by deep-rooted dominant ideologies of the body. In this age of physical radicalization (i.e. transplants, artificial organs and cloning), fantasies of modifying the body emerge with increasing frequency (Rose 11). Optimization of the self is now inculcated in public life. Cultural vehicles like films are increasingly seizing the possible modifications of the body as a narrative device for exploring this optimization vis-a-vis the advent of biotechnology. The creation of “flesh” and of “almost real” life is depicted as the natural evolution of a progressive science. Medical science begins to look like an art form; bodies are made beautiful and more highly functioning while science is seen as the repository of unending possibilities. Contemporary public life appears to depend on this compulsory optimization.

The Hollywood film industry reconstitutes ideologies, purporting to reflect reality:

What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology. Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the
ideology. (Easthope 46)

Film both enacts prevalent ideologies by reconstituting the audience’s notion of themselves and, simultaneously, is ‘conditioned’ by ideology. Therefore, though film is a material product, it is also ideological. Disability theorists have examined the relationship between hegemonic ideologies and such powerful economic forces. Such work has identified a set of ideologies, namely individualism, normalization and medicalization, which together are central to ableism. An examination of each of these ideologies illustrates their interrelation and their relationship to the science which purports to “solve” all problems. This set of ideologies can be seen to inform the manner in which disability is represented and simultaneously the manner in which science is made all-powerful.

**Individualism, Normalization and Medicalization**

Mike Oliver suggests that the ideologies of individualism, normalization and medicalization are linked to capitalism’s rise and have shaped contemporary understandings of disability (4). In the twenty first century, popular narratives acknowledge the relationship between capital and health; the onus is on the individual to get well and stay well through whatever individualistic solutions are possible. Individualism is an ideology which emphasizes the duty of each individual to further their own interests, without taking the interests of society into consideration. Social critics posit that individualism justifies inequalities by suggesting that barriers to economic success are due to the psyches of individuals, rather than to social structures (Greene 117). Encouraging the autonomy of the individual, individualism assumes each person is capable of rational and vigorous self-improvement. Rather than being static, economic, political and cultural shifts continuously shape the notion of individualism (118). Disparate threads of individualism may be identified that still share common structural antecedents and over-arching outcomes. In the Marxist sense, individualism buttresses capitalism by fostering self-interest: inspiring the masses to hard work while encouraging them to focus on their own material desires. The assumption that every person has the ability to improve their social position leaves no room for those who may need care or assistance and perpetuates the myth of self-sufficiency, constructing some as dependent and others as autonomous (White and Tronto 116). A person’s ill health or “disability,” then, is his or her own responsibility, and he or she ought to exercise their right to improve their situation, rather than seeking the assistance or recognition of society.

Hollywood blockbusters are particularly interested in ideologies of the American life, and individualism, because it is “woven into American culture and social institutions,…often symbolizes the freedom of the American
way of life” (Greene 117). American individualism, an ideology which is tied up with American Exceptionalism and the notion of citizenship, is bound up with an individualist egalitarian democracy where each citizen has the ability to improve their social standing by virtue of hard work (Garland-Thomson 41).

Furthermore, in this paradigm, each citizen is a microcosm of the American nation (Garland-Thomson 43). “Good” citizens, then, are those who enact the “correct” amount of self-drive and determination, to improve their own position and the overall position of the nation. Indeed,

[a] well-regulated self thus contributes to a well-regulated nation. However, [that depends] upon a body that is a stable, neutral instrument of the individual will. It is this fantasy that the disabled figure troubles. (42)

The economic sphere of course, is fraught with competition, and celebrates the “survival of the fittest,” which literally and figuratively places physically imperfect people at a disadvantage. The notion extolled by individualism whereby each citizen has the same potential for success, is predicated on the assumption that every citizen has the same material condition. Individualism, therefore, has a predilection for ‘normal’ bodies and so seeks to reject or “normalize” those outside the realm of what it considers “normal.”

“Normal,” a construct from the nineteenth century, is an “ideal” of the average man, without deviations, who can be assimilated seamlessly into the masses (Davis 6). The rise of professions, particularly the medical profession, necessitated a manner of measuring and evaluating; an effective calculus of mankind, which would not easily accommodate variations. “Normal” persons, therefore, are ascribed a hegemonic position, and this hegemony asserts itself in the celebration of the normal—the reiteration of the dominance of the majority who are non-disabled. As Rosemarie Garland-Thompson argues, “[i]n modern society the tyranny of the norm makes extraordinary bodies into freakish bodies, which both compel and repel normate sensibility” (137). The forms of agency and subjectivity available to those who are outside the hegemonic “norm” are limited; while they are invisible, they are also stereotyped as dominant groups project their own experiences as representative of all humanity, thereby excluding other groups. Popular contemporary film, contributing to ideologies of health, social expectation and citizenship, recirculates oppressive discourses of the body which place the burden of repair and improvement on individuals.

The pervasive theme of medical science in contemporary narratives illustrates our current cultural
reverence of medicalization. Medicalization is the ideology which sustains the kudos of medical science and the inherent professionalism within it. The medical experts are seen to have superior qualifications and knowledge which supersede any individual’s thoughts about their own medical issues. The ideology of medicalization sustains the power of medical professional opinion, medical assessment, intervention and treatment. It is predicated on the idea that all persons, when possible, must be made “normal,” must be “fixed,” through a process of medical intervention. Medical intervention can be traced to the eighteenth century and the rise of medical science. The work of Foucault is useful in analyzing the development of professional discourse, or, the examination and categorization which form part of the medical approach to ability and health. According to the work of Foucault, the “discursive practices” of knowledge are not independent of the objects that are studied, and must be understood in their social and political contexts. In the light of post-structuralism, nature and culture do not occupy separate spaces. The sociology of the body, alongside the rise in cultural studies as a field, has augmented the ideas of Foucault in developing new insights into body theory.

The Birth of the Clinic

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault pinpoints the end of the eighteenth century as the time at which modern biomedicine was born; it was then that the distinction between the normal and the pathological, the distinction around which medicine came to be organised, came into being. By the end of the nineteenth century, confinement, institutionalization, and dependency had become synonymous with ill-health, madness, and disability. For Foucault, power is inseparable from knowledge, and so the medical gaze is a technology of power, producing both. Foucault’s post-structuralist analysis of the creation of the conditions which have allowed medical ideologies to thrive also illuminate the conditions under which science has become ‘reified’ by modern culture and allowed, in effect, to become “monstrous.” Modern perceptions of the body may be effectively traced back to the late eighteenth century, when medical practice began to examine bodies in order to classify them:

In the eighteenth century, the fundamental act of medical knowledge was the drawing up of a map: a symptom was situated within a disease, a disease in a specific ensemble, and this ensemble in a general plan of the pathological world. (Foucault 13)

Foucault argues that the materiality of the body cannot be dissociated from the historical practices that objectivise it (Hughes and Patterson 333). The patient became the passive subject of the medical gaze, subjected to analysis.
and classification. Foucault maintained that this eighteenth century clinical discourse was the basis for a new regime of power, which he called “biopower.” Foucault’s biopower refers to the tendency of relatively recent forms of power/knowledge to work toward an increasingly comprehensive management of life, both the life of the person and, consequentially, that of the nation. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault argues that the dividing practices of the nineteenth century clinics affected the treatment of the body by professionals. Categorization, segregation and manipulation of subjects were objectifying procedures, through which subjects become attached to a personal and social identity. Foucault considered normalization to be the cornerstone of biopower. Normalizing technologies (practices of bodily reconstruction, analysis and rehabilitation as well as self-help groups, fitness regimes, etc.) perform disciplinary functions, encouraging subjects to identify themselves in ways that make them governable. Through the work of Foucault, then, it is apparent that from the eighteenth century, classification and governability have gone hand-in-hand. The scientific classification of persons has been seen as the primary determining factor rather than their socially-created identity. The power of science, therefore, has grown exponentially to the point where it is celebrated and glorified by mass media. Seen to be a rational repository of truth and reason, it is given the task of defining our levels of humanity, orderliness, and compliance. In this way it is also “monstrous”; its growth is exponential, as is its power.

Contemporary popular film regularly displays the powers of science and technology, labelling it as “rational” and imbuing it with largesse. Fed by dominant ideologies of health and the body, popular film fails to attend to some of the evolving subtleties that late modern societies create in relation to disability, health, such as the conditions in which repair and cure are accessible and the social pressure to optimize. Contemporary science fiction films such as *Repo Men* (2010) and *Ex Machina* (2015) refer to the ever more complex nuances of the body in relation to biotechnology. These texts are useful exemplars of a “monstrous science,” a science which has powers to “fix” and even create humans. Such science is not a field concerned with rights or equality; rather it is concerned only with its own growth and the perceived ‘optimization’ of human life, with profits for the corporation and kudos for the creator.

**Science Fiction Film and Monstrous Science**

Popular film, science fiction in particular, enacts our fascination with and our fear of this monstrous science. Through science fiction narratives we can grapple with scientific advances and work through the underlying fears
about its potential power. These narratives feature imagined futures, replete with all that science currently can and may one day be able to offer. In science fiction films, medical technology and scientific advances offer “perfect” bodies, in this way reconstituting the dominant ideologies of medicalization, normalization and individualism. The constant drive toward the optimization of the body—the replacement of body parts, assisted conception, gene therapy and assorted other “procedures”—are now so commonplace that science and technology are an everyday part of life and the aging process. So much of social interaction, education, employment, even leisure, depends on the categorization of people (healthy/unhealthy, non-disabled/disabled, old/young, fit/unfit) that the scientific intervention that is available or unavailable to us is more and more relevant (Rose 17). These concerns find articulation in the mass market media, in particular blockbusters that attend to the concerns of the masses.

Science fiction is often concerned with a dystopian future, a world far from ideal where traditional values are collapsing. This world of the future is tightly controlled by superpowers that, through their accumulation of vast wealth, are in a position of supreme power and influence which affects the average citizen, limiting his freedom and dictating his lifestyle. Science fiction seeks to produce imaginary futures where the breakdown of society is alarming and the gap between the powerful and the powerless is a vast and ever-stretching chasm. Film is particularly well suited to the portrayal of science fiction; the distortion of ordinary colors, forms and landscapes may be made vivid, while 3D allows the viewer to “enter” the fantastical world of the future. The new technologies of late capitalism like transport systems, technological aids, and modified bodies, are all easily exhibited and made real.

The intersection of the body and technology is a recurrent trope of science fiction. The body is remade (RoboCop 2014), reconfigured (Transcendence 2014), remodeled (Iron Man 2008) and transmuted (The Fly 1986). As medical technology and genetic engineering have developed, so have the futuristic ideas of a society where “disability” is eradicated by the intervention of technology to cure and treat impairment (Reeve 100). In science fiction films, medical science transforms the body in a most monstrous way, scooping out the apparent weakness of the human form in order to implant a mechanical component:

There is no getting away from the monstrosity of the body, or from the violence with which it is transformed, because there is no essential nature, no spontaneous being, of the body; social forces permeate it right from the beginning. The body is at once a target for new biological and communicational technologies, a site of political conflict, and a limit point at which ideological
oppositions collapse. (Shapiro 134)

Science fiction can be seen as a warning of what might happen when science goes too far. Biotechnological cures for disabilities can result in horrifying mutations (The Amazing Spiderman 2012), cyborgs can revolt (I, Robot 2004), clones can overthrow the system (The Island 2005) and economics can determine whether you live or die (Repo Men 2010). Science fiction always sees trouble with biotechnology; rather than providing a perfect advancement for humanity, it presents a precarious and dangerous relationship which threatens to go wrong at every turn and disrupt the balance of power between human and machine. Machines have now made ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, “[o]ur machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 176). The scope of biotechnology is so great that it invokes both fear and awe, seen in fictional representations as massive bodies that overpower humans (Springer 306). The growing array of scientifically plausible futures provide narrative fodder about the risks of a world controlled by technology, as the evolving technological imaginary moves beyond the body to digital data as the dominant form of materiality:

Popular science, media representations, pundits, and futurologists all portray our own moment in history as one of maximal turbulence, on the cusp of an epochal change, on a verge between the security of a past now fading and the insecurity of a future we can only dimly discern. (Rose 5)

As far back as 1926, science fiction addressed the fear of technology when Fritz Lang’s Metropolis articulated the dehumanizing effects of the Fordist economy which imposed mechanization on workers. The science fiction genre grew as industrial development and technological evolution created a fear of the machine. Now, the frontiers of biotechnical innovation are shifting via the digitization of life. Humanity has come to see itself at a molecular level “at the same time as the vitality of the body has become increasingly open to machination” (Rose 254). This machination introduces possible modulations of the body which were inconceivable a hundred years ago, and popular culture successfully narrates the attendant fears and concerns regarding this leap. Interrogations of such narratives can help us to understand contemporary experiences of scientific and technological advances. Scientific advances such as organ transplantation, stem cell science and even blood donation require and create new sets of social relations as well as generating new ideas about what constitutes life (17).

Science fiction repeatedly features disabled characters who are “fixed” by technology; Robocop is remade, Anakin Skywalker gains an exoskeleton which allows him the use of legs and arms, the Six Million Dollar Man is
engineered to have super-ability, Iron Man forges a heart replacement; again and again science and technology seem to have the solutions for those whose bodies are imperfect. The reification of science and technology combined with the less than perfect body of the hero place such films in the service of an ableist agenda: scientific progress is thus shown as engaged in the modification and “repair” of human beings.

In the future that science fiction portrays, “abnormal” bodies are excluded from the realm of the active subject; if their bodies are “fixable” society projects expectations of repair at any cost. Contemporary films such as Repo Men (2010) warn of a monstrous future devoid of privacy and laden with control. Featuring bodies which are colonized by power structures, corporate interests effectively dictate human life. Surveillance, in this imagined future, is married to self-repair and survival and corporeality is open to techniques which incur debt:

The world of late capitalist power is literally made flesh. The ubiquitous but ungraspable hyperreality of surveillance and domination is materialized and localized in the form of excruciating pains and pleasures. In this subjugated flesh, fantasy and materiality, affect and technology, the circuits of the brain and the circuits of capital, finally coincide. (Shapiro 135)

Repo Men (2010) enacts the nightmare of a capital-centered future where organs can be bought at a high price. Set in 2025, a corporation called “The Union” has perfected mechanical organs to replace diseased or damaged organs. If a customer falls behind or reneges on payments, “repo men” are sent to reclaim the “artiforg” (artificial organ) from the body. The procedure is immediate and primitive, frequently resulting in the death of the customer. Remy and his partner Jake are considered the best of the Union’s repo men. The Union is unquestioningly profit driven, having long term payment “options” which tie in consumers for most of their life:

Remy: My job is simple. Can’t pay for your car, the bank takes it back. Can’t pay for your house, the bank takes it back. Can’t pay for your liver, well, that’s where I come in. (scene 1)

In this imagined future, the ownership of capital is a prerequisite to harvest the power of science and technology. Concerned-looking families huddle in the corporation’s offices to look discuss their loved-one’s options; the family unit illustrating the element of duty to repair oneself at any cost:

Remy: He’ll sign it. Everybody signs it. (scene 3)

Images of computerized diagnostics seem to hold the valuable information about possible cures; the medical gaze is now married to technological advances, which, in turn, are linked to a payment grid and a seemingly
life-long financial commitment to the corporation. Social and familial stability in this way depend on individual solutions which incur payment plans. The successful characters are those who can make repayments, they have money, families and a healthy fear of the Union, respecting the need to pay back their debt. The characters’ need to self-regulate, and as such be effective members of the population, is informed by the ideology of individualism and simultaneously, it reflects the biopower which Foucault describes. These organs are tracked and monitored and hence, surveillance is endorsed by the powerful elite as a method of control and regulation. Science, in the hands of the elite, is a means of amassing capital while simultaneously controlling the populace, as the “repo men” extract devices and life from the non-compliant customers. The corporation is a shadowy organization, a faceless giant whose only aim is to feed profit to unseen investors. In this scenario, biotechnology is a commodity, a tool of capitalism, keeping the masses enslaved. *Repo Men* illustrates the “vital politics” of our time, which is neither delimited by the poles of illness and health, nor focused on eliminating pathology to protect the destiny of the nation. Rather, it is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures. (Rose 3)

*Repo Men* enacts this vital politics, placing individualism, normalization and medicalization in a complex web of familial, financial and moral duty. The repo men themselves become the reapers of financial retribution, performing corporate discipline at the most intimate level. In this way the film deliberates about the worth of various lives in an individualistic and capital oriented manner, allowing social responsibility an escape route as repair is grounded in the responsibility of each individual. This politics of capital and of life itself, of the government of individuals, is inculcated in such popular narratives which, by addressing he technological character of modern life, optimization and finance, blur the lines between financial and physical ability.

*Ex Machina* (2015) marks a return to *Metropolis* in its fascination with the machination of processes and of human behavior. In a critique of the world we have created, where data can replicate life itself, and cybernetics are the new production line, the film returns to the Fordist fear of its predecessor. *Ex Machina* concerns the creation of life; a robot becomes sentient, imitating life and learning to adapt to the human world, ultimately out-smarting her creator. The film’s title refers to the ancient literary tradition of “deus ex machina” (God from the machine), a person or voice who is introduced into a situation and provides a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty. *Ex Machina* (from the machine) suggests that the artificially created person may surpass the
limits of human intelligence, learning exponentially to solve material problems. In the manner in which Metropolis articulated the fear of the machine taking over from man, Ex Machina addresses the data set as something which is so integrated into daily life that human is rendered indiscernible from machine. The film questions the term “human,” illustrating the ongoing evolution of life forms. If we look back to the birth of the clinic and forward to increasing intervention and machination, we may see that, as Rose says, “we do not stand at a unique moment in the unfolding of a single history, but in the midst of multiple histories” (252).

“Machine” beings are now open to examination and classification, diagnosis and, if necessary, adjustment or repair. Clinical observation in the case of a humanoid takes the form of the “Turing test.” The test serves a diegetic purpose, bringing the programmer Caleb to examine the humanoid robot Ava:

    Nathan: Because if the test is passed, you are dead centre of the greatest scientific event in the history of man.

    Caleb: If you’ve created a conscious machine, it’s not the history of man. That’s the history of gods.

    (scene 4)

The Turing test, developed by Alan Turing in 1950, examines a machine’s ability to exhibit intelligent behavior indistinguishable from that of a human being. Such behavior is, of course dependent on the ideology of normalcy—the normalization of behavior, thoughts, and patterns, as well physical normalcy. The importance of the Turing test is tantamount to the success of the humanoid robot as a scientific creation. Reinforcing the ideological frames of what is “normal,” the test seeks to ascribe a range of normal responses. We may see the Turing test as a new form of the “medical gaze,” the biotechnical version of a clinician’s examination. The film in this way colludes with the traditional notion of science as a rational and measured discipline, capable of predictable and highly managed “solutions.” In this way, is the “deus ex machina” a solution to the vagaries of the human body? The perfectly traditionally attractive appearances of all of Nathan’s robots would suggest so. Yet in true science fiction tradition, the science gets out of control; Ava tricks Nathan and Caleb, trapping them inside the building and escaping to a new life in the city. Free to run amok in the metropolis, we are left to wonder what havoc she may wreak as a modern day Frankenstein’s monster.

This vision of the created being is inherently terrifying—it does not praise the potential of science. Though this Frankenstein-esque machine develops the intelligence to escape from her creator, showing what Braidotti might term autopoeisis—the capability of maintaining and reproducing itself—Ava’s escape is depicted
as an act of cunning and inherent evil, as illustrated by the scene of the injured orphan-man Caleb trapped inside Nathan's prison as Ava escapes. While Braidotti writes of the machinic autopoeisis as “the threshold to many possible worlds” (94), the vision of scientific creation which Ex Machina's proffers is one of terror. In this, we may excavate the concerns of the contemporary world and witness how science fiction continually addresses emergent technologies to illustrate the need for control. Both films speak of the greater accessibility to new technologies which the financial elite have and, simultaneously, the need to rein in capitalist interests. In these narratives, the drive for profit, and of the individualistic concerns of ego are the things which must be kept under control, rather than the technologies themselves. This fear is the fear of the power of capital, rather than a fear of new technologies growing out of control, as these two film examples show us, to use Braidotti's term, “a consumer-oriented brand of liberal individualism” (97).

**Conclusion**

Contemporary science fiction tells us that our collective and personal concerns are centered around survival, which involves having the means to invest in whatever necessary technological interventions are available. As contemporary Hollywood film is seen to narrate the concerns of the audience, the “brave new world” of medical and scientific possibilities has continues to be a central theme. As Repo Men and Ex Machina illustrate, scientific solutions to the vagaries of the human form are bound up with the ownership of capital and the enactment of self-drive. This interplay of economics with science illustrates science fiction's continued concern with the power structures of the future, while reiterating that those whose control science, control life and that those who can afford science can live longer, better, happier lives. At the intersection of a number of advancements, both social and scientific, we are no different from the original audience of Fritz Lang's Metropolis in 1927. We are not at a turning point in history, as theorists are sometimes wont to proclaim, rather, as Rose suggests, we stand in the midst of multiple histories (252).

The ideologies of medical science, which may be traced back to the birth of modern medicine in the eighteenth century, are indeed implicated in the current discourses of biotechnology as we are increasingly called upon to operate within binaries of have or have not; money, health, ability, etc. Both Repo Men and Ex Machina, in different ways, illustrate the centrality of classification, intervention, optimization and control which are central to biopower. Life, in these narratives, is open to assessment as the functioning of humans, their frailties and impulses,
is exposed as sub-optimal. Disability’s disruptive potential is never entertained; the narratives sweep toward the repair of and creation of the perfect specimen of a human. These narratives are interesting examples of how science fiction enlarges and queries what it means to be human in a world of polarizing wealth inequalities.
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Call for Papers
Special Issue: Cultural Artifacts in the Anthropocene, Issue 3.2 (August 2017)

Ethos: A Digital Review of the Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics—a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary online journal and digital forum—invites submissions for its August 2017 special issue on the Anthropocene. In 2016, the International Commission on Stratigraphy met to discuss whether or not to formally define our current geological epoch as the “Anthropocene.” Despite the fact that the term has not been officially sanctioned, it has been widely adopted by popular scientists, social theorists, humanities scholars and others since its coining in 2000 by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer. It is used to reflect the geologically significant conditions of an earth that has been profoundly shaped by human activities including global warming, ocean acidification, habitat loss, and species invasion. The adoption of this term has profound consequences for the way we think about humans. As Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses, the concept muddles the distinction between human and geological history. Accordingly, the concept of the “Anthropocene” has become, in Bruno Latour’s estimation, “the best alternative we have to usher us out of the notion of modernization.” For this issue of the Ethos journal, we invite submissions of original scholarly work that consider topics relevant to the project’s intellectual interests in the arts, humanities, and public ethics as each relates to the concept of the Anthropocene. Articles may explore literary texts, film, music, trends in cultural criticism and “theory,” or issues of wider social and political concern, in order to answer the question: How do our cultural artifacts respond to this new geological era?

Essays should be between 4000 and 7000 words in length and should be submitted in a format adhering to the most recent MLA guidelines. Ethos publishes articles written for a wider intellectual audience, so authors are encouraged to avoid—or, in the least, explain—technical jargon whenever possible.

Ethos is also looking for book reviews to publish that have some relevance to the issue’s theme. Book reviews should be between 500-1000 words, and must be submitted according to the MLA style guide. Reviews do not necessarily have to consider academic texts, as long as the criticism is incisive, the writing is clear, and the book is interesting (or, your review has something interesting to say about it).

Essay submissions received before May 16, 2017 will be considered for the August 2017 issue. Book reviews can be submitted for the August 2017 issue until June 16, 2017. Submissions well before the due date are especially welcome.

Ethos is a digital project maintained by a collective of academics and public intellectuals based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to our referred journal, the project also features weekly review posts on cultural criticism and public life. To learn more, visit the project at www.ethosreview.org.

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