

PRANKSTER NARRATIVE IN KEN KESEY'S *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST*

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in the partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Jean Griffith, Committee Chair

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DEDICATION

To Xavia, if not for you I wouldn't have made it out alive.

Sheldon: I always thought I was more like a cuckoo bird. You know, a superior creature whose egg is placed in the nest of ordinary birds. Of course the newly hatched cuckoo eats all the food, leaving the ordinary siblings to starve to death. Luckily for you, that's where the metaphor ended.

Missy: I thought it ended at cuckoo

*"The Pork Chop Indeterminacy." *The Big Bang Theory*. CBS. 5 May 2008.*

ABSTRACT

The opening lines of Ken Kesey's 1962 novel recall the title imagery and central metaphor of psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*: "[t]hey're out there. Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them" (3). Read within the context of Fanon's concern with colonization, *Cuckoo's Nest* presents a satirical microcosm of a male dominated society creating a place where colonial gender constructs disintegrate into the post-colonial as perceived by the culturally displaced Chief Bromden. The evident effects of Chief Bromden's sociocultural displacement demand a Fanonian context. However, in the literary world Kesey inhabits, Herman Melville's palpable presence encourages an examination of the post-colonial nature of the asylum through the lens of 19th century literature. This approach reveals the nature of prankster narrative and con artistry in Chief Bromden's colonized voice.

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The opening lines of Ken Kesey's 1962 novel recall the title imagery and central metaphor of psychiatrist¹ Frantz Fanon's 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*: "[t]hey're out there. Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them" (3). Read within the context of Fanon's critique of colonization, *Cuckoo's Nest* presents a satirical microcosm of a male dominated society, creating a place where colonial gender constructs infiltrate the post-colonial as perceived and embodied by the culturally displaced Chief Bromden. The evident effects of Chief Bromden's sociocultural displacement demand a Fanonian context. Without this context many readers have accepted Bromden's narrative at face value, creating a misogynistic and racist text (as reflected in the film adaptation). However, in the literary world Kesey inhabits, Herman Melville's palpable presence encourages an examination of the colonial nature of the asylum through the lens of 19th century literature. Most overtly, Kesey introduces *Moby Dick* themed boxer shorts, but he also alludes to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth Mark" in the form of a nurse with a birth mark². From these literary references and others it becomes clear that Kesey plays with genre, layering the adventure narrative on top of the sentimental novel and demonstrating the stagnation of gender politics in America over the past century or more. This approach reveals the nature of prankster narrative and con artistry in Chief Bromden's colonized voice. *Cuckoo's Nest* is,

¹ To Fanon, black people wear white masks in a variety of ways and in a variety of formats, but, wearing a white mask always means a black person "being for" a white narrative (Fanon 1). The mask can be linguistic, as Fanon discusses in the first chapter, "The Black Man and Language," or, the mask can be a sexual performance (discussed in both "The Woman of Color and the White Man" and "The Man of Color and the White Woman"). And while Bromden certainly does not recognize the full weight of his language—"black boys in white suits"—Reading Kesey's use of Bromden to speak this line as incidental or lacking intention would be naïve at the least: "we are witness to the desperate efforts of a black man striving desperately to discover the meaning of black identity. [. . .] The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man. There is no doubt whatsoever that this fissiparousness is a direct consequence of the colonial undertaking" (Fanon xviii-1).

² There is great opportunity, which I will not indulge here, to further explicate the relationship between religion and science as part of Kesey's commentary on Hawthorne in terms of this nurse, her Catholicism, and her fear of men (all in a clinical, scientific setting).

however, almost always read as a dichotomous battle of the sexes played out between Randal Patrick McMurphy and Nurse Ratched. Even James Phelan, using a narratological approach, argues that the implied³ Kesey's interpretive and ethical judgments construct Ratched as a villain. However, when a narratological approach is combined with whiteness studies and an intertextual reading of gender politics, *Cuckoo's Nest* emerges as a novel that deconstructs dichotomy, exposing the notion of polarities as inherently false. I will argue, in fact, that the implied Kesey's narrative judgments are discordant with those of Chief Bromden's and that Kesey's use of a Chinook narrator disorients readers and demonstrates the self-destructive nature of the white privilege into which Bromden is indoctrinated. This approach is meant to dislodge readers from the self-satisfied constructs of race and gender that define the dominant culture in America.

First, from a Fanonian context, we can understand Bromden's marginalization to have an infectious effect on his narrative. Having internalized the values of an Anglo-normative, heterosexist society, Bromden's linguistic performance becomes tainted by the mechanisms of his own disenfranchisement. In short, Bromden is, more or less, the desired result of "the colonial undertaking" as Fanon describes it (Fanon 1). Second, in Melvillian terms, McMurphy is, very nearly, the perfect specimen of a white colonial American: a symbolic and literal embodiment of the agency behind Bromden's colonized perception. The 'more or less' and 'very

³ Narrative theorists, at times, disagree on the value (or lack thereof) of the implied author. Phelan tends to argue for the usefulness of such a theoretical device. It should be noted that not all narrative theorists agree on the value of the term "narratology." Phelan asserts that the implied author, a theoretical author found in the text but not inextricably linked to "the flesh-and-blood author," tends to have particular value in the context of post-structuralism. Because narrative theory, particularly rhetorical narratology, understands narrative as "*a multidimensional purposive communication from a teller to an audience*," Roland Barthes' death of the author requires some adaptation. We cannot understand the "*teller*" fully without allowing her/him to live. But readers find the implied author almost exclusively in the text; the "flesh-and-blood author." I prefer the term biographical author, is a product of interviews, texts, biographies, autobiographies, and, at times, personal interactions. This creates an interesting intersection between reader and author. Phelan argues that different readers create different texts in the act of reading. Therefore, we can understand the implied author, in part, as the product of readerly interactions with a text. I find the implied Kesey particularly useful here because I feel strongly that I disagree with the biographical Kesey's reading of *Cuckoo's Nest*.

nearly' above, however, become the crux of the novel. For both men, an embrace of colonial ideologies, Melvillian and Fanonian, causes grievous emotional and psychological damage, leading to their dysfunctional engagement with society—Bromden plays deaf and dumb while McMurphy lashes out with erratic violent behavior—and subsequent commitment to a mental asylum. From their unlikely friendship, we find clear evidence of an implied Kesey and his narrative judgements: aesthetically, McMurphy is ignorant; interpretively, both are broken; and ethically, both are racist and misogynistic.

First we must come to an agreement over the implied Kesey. The implied author differs from the biographical author in that we look exclusively to the text to find the implied author. For instance, if readers are to understand or know more about a scene or character than the narrator seems to then an author must have supplied that information. However, in line with the death of the author, narratologists are not interested in allowing the author, outside of the text, to dictate the terms by which we understand the implied author. Essentially, that it can be useful to acknowledge authorial agency without revivifying the impact of the genic author. As James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz understand narrative, from a rhetorical perspective, it is a communicative act: “*Narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something*” (Phelan and Rabinowitz 3). This definition complicates but does not absolutely conflict with Roland Barthes’ thesis on the death of the author: “to the extent that you are considering narrative *as communicative process*, then authors, and their communicative purposes, matter: there can be no rhetoric without a rhetor” (Phelan and Rabinowitz 30). But Phelan and Rabinowitz are quick to warn their readers against the complete reemergence of the author: “In stressing the author’s decisive role, however, we are not suggesting that the task of interpretation (or the goal of reading) should be

reduced to the discovery of the author's conscious intentions. [. . .] we account for the effects of narrative by reference to a feed-back loop among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response" (30). Further, even authorial agency is not simply a matter of allowing Kesey to interpret his own work. As a public figure, Kesey created an authorial persona which then limits readers' interpretive efforts. Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, more significantly than any other single publication, works to create or distribute this persona—Kesey, the LSD dispensing Hippy King. Kesey spends a great deal of subsequent interview time attempting to undo or re-contextualize this interpretation:

Oh yeah. It's a good book, [*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*]. Yeah, he's a—
Wolfe's a genius. He did a lot of that stuff, he was only around three weeks. He picked up that amount of dialogue and verisimilitude without tape recorder, without taking notes to any extent. He just watches very carefully and remembers. But, you know, he's got his own editorial filter there. And so what he's coming up with is part of me, but it's not all of me, any more than Hunter S. Thompson is loaded all the time and shooting machine guns at John Denver. (Parker 110)⁴

But Kesey's real work toward distancing himself from the hippie personae comes when he kicks the Pranksters off his property:

Well, there were sixty-one people when they headed out to Woodstock. And after they were gone, I went upstairs—and we live in a barn. We still live in the same barn. We fixed it up and it's a pretty nice place. But at that time there was still hay in the loft of the barn. And I found out one of these little hippie warrens where they dug in with their little ratty old sleeping bags and their copy of *Zap* magazine. In stock right down in a hay bale was a candle which had burned right

⁴ From the 1989 Terry Gross Interview and an excellent version of his mantra on Wolfe.

down to the hay before it had gone off. And I thought, hey, enlightenment is one thing but being this loose is . . . I mean my grandpa wouldn't have allowed them up there and my great grandpa wouldn't have, and there's certain things that take precedence over enlightenment. (Parker 115)

In other incarnations of this story, Kesey evokes the sanctity of his children rather than his heritage but the message is largely the same. And, in either case, Kesey seems hypocritical; he wants to completely unmoor the social landscape his forefathers left him but maintain their barn in pristine order; he leaves his wife and young children at home while he spends huge amounts of household earnings on a drug fueled road trip then disband the Pranksters in the name of being a father and husband. Essentially, I am arguing that, as readers, we must avoid allowing a biographical Kesey to too heavily influence our understanding of the implied author of *Cuckoo's Nest*. To be clear, the, or better, *an* implied Kesey is not static. He emerges specific to the reading and the text. We cannot, or at least should not, find the same implied Kesey in *Cuckoo's Nest* that we find in *Demon Box* or *Sometimes a Great Notion* and, regardless of the text, an implied Kesey may differ based on the reading and the reader. For instance, a reading of temporalities in *Cuckoo's Nest* reveals an authorial perspective of white privilege: "True freedom and sanity spring from the same spiritual well, already mixed, just add incentive. Insanity, on the other hand, is dependent on *material* fad and fashion, and the weave of one's prison is of that material. 'But I didn't weave it,' I hear you protest. 'My parents, their parents, *generations* before me wove it!'" (Parker 53). This quote, from Kesey's interview with Paul Krasner in 1971, demonstrates white privilege in Kesey's approach to *Cuckoo's Nest* because it is much easier to escape the confines of a personal historical context when white privilege affords extensive opportunity for upward mobility. I will demonstrate that Bromden appears relieved of his

oppressive past as a result of therapeutic effort: psycho-analytic reflections on his past.

Throughout the novel, Bromden's mental illness most significantly manifests in traumatic flashbacks. If *Cuckoo's Nest* argues that Bromden's trauma, resulting from racist ideologies, can be cured—and I will demonstrate that it does—then Toni Morrison's depiction of haunting as unresolvable in *Beloved* can be read as a rebuttal to Kesey's assertion that “when you're a prisoner, the task is not to shout epithets at the warden, but to *get out*” (Parker 53). I would argue that Bromden's potential cure, realized or not, demonstrates Kesey's firm belief in a “pull yourself up by your boot straps” mythology. Where Morrison's depiction of haunting exposes a more realistic portrayal of the reverberating effects of colonial American race politics. Kesey seems to see Bromden as inherently capable of removing himself from the prison of his past; Morrison, in the very act of writing a historical novel set in the aftermath of slavery one-hundred years later, seems to see the impact of racist socio-political constructs as inescapable. More direct approaches to *Cuckoo's Nest* may not reveal this privilege and therefore the Kesey quotes above may not possess the same relevance. For instance, a queer reading of the novel would reveal a queerness to McMurphy's non-reproductive lifestyle which would ally him, or at least parallel him, with Nurse Ratched. In this reading, the implied Kesey's bias is less apparent, if apparent at all, and therefore we find a different implied author; one who perhaps allies himself with the biographical Kesey's friend and colleague Allen Ginsberg (wrongfully committed to just such an asylum for his sexual orientation). From these brief examples we can begin to see the potential value of the implied author specifically in *Cuckoo's Nest*.

Rather than allowing Kesey's views on race and gender to dictate our reading of *Cuckoo's Nest* and its exploration of race and gender narratives, then, we should consider Kesey's personal and artistic investment in tricksterism. For instance, Kesey himself played the

trickster when he used the proceeds from *Cuckoo's Nest* to fund his bus trip performance. Combining a day-glow bus full of white hippies on hallucinogens with a cross country road trip, Kesey attempts to shock main street America. His intention was not to control the message but to disrupt existing norms. Because civil rights issues are central to the hippie discourse, we can assume that Kesey intends to disrupt norms of white male supremacy, but we must acknowledge that his access to disruptive agency is inextricably linked to his white male privilege. To some extent, Kesey's discourse on hierarchy not only fails to directly address racial and gender inequities supporting notions of American exceptionalism, it reinforces them through the exercise of that privilege. He brings chaos in a way that disorients main stream America without offering definite resolution. Kesey's project, in other words, is akin to the shattered glass shimmering in moonlight, at the end of the novel: it disrupts monumental narratives of white male supremacy without offering an alternative. While I do not intend to argue that Kesey is a vanguard of feminism and minority issues, I will show how his novel depicts the dysfunction of masculinities as constructed by ideologies of biological supremacy and satirizes Anglo-/hetero-normative narratives in a way that allows readers (especially readers invested in narratives of the marginalized) to find criticism of white male perspectives on marginalized peoples. From Kesey's chaos readers can and, I feel, should find specific feminist and minority responses to privilege even if they are not the intended results of a discourse consciously shaped by the author.

Demonizing the black orderlies with a racist tirade at the beginning of the novel demonstrates Bromden's dysfunctional engagement in Anglo-/hetero-norms. The opening lines of the novel offer a great deal of the socio-cultural context necessary for understanding Bromden's neurotic approach to gender and race: "They're out there. Black boys in white suits

up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them” (Kesey 1). “They’re out there” must be examined in terms of Bromden’s psycho-social topography. While the “they” is explained in the following line, the idea of being “out there” suggests spatial orientation, asking the question: where is Bromden? And what does it mean to be outside of this space? A reader who opens this novel with a basic background in its content might assume that Bromden is in his room and the black boys are in the hall outside of that room. This is not inaccurate, but it fails to fully acknowledge the social context of a racially mixed mental patient’s relationship with the black orderlies. In this context, it becomes key to recognize that the black boys are both outside of Bromden’s room and, as Bromden perceives it, beneath his social status. Bromden fails to recognize his relationship to the black orderlies because he identifies along Anglo-normative lines. Understanding, then, that Bromden does not relate to the orderlies—though both are socially disenfranchised by Anglo-normative social structure—we can read the beginning of the following line, “Black boys in white suits,” to possess all the meaning it insinuates to the reader—*Black Skin, White Masks* and double consciousness—without reading Bromden as recognizing the metaphor or its central importance to his narrative voice. Bromden’s use of this metaphor and his inability to recognize it or its importance is further demonstrated by his racially derogatory use of the term “boy” to describe grown black men. Being “up before” him, then, may seem relatively innocuous, but the novel later reveals this idea to carry a great deal of meaning for Bromden. The orderlies, in this case, understand their relationship to the white power structure far more clearly than Bromden, who seems to identify from an ideology of white supremacy, can. Bromden demonstrates this more clearly in the cotton mill scene as I will illustrate below. Therefore, being “up before” him signifies, to the reader, that the black subordinates in the mental hospital have come to understand the violent

implication of colonialism where Bromden has not; for Bromden, however, their early arrival to consciousness suggests deception and deceit demonstrating the danger they pose to him. Coming to understand what the orderlies already know is, then, the central journey of the novel and Bromden's most significant work. For instance, recognizing that Bromden is tall enough to eat apples off their heads and yet he subordinates to them, the orderlies demonstrate an understanding of Bromden's enslaved mentality. Immediately following this line, Bromden again imposes his racist narrative voice on the reader: "to commit sex acts in the hall." Here Bromden engages a narrative which hyper-sexualizes the black body and makes that hyper-sexualization dangerous and threatening to Anglo-normative purity. Consider further that the imagined sex acts are perpetrated publicly and therefore additionally elicit. Black sex is, however, elicit in the same way that the interracial re-production of Bromden himself is elicit: "reproductive sex between non-white people and homosexual sex [. . .] threaten colonial-imperialism and nationalist ambitions. Both are 'queer acts' in that they challenge the stated norms of collaborating colonial narratives of race, sex and gender, through which modern formations of nature have been constituted" (Gosine 150). By suggesting that he might catch the "black boys" committing sex acts, Bromden assumes the authority of white privilege and ignores or fails to acknowledge his own social disenfranchisement in an Anglo-normative system—by critiquing the orderlies' imagined sexual presence, Bromden unintentionally implicates his own mixed race heritage as disruptive to an Anglo-normative social hierarchy while simultaneously engaging in its racists, heterosexist narrative discourse: Bromden is the non-white product of a white womb. Though Bromden does not possess this authority, McMurphy does, and the assumption of that authority shapes Bromden's narrative, distorting his perspective, his narrative judgments, and, therefore, distorting the reader's perception of characters in the novel. In this narrative distortion,

Kesey's use of Bromden works to prank or mislead readers in a way that reveals the readers' willingness to be lead toward a racist and heterosexist narrative discourse. By revealing this willingness Kesey implicates the reader in a racist approach to discourse. Through a close explication of these opening lines, it becomes clear that Bromden assumes a position of hetero- and Anglo-normative authority in crafting his narrative, a narrative orientation that satirically endorses a racist and heterosexist discourse. From this, readers' can assume that the implied Kesey's interpretive and ethical judgments conflict with Bromden's narrative judgments.

Though critics too often focus their attention on Bromden's relationship with McMurphy, the novel's opening lines and the passages that follow make it clear that Bromden's interactions with the black orderlies and other marginalized people are far more important to a critical reading of the text. When the orderlies first actively engage Bromden, Bromden asks the reader to interpret them as hateful, spiteful, malicious creatures: "all three of them sulky and hating everything. [. . .] they got special sensitive equipment detects my fear and they all look up. [. . .] 'Here's the Chief. The *soo-pah* Chief, fellas. Ol' Chief Broom. Here you go, Chief Broom. . . .' Stick a mop in my hand and motion to the spot they aim for me to clean today, and I go" (Kesey 1). An Anglo-normative reading of this passage presents the orderlies as disrespectful, denigrating Bromden by first belittling his inherited title and then by bullying him into a subordinate, janitorial position. Mocking the title "chief" and its diminished importance while pressing Bromden to join them in their janitorial duties, the orderlies are not, however, malicious but attempt comradery. Teasing Bromden about his title, the orderlies can be read as making an attempt at doing the dozens⁵ (which Bromden is incapable or unprepared to engage for a number

⁵ Roger Abrahams defines the dozens in the following terms: 'One insults a member of another's family; others in the group make disapproving sounds to spur on the coming exchange. The one who has been insulted feels that he must reply with a slur on the protagonist's family clever enough to defend his honor (and that of his family). This, of course, leads the other (once again, more because of pressure from the crowd than actual insult) to make further

of reasons). And asking Bromden to join them in mopping the hall, the orderlies ask Bromden to recognize his socially disenfranchised position, to help relieve him of the colonized voice that distorts his narrative and forces him to “behave along neurotic lines” (Fanon 42). Later in the novel, the reader is told that Ratched sees Bromden’s janitorial duties as therapeutic; by recognizing the potential value of mopping in the context of Bromden’s colonized voice and his relationship to the black, male orderlies, Ratched’s assessment seems significantly more plausible and Bromden’s ethical judgment of Ratched, using the guise of therapy to emasculate, less plausible and, therefore, discordant with the implied Kesey’s ethical and interpretative judgments of both marginalized groups: women and non-whites. Consider that the act of mopping, sweeping, and cleaning in general requires the ability to sort matter, to determine the difference between waste and material of value. For instance, Mary Douglas argues that “dirt [is] matter out of place” (44). Dirt is a social construction. Learning to recognize dirt in a western, clinical setting, Bromden comes to understand the social topography of his colonized America.

As we work toward untangling Bromden’s narrative voice from an historical Kesey’s narrative voice we encounter an interesting parallel: both men struggle to identify the forces they must rebel against and both men look for answers in the mirror. There is an aspect of this narrative which entirely belongs to Chief Bromden and this part of the story can only be the product of an implied Kesey: a narrative of marginalized peoples attempting to navigate an Anglo-normative world. In this aspect of the novel the implied Kesey works well outside the experiences of the historical Kesey; Bromden’s experience of marginalization cannot reasonably be attributed to Kesey’s conscious efforts. Also, the novel inevitably expresses the historical

jibes. This proceeds until everyone is bored with the whole affair, until one hits the other (fairly rare), or until some other subject interrupts the proceedings (the usual outcome). See also Harry LeFever’s ““Playing the Dozens’: A Mechanism for Social Control,” Thurmon Garner’s “Playing the Dozens: Folklore As Strategies for Living,” and Darryl Smith’s “Handi-Cappin’ Slaves and Laughter by the Dozens: Divine Dismemberment and Disability Humor in the US.”

Kesey's desire to reflect on himself, this is an entirely separate narrative, a narrative of whiteness reflecting on its own privilege—Spivey's, Scanlon's, McMurphy's, and Harding's narrative. To completely envelope this argument, momentarily, in Bromden's narrative judgments I will explore why his friendly relationship with McMurphy and his antagonistic relationship with Nurse Ratched exposes precisely the neurosis Fanon discusses. Bromden should recognize Mac as a clear representation of the forces that disenfranchise Native Americans and he should see Nurse Ratched as an ally in his rebellion. Bromden's inability to distinguish between friend and foe tells the story of colonization and its impact on the interior of marginalized peoples. If we assume a liberal Anglo-normative approach to how Bromden *should* feel about Mac, the lumber jack, we certainly find discord between an implied Kesey's narrative judgments and Bromden's narrative judgments. Bromden *should* read Mac as the ultimate symbol of colonial power inflicting a violent deterioration of Chinook culture and his own personal identity as a mixed American. Reading McMurphy as a hero, Bromden demonstrates his willingness to accept Anglo-normative American narratives of masculinity. We can certainly find these narratives in Paul Bunyan and Pacos Bill or, in the high literary art of Kesey's world, in Ishmael or even Ahab and Starbuck—men surviving alone in nature who become American icons, worshiped as heroes for their sacrifice, individualism, and strength. Bromden's appreciation for this type of heroics only compliments the racist tirade he opens the novel with; Bromden has internalized racist narratives and his alliance with McMurphy only further demonstrates his psychopathy:

All colonized people—in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave—position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated to the cultural values of the

metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become. (Fanon 2-3)⁶

This relationship to the civilizing language and the metropolis can be seen most clearly in an examination of the hydroelectric plant and the Columbia River to which it belongs. While the construction of a hydroelectric plant⁷ shows *progress*, marking time in the American industrial period, the renaming of American geographic locale, such as the Columbia river, during the colonial period monumentalized a mythological⁸ past, allowing Anglo-Americans to feel righteous in repurposing America to fit their ideal space—an industrial space where the center of Chinook culture and economy becomes a power plant fueling the electrically lit homes and businesses lining Main street America: “[m]onumentalism supports the work of nation-building by creating, through the manipulation of a mythical past, a feeling of national belonging” (Luciano 172). In turn, the creation of a new mythological past displaces the colonized by deconstructing their preexisting sense of communal belonging, rendering Native Americans alien in their native land. Instead of defining himself by the natural surroundings that lend identity to his father, the process of assimilation itself comes to define Chief Bromden as a Columbia Indian Chief, or Chief Broom:

⁶ It is, perhaps, worth noting that while Fanon warns readers not to conflate black/white relations in a colonial space with black/white relations in America, his analysis of colonialism fits exceptionally well with the Anglo-centric construction of Native American identity.

⁷ See also Mark Auslander’s discussion of Sherman Alexie’s poem “Powow at the End of the World” and the Woody Guthrie song “Roll On Columbia, Roll On,” which, in its original version, contained explicit references to the summary execution of Native American prisoners, and even in its redacted form presents an unintentionally chilling image of colonialism: *Tom Jefferson’s vision would not let him rest, / An empire he saw in the Pacific Northwest/Sent Lewis and Clark and they did the rest*

⁸ Though I draw my assertion that American exceptionalism depends significantly on the construction of a mythological past from Dana Luciano’s work with countermonumentalism, Fanon also focuses some attention on the effects of an invented past on the psychology of the colonized: “The educated black man, slave of the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro, feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him. Or that he no longer understands his race. He is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that this wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past” (Fanon xviii).

(Papa tells me to keep still, tells me that the dog senses a bird somewhere right close. We borrowed a pointer dog from a man in The Dalles. All the village dogs are no count mongrels, Papa says, [. . .] this here dog, he got *insteek!* I don't say anything, but I already see the bird up in a scrub cedar, hunched in a gray knot of feathers. [. . .]). (6-7)

In his silence, Chief Bromden resists his father's disdain for the village dogs and Eurocentric disengagement of Chinook culture with a culturally significant practice: hunting. What Te Ah Millatoona understands as instinct is, of course, not instinct but training, and seeing it as instinct is to accept a narrative of biological white supremacy. This scene, the first of many flashbacks, demonstrates Chief Bromden's uneasy discord with his father and the crippled sense of self that discordant relationship produced. Learning to hunt with his father should be enculturating, a masculine rite of passage, but Chief Bromden's father introduces a colonial dog, colonial tools and colonial practices, acting to conflate Chinook culture with colonial culture, resulting in the emergence of a Columbia Indian tribe. The Columbia River and the dam come to shape Chief Bromden in the language and values of the colonizers. Reliving this moment as he physically resists immersion into "a room all white walls and white basins," Chief Bromden reveals his silence to be a form of resistance to assimilation: "[t]o speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (Kesey 6, Fanon 1-2). Displaced from a culture he barely knows, Chief Bromden's refusal to speak indicates a resistance to the weight of a civilization that seeks to oppress him. Though, in his silence, he refuses to take part in post-colonial American society, Chief Bromden reveals the effects of a botched assimilation as he speaks to the reader: "[t]here'd be my face in the mirror, dark and hard with big, high

cheekbones like the cheek underneath them had been hacked out with a hatchet, eyes all black and hard and mean-looking, just like Papa's eyes or the eyes of all those tough, mean looking Indians you see on TV, and I'd think, That ain't me, that ain't my face" (153). Chief Bromden's colonized mind identifies as Anglo-normative while his reality reflects a Native American identity, demonstrating a dysfunctional acculturation.

Chief Bromden retreats from the fear of present paranoid delusion into a past mired in grief. Bromden's simultaneous feelings of fear and grief exhibit one major characteristic of trauma: the conflation of past, present, and future. This conflation becomes clear in the first chapter when the horrors of an early morning shave drive Chief Bromden into a mop closet where he seeks the refuge of memory:

I hide in the mop closet and listen, my heart beating in the dark, and I try to keep from getting scared, try to get my thoughts off someplace else—try to think back and remember things about the village and the big Columbia River, think about ah one time Papa and me were hunting birds in a stand of cedar trees near the Dalles. . . . But like always when I try to place my thoughts in the past and hide there, the fear close at hand seeps in through the memory. I can feel that least black boy out there coming up the hall, smelling out for my fear.

Before Bromden can safely conceal himself in the past tense, fear interrupts memory in the form of an ellipsis and, when he returns to memory, his trauma compels Chief Bromden to tell his hunting story in the present tense. Paying close attention to the beat of his heart, the central human chronometer, Bromden wills himself into the past where he hopes to find safety. However, as the heir to a tribe largely defined by its fishing practices in the era of damming, Chief Bromden has no safe haven from the influence of the dominant culture, symbolized here

by the overwhelming whiteness of the florescent lit wash room. Though Chief Bromden suggests that present fear permeates an otherwise fond memory, trauma transcends time, remaining perpetually present and revealing the whiteness present in his early childhood. Chief Bromden's inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the origins of his trauma indicates his inability to cope with a sense of abandonment which breeds animosity toward his father. While Bromden never expresses and likely never recognizes this animosity, Tee Ah Millatoona's actions warrant it. Not only does Tee Ah Millatoona eagerly take up and pass on the name Bromden, emblematic of his son's identity crisis, he also engages in a suicidal form of alcoholism: "But he was too little anymore. And he was too drunk, too. The Combine had whipped him. It beats everybody" (Keseey 189). Because the reader might sympathize with Tee Ah Millatoona, it might be easy to miss his complacency in colonial cultural supremacy. Anticipating the reader's probable sympathy for Tee Ah Millatoona, Keseey elicits an audience response that misplaces blame for Chinook disenfranchisement on other marginalized groups: "I can see all that, and be hurt by it, the way I was hurt by seeing things in the Army, in the war. The way I was hurt by seeing what happened to Papa and the tribe" (130). It should be noted that Chief Bromden positions his first war flashback adjacent to his flashback of his father's alcoholic demise: "*Papa, I'm telling you: that cactus moon of Sid's is gonna make you old before your time*" (132). Engrossed in Chief Bromden's sentimental world, readers likely fail to recognize the impossibility of feeling one way or the other about suicide and survival and therefore eagerly accept Chief Bromden's explicit assignment of blame and presentation of all conflicts as dichotomous. In this case, the reader's propensity toward a misogynistic reading coupled with their tendency toward sympathy for Native Americans pushes the reader to blame Mary Bromden for Tee Ah Millatoona's demise rather than his suicidal indulgence of alcohol.

Readers overly engaged in the Nurse Ratched/McMurphy conflict risk a misogynistic reading by focusing on the adventure narrative of McMurphy's rebellion at the expense of Bromden's sentimental narrative. This approach to the novel allows Bromden's childhood flashbacks to become a subplot rather than the organizing principles which define Bromden's perception. This misstep exposes the reader's willingness to accept narratives which pit the marginalized against one another while absolving white men of their responsibility in the disenfranchisement of women and non-whites, further entrenching that same marginalization. In "The Vanishing American: Identity Crisis in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" Elaine Ware recognizes Chief Bromden's "identity crisis" and its central importance to the novel (95). She, however, fails to examine the role men play in constructing this crisis; instead Ware accepts Chief Bromden's premise, blaming his mother for the loss of tribal lands and subsequently Nurse Ratched for the emasculation of men on the ward. Ware asserts that Mary Bromden "coerces Bromden's father into selling the tribal lands [. . .]" and though Chief Bromden portrays his parent's relationship this way, his narrative allows other readings: "[e]verybody worked on him. [. . .] In the town they beat him up in the alleys and cut his hair short once" (208). Here Chief Bromden acknowledges the multitude of factors pushing his father to sell tribal lands and ultimately replacing Chinook culture with a Columbian Indian tribe from an Anglo-normative perspective of historical American geography. Ware's analysis presents another problem in that readers never see Mary Bromden actively diminishing Tee Ah Millatoona. Mary Bromden's great sins consist of not wanting her child to eat bugs and refusing to take her husband's name. Bromden's father ignores the first directive and embraces the flexibility offered by his wife's Anglo name: "[a]nd when we move into town, Papa says, that name makes getting that Social Security card a lot easier" (272). Though clumsily and

drunkenly, Tee Ah Millatoona clearly succumbs to colonial culture in hunting, marriage and economy, presenting Chief Bromden with his first impossible decision: who to blame?: “Their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own” (Fanon 90). While his father’s death is not overtly suicidal, the alcoholic’s demise results from a variety of mental illness and leaves surviving family members feeling conflicted between remorse and anger. Chief Bromden, sympathetically, projects this anger on his mother. Bromden’s relationship with his parents parallels or even informs his relationship with McMurphy and Nurse Ratched. The reader is, then, left equally conflicted about McMurphy’s lobotomy and subsequent death. McMurphy could have escaped but did not. This conflict is further complicated by Kesey’s use of Christ imagery to describe McMurphy, leading readers to regularly accept McMurphy’s death as a selfless sacrifice for the greater good. This particular reading can only result from readers missing the irony. The *white men* McMurphy is supposed to be sacrificing himself to save are all voluntarily committed; they have recognized their own dysfunction and sought Nurse Ratched’s professional help. Bromden’s perspective does not, however, allow a similar ambiguity about Billy Bibbitt’s death which seems to be directly blamed on Nurse Ratched. But by recognizing Tee Ah Millatoona’s role in his own demise, the reader is freed from Chief Bromden’s false parental dichotomy and, by extension, all simplistic dichotomies, as Bromden’s understanding of this relationship informs his reading of all relationships.

However, gender, for Bromden, cannot be divorced from race. As the brown product of a white womb, Bromden personifies the margins of racial division at the site of reproduction. For Bromden, struggling to navigate gender constructs directly relates to his struggles with racial

consciousness. Bromden's struggle with the intersection of gender and race becomes most clear when he recalls his time as a high school football player. Before we can adequately explore the specifics of Bromden's football flashback we must contextualize American football in the role it played for Native Americans: assimilation. As she describes a famous football match, 9 November 1912, between the Carlisle Indian School and the U.S. Military Academy, Sally Jenkins reads football as a metaphor for the Indian Wars:

To both sides, football was more than a game. It was war without death. As audience and participants alike understood it, the gridiron was a training tool to prepare the best-bred young men in the country to wield power. Harvard football coach W. Cameron Forbes, the grandson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 1900 called the sport no less than "the ultimate expression of Anglo-Saxon superiority." It was a game of clout. It was about, among other things, authority. (Jenkins 2).

Jenkins, in a dramatic and flowery tone, describes the Carlisle Indian School as a formidable force in the early days of American college football. Jenkins, among others, credits the Carlisle players with significant innovation in the game. They invented the passing game, for instance. But central to football as metaphor in *Cuckoo's Nest* is to understand what Kesey surely did: football is a game of taking ground.⁹ By the time Bromden enters high school, however, all the literal ground has been taken, the tribal lands sold, and the only ground left is socio-economic:

⁹ Though I will not fully discuss it here, it should be noted that a range of American sports play a significant role throughout the novel. Though baseball has a complicated historical legacy, linking the U.S. and Europe, Kesey uses baseball in the novel to represent McMurphy's notion of democracy. After the chronics, the voiceless men on the ward, fail to vote, Nurse Ratched denies McMurphy the opportunity to watch the world series. I read this as commentary on voicelessness and American ethnocentrism—the title, "the world series," seems to be a misnomer as only American baseball teams participate. Additionally, basketball games between the black orderlies and the more active male patients become problematic when McMurphy breaks Washington's, an orderly's, nose during a game, and the intermural games ultimately end when McMurphy flattens their only ball during one attempt, one of many, to intimidate Nurse Ratched by breaking the glass in the nurse's station.

When we flew into the town we had to go visit some local industry. Our coach was one for convincing folks that athletics was educational because of the learning afforded by travel, and every trip we took he herded the team around to creameries and beet farms and canneries before the game. In California it was the cotton mill. (Keseey 36).

The educational opportunity afforded Bromden at the cotton mill is a peek behind the veil, as Dubois would put it:

One of the girls left her machine and looked back and forth up the aisles to see if the foreman was around, then came over to where I was standing. She asked if we was going to play the high school that night and she told me she had a brother played tailback for them. We talked a piece about football and the like and I noticed how her face looked blurred, like there was a mist between me and her. It was the cotton fluff sifting from the air.

I told her about the fluff, she rolled her eyes and ducked her mouth to laugh in her fist when I told her how it was like looking at her face out on a misty morning duck-hunting. And she said, “Now what in the everlovin’ world would you want with me out alone in a duck blind?” I told her she could take care of my gun, and the girls all over the mill went to giggling in their fists. I laughed a little myself, seeing how clever I’d been. We were still talking and laughing when she grabbed both my wrists and dug in. The features of her face snapped into brilliant focus; I saw she was terrified of something. (37).

In a scene where a white cotton haze obstructs the view of “a lot of Negro girls,” where terror abruptly interrupts a jovial and flirtatious conversation, and where concern over white gaze

looms ever present, Chief Bromden is simultaneously reminded of how “[t]he ward hums” and of “the men in the tribe who’d left the village in the last days to do work on the gravel crusher for the dam” (Kesey 36). Bromden’s sexual naiveté in this scene mirrors his racial naiveté, both of which center on the application of violence. It doesn’t occur to him that a weapon could be a phallus just as it doesn’t occur to him that a penis could be a weapon or that violence inflicted on his father by men like McMurphy played a significant, if not exclusive, role in the loss of tribal lands. Instead Bromden blames his mother just as he blames Nurse Ratched: “Psychoanalysis—and this can never be stressed enough—sets out to understand a given behavior within a specific group represented by the family. And in the case of an adult’s neurosis, the analyst’s job is to find an analogy in the new psychic structure with certain infantile elements, a repetition or a copy of conflicts born within the family constellation. In every case, the family is treated as the ‘psychic object and circumstance¹⁰’” (Fanon 120). Working toward a living Bromden narrator, we can read the entire novel as an expression of his moment of consciousness: the point at which he becomes aware of his socio-cultural environment; Bromden comes to understand his marginalization and its injustice. In the last line of the first chapter—“But it’s the truth even if it didn’t happen”—is the only instance in the novel where the reader is made aware that, though telling his story in present tense, Bromden is reflecting on past events: “A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” (Fanon 2). From this realization, we can understand the novel as the perpetual unravelling of a single moment: Bromden’s coming to racial consciousness as he comes to terms with the language of the colonizers. The novel itself is Bromden’s most significant expression of language, it breaks his silence.

¹⁰ Fanon quotes Jacques Lacan.

Reading Bromden's narrative as a perpetual state of epiphany unrealized, we can understand his constant use of present tense, creating flashback or, as Toni Morrison's Sethe might put it "Rememory," as a way to express the unfixed nature of time. Bringing past, present, and an imagined future into a single moment, Kesey "develops an essentially *countermonumental* perspective" on American exceptionalism (Luciano 170). Even the reader is forced into a countermonumental reflection of the opening of the novel: "they got special sensitive equipment detects my fear and they all look up, all three at once, eyes glittering out of the black faces like the hard glitter of radio tubes out of the black of an old radio" (Kesey 1). This image of menacing black faces surveilling his fear must be contrasted to the floral print dress and "dark, pretty face" of the cotton mill worker (Kesey 37). The reality of slavery reverberating through American society must be present in the cotton mill just as the extermination of Native Americans must be present in the football team and the American Revolution must be present in the mid-twentieth Century counter-culture revolution Kesey seeks to incite.

Bromden's cotton mill flashback immediately introduces McMurphy's first group therapy session. In this session, we get our first clinical look at McMurphy, to this point in the novel we have only known McMurphy's "loud, brassy voice" and his "broad white devilish grin" (Kesey 10, 11). But, as his "Distinguished Service Cross," his "dishonorable discharge," his marital status, and eventually his arrest on charges of "Rape" are revealed, Bromden's flash back takes more significant meaning, offering context to Bromden's relationship with McMurphy (42). "Still, even though I can't see him, I know he's no ordinary Admission. I don't hear him slide scared along the wall, and when they tell him about the shower he don't just submit with a weak little yes, he tells them right back in a loud, brassy voice that he's already plenty dam

clean, thank you” (Kesey 10). Bromden creates a context for McMurphy where the adjective “devilish” comes across in a positive light. McMurphy’s “good-looking and friendly” demeanor plays on the sympathies of an Anglo and hetero-normative audience and can be seen most clearly in Dr. Spivey: “[r]ape? The doctor perks up” (Kesey 42). McMurphy’s response to Nurse Ratched’s accusation works to requalify the narrative in more attractive terms. He’s quick to emphasize that the prosecution “couldn’t make that stick,” that the “Girl wouldn’t testify,” and that “she was *plenty willin*”—all interruptions of Ratched’s review (42). Arguably, this is all unnecessary as Dr. Spivey seems to embrace the idea of rape with pornographic intrigue. Never the less, McMurphy spins his tale:

“Hoo boy, I *had* to leave. Doc, let me tell you’—he leans forward with an elbow on a knee, lowering his voice to the doctor across the room—‘that little hustler would of actually burnt me to a frazzle by the time she reached legal sixteen. She got to where she was tripping me and beating me to the floor.’” (Kesey 43)

Indicative of traditional narrative demonizing rape victims and female sexuality, McMurphy’s interaction with Dr. Spivey models his flirtation with readers. In this, *Cuckoo’s Nest* indicts a romanticized reading of McMurphy, who blames his victim with the pretense that a 15-year-old girl can overpower him. Spivey not only demonstrates a propensity to embrace McMurphy’s deceptive narrative but also to alter his own position in the hospital to accommodate misogyny on the ward:

The doctor fishes his glasses from his coat pocket by pulling on the string, works them on his nose in front of his eyes. They’re tipped a little to the right, but he leans his head to the left and brings them level. He’s smiling a little as he turns through the folder, just as tickled by this new man’s brassy way of talking right up

as the rest of us, but, just like the rest of us, he's careful not to let himself come right out and laugh. (43)

From this quote we can understand that McMurphy's role is to reveal an undercurrent of misogyny and racism influencing conversations between men about masculinity. This scene, more broadly, demonstrates how men conceal conversations about gender from women. Where Dr. Spivey is "careful not to let himself come right out and laugh," McMurphy can and does come right out and laugh about rape. And, from Spivey's response, we can understand that McMurphy's version of masculinity is, in a clinical setting, predominantly considered inappropriate. Early in the admission process, McMurphy puts this question directly to his fellow patients: "they tell me a psychopath's a guy fights too much and fucks too much, but they ain't wholly right, do you think?" (Kesey 13). Later, as his conversation with Spivey continues, McMurphy engages his own clinical record for the purpose of making just this point to Spivey in different terms:

"Where it says, 'Mr. McMurphy has evidenced *repeated*'—I just want to make sure I'm understood completely, Doc—'*repeated* outbreaks of passion that suggest the possible diagnosis of psychopath.' He told me that 'psychopath' means I fight and fuh—pardon me, ladies—means I am he put it *overzealous* in my sexual relations. Doctor, is that real serious?"

He asks it with such a little-boy look of worry and concern all over his broad, tough face that the doctor can't help bending his head to hide another little snicker in his collar, and his glasses fall from his nose dead center back in his pocket.

McMurphy's rhetoric, in this speech, reveals or at least acknowledges two differing narratives of rape and gender consciousness. By excusing himself and filtering his language, pointedly for the sake of a female presence, McMurphy argues in favor of a discourse exclusive to men. And, by playing on Spivey's discomfort with the intersection of these two conversations, McMurphy evokes Spivey's default or normative gender modelling. McMurphy's intent throughout this exchange is to discredit any feminine voice, particularly Nurse Ratched's: "I *am* crazy, Doc. I swear I am.[. . .] The nurse left this part out while she was *summarizing* my record" (Kesey 44). McMurphy's appeal to a man's man sensibility transforms when the text of his life proves a necessary point. As Nurse Ratched puts it: "[h]e is what we call a 'manipulator,' Miss Flinn, a man who will use everyone and everything to his own ends" (Kesey 25). He needs to be crazy. Just as he conflated the distinction between war hero and criminal, McMurphy must seek a way to transform criminal into well-adjusted citizen—he must first be crazy. McMurphy's attempt to revise his past, however, are thwarted by his scar tissue, tattoos, and (as the novel proceeds) fresh wounds.

In McMurphy, Chief Bromden finds the emblem of a colonial American hero. Only able to understand McMurphy in a heroic frame but desperately needing to resist the colonial power he represents, Bromden's confusion leaves him unspeakably lost in the landscape of his own mind. Though engaged in a heroic notion of McMurphy, Leslie Fiedler acknowledges that combining the American West and a mental asylum as the setting for *Cuckoo's Nest* suggests a sentimental cartography rather than a physical space. For Chief Bromden voicelessness and invisibility define this setting. Where fog acts as the central metaphor for Chief Bromden's confused sense of sentimental location, his relationship with McMurphy exemplifies the disintegration of his sense of self:

I wanted to reach over and touch the place where he was tattooed, to see if he was still alive. He's layin' awful quiet, I told myself, I ought to touch him to see if he's still alive. . . .

That's a lie. I know he's still alive. That ain't the reason I want to touch him.

I want to touch him because he's a man.

That's a lie too. There's other men around. I could touch them.

I want to touch him because I'm one of these queers!

But that's a lie too. That's one fear hiding behind another. If I was one of these queers I'd want to do other things with him. I just want to touch him because he's who he is. (Kesey 210)

Bromden's struggle to relate to McMurphy's tattoos evidences competing temporalities—the immediate now in his desire to touch and the incursion of the historical past represented by the tattoos¹¹—affecting the shape of Chief Bromden's psychological geography. These competing temporalities are represented in McMurphy's stagnant, monumental masculinity and Nurse Ratched's patient, mutable femininity which merge to form a notion of Chief Bromden's traumatic fog, creating a deceptive, confusing sentimental cartography for readers.

But because the fog and Chief Bromden's trauma predate the conflict between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, the battle of the sexes, seemingly central to *Cuckoo's Nest*, must be read as a representation of and secondary to Chief Bromden's internal conflict. Just as Bromden must piece sanity together from the temporally disjointed fragments of his life, the

¹¹ Because one of his tattoos depicts playing cards it could also be argued that this tattoo represents the anticipatory future of gambling.

reader, attempting to follow Bromden, must engage a countermonumental approach to the text: reading the introductory chapters as a reflection on the ending. This countermonumental engagement aligns Chief Bromden with the mechanics of psychoanalytic therapy and reveals the presence of resistance to colonial oppression in the stuttering temporalities of his narrative: “[a]s a newly rational and predominantly linear understanding of time came to dominate the West, the time of feeling, deliberately aligned with the authority of the spiritual and natural worlds, was embraced as a mode of compensation for, and, to some extent, of resistance to, the perceived mechanization of society” (Luciano 6). Positioning Chief Bromden’s cotton mill romance as the introduction to McMurphy’s admission, Kesey allows this scene to act as a warning against the reader’s inclination to accept the premise of McMurphy’s war on Nurse Ratched. Here, we see mechanization as imposed on women by a heterosexist, racist male-dominated society. Though Bromden paints Ratched with a mechanical brush, her temporal engagement of patients is psycho-analytic or self-reflective and her use of silence certainly aligns with Luciano’s idea of countermonumental resistance to mechanization. Though the idea of progress, inherent in Nurse Ratched’s patient, therapeutic, temporal engagement, discourages Chief Bromden in his desire to resurrect a Native American culture principally attached to a cyclical experience of time, the colonial constructs monumentalized in McMurphy’s stagnation symbolize those forces directly responsible for Chief Bromden’s sociocultural displacement.

The very existence of Bromden’s narrative endorses Ratched’s therapeutic techniques. In a hetero- and Anglo-normative system, Bromden is instructed to read narrative along binary lines and his narrative voice reveals conflict over this underlying impossibility: he cannot make sense of the nuance he faces with a binary model. The Chief of unreliable narrators attempts to present his audience with the same overly simplistic choice between two binary gender constructs.

Given these two impossible options and his relation to them, Chief Bromden should not endorse McMurphy and would, perhaps, do well to engage Nurse Ratched's therapy but, as Fanon argues, those enslaved by marginalization or by false superiority all "behave along neurotic lines" (Fanon 42). Consider that while the three principle characters (Bromden, Ratched, and McMurphy) tend toward critical categorizations which position them on opposing sides of a battle of the sexes, all three have a history of military service and only Ratched is demonized for it. Further, Bromden perceives Ratched as a force of mechanization, mechanization which is typically associated with the organizational forces positively associated with men in the American industrial age. From this broad thematic scope, we can begin to understand Bromden's demonization of Nurse Ratched more as a response to the movement of women into the industrialized workplace during World War II; a war in which both Bromden and Nurse Ratched served. Ratched's refusal to return to the domestic sphere at the close of the war constitutes a violation of monumental American gender norms and makes her, more easily, the target of Bromden's disdain for the industrialization that brought an end to his traditional tribal engagement of the Chinook landscape.

Bromden should, however, attribute this mechanization and its effects to McMurphy. With the constructs of colonial masculinity indelibly sketched on his skin and carved into his hands, McMurphy embodies a sense of Americanness that attracts Bromden. McMurphy's tattoos make present a past in which Bromden belongs as an Indian in opposition to the colonizers. For instance, tattooing is first introduced into the American popular culture by natives of the Pacific Islands, as noted among sailors in Melville's *Typee*. Unfamiliar with the origins of his cultural demise and incapable of understanding why he wants contact with those constructs, Bromden succumbs to a notion of McMurphy's masculinity as heroic. However, readers can find a

deconstruction of masculine colonial gender ideologies in McMurphy's *Moby Dick* themed boxer shorts: "[f]rom a co-ed at Oregon State, Chief, a Literary major.' He snaps the elastic with his thumb. 'She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol'" (Kesey 81). Here a traditional masculine reading of Melville can fool the informed reader. Understanding McMurphy as the archetypal man's man whose virility is unattainable to women depends on the uncritical reader's presumption of McMurphy's desirability; a notion Bromden's creative interpretation imposes. *Cuckoo's Nest*, however, allows the critical reader to recognize the reorganization of gender politics in the mid-20th century, represented by the potential for feminine readings of canonical works, as capable of deconstructing monumental readings. Offering this gift, the co-ed demonstrates an understanding of McMurphy, perceiving himself as unattainable; she mocks his underlying assumption of her desire to possess him. Where elsewhere in the novel, the penis has been understood as a weapon or a potential weapon—a masculine emblem of violence, particularly violence against women—the unnamed coed disarms McMurphy with the aid of his unwitting embrace. Additionally, this speaks to Kesey's use of satire throughout the novel, as in his use of the mental asylum to satirize the all-male discourse of colonial endeavors whether they are whaling or warring efforts.

Cuckoo's Nest further deconstructs traditional presentations of masculinity as the novel parallels the microcosm of an all-male society represented in Melville's various marine adventure narratives by whaling and slaving vessels with the all-male ward of the Oregon State mental hospital. Broadly, this demonstrates the insanity or insensibility of an exclusively male dialogue as both Caroline Kirkland, *A New Home Who Will Follow*, and Louisa May Alcott, *Moods*, demonstrate in their characters Henry Beckworth and Adam Warwick. Both men, read as analogues to McMurphy and as feminine readings of Melvillean marine adventurers, re-

contextualize the “lone male surviving in the wilderness” (Heis, Carruth 3). Kirkland’s Beckworth flees his domestic failures and joins a whaling expedition while Alcott’s Warwick abandons his domestic mission for an Arctic expedition, but both men are depicted as tragic figures whose social decentralization disrupts rather than completes their normative masculine identification.

The challenges McMurphy’s particular brand of masculinity present to his life-style and ability to act as a functional, (re)productive member of society are addressed directly by McMurphy as he sings in the washroom (Keseey 88-97). The tune is an old folk song with no known author and dozens of variants. The most popularly recorded version in the mid-20th Century is titled “The Rambler Gambler” and makes for an apt description of McMurphy. Alan Lomax first recorded this tune under that title in 1958, followed by Bob Dylan in 1960, and Joan Baez in 1963 (the year after *Cuckoo’s Nest* was published). However, the *Max Hunter Folk Song Collection* at Missouri State University reveals a number of variations with titles like “Pretty Marry” and “My Horses Ain’t Hungry.” McMurphy’s version of this folk song seems closer to “Pretty Mary” than any of the others. McMurphy’s engagement of this song demonstrates his embrace of the rambler gambler identity and reveals his displacement from the domestic sphere to be a self-inflicted wound.

Now, my horses ain’t hungry

An’ they won’t eat your hay

So, fare-thee-well darlin’

I’m going my way

So, fare-thee-well darlin’

I’m goin’ my way

The feminization of this brand of masculinity becomes apparent in the implied Kesey's interpretative judgments when Bromden recounts their returns to McMurphy's childhood home: "[t]hen—as he was talking—a set of tail-lights going past lit up McMurphy's face, and the windshield reflected an expression that was allowed only because he figured it'd be too dark for anybody in the car to see, dreadfully tired and strained and *frantic*, like there wasn't enough time left for something he had to do" (Kesey 245). The title, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is typically read in terms equating the cuckoo to crazy, but this approach ignores the imperialist nature of the cuckoo bird and its utter lack of genuine familial relations. A cuckoo is hatched in an alien nest and exits the egg programmed to mimic the calls of the siblings it will ultimately kill. From an ecological reading of the title, we can understand the rambler gambler, cuckoo approach to domesticity as crazy, as psychopathic. And the bird metaphors pop out at all angles through the text culminating in an undeniably queer metaphor. The cotton mill worker is "feather footed" and imagines herself caring for a phallic rifle in a duck blind. Bromden, in his first flash back (discussed earlier), identifies with the bird his father is hunting rather than with his father. And McMurphy dubs the group therapy sessions "peckin' part[ies]." In each of these cases, bird attributes are applied to women in both positive and negative ways, but the true queering of bird imagery occurs when McMurphy announces his intention to replace Harding as "the bull goose loony" (Kesey 19). This term surely plays on Theodore¹² Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party but McMurphy's take on it replaces moose with goose. This makes for a fun rhyme, but in the context of the novel, it also queers the idea of being the best, or the idea of exceptionalism itself.

Cuckoo's Nest does not stop with McMurphy as broken in his remove from a normative domestic role, but ensures his absolute displacement in the shape of this narrative by creating a wrinkle in time: "[t]he very first girl ever drug me to bed wore that very same dress" (Kesey

¹² A college football player and Indian fighter of some reknown.

244). The potential for that dress to still be there nearly thirty years later is so beyond believable, *Cuckoo's Nest* perhaps tests the extent to which readers will suspend disbelief in order to love and believe McMurphy, who describes a nine year old girl with the same sexually slanderous terms he uses to denigrate adults and teenagers: “[b]ut this little whore—at the most eight or nine—reached down and got her dress off the floor and said it was mine. [. . .] Jesus nine years old’, he said, reached over and pinched Candy’s nose, [. . .] she bit his hand, laughing and he studied the mark” (245). This not only demonstrates McMurphy’s domestic displacement but also the intentional construction of a relationship between McMurphy’s temporal existence and scar tissue. McMurphy further entrenches himself in this mythical notion of masculinity by continually scarring his hands as he attempts to intimidate Nurse Ratched and demolish the transparent division separating monumental American masculinity and mutable, dynamic femininity: “McMurphy sat on a stool, grimacing something awful while he got his cuts tended, winking at Scanlon and Harding over the nurse’s head” (Kesey 195). Although McMurphy clearly intends to intimidate Nurse Ratched and further assert his masculine dominance, the damage he does to himself in this endeavor clearly demonstrates the dangers of domestic displacement inherent in a lone wolf take on masculinity. Though never practical, colonialism necessitates a heroic notion of the “lone male surviving in the wilderness” (Heise, Carruth 3). In this, readers can recognize how McMurphy, “slave to his superiority, behave[s] along neurotic lines” (Fanon 42).

While both Kirkland and Alcott present a feminine reading of archetypal American masculinity, the male-dominated literary canon evidences their voicelessness as it prevails well into the 20th century: “more than a century of critical silence—during which time Kirkland’s work, like that of virtually every other antebellum American woman writer, was labeled

‘sentimental’ and consigned to the literary rubbish heap” (Zagarell xi). Unlike Kirkland, Alcott has consistently remained in print as a non-canonical author for young girls and was only recently added to the Norton, further demonstrating the shifting perspectives relating to feminine voices as they continue to evolve in American literary analysis. Chief Bromden, Nurse Ratched and the historical reality presented in Alcott and Kirkland all allow the reader to relate protest and voicelessness not exclusively as a refusal to speak but as the process of going unheard. An experience Bromden shares: “it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all” (Kesey 198).

Unfamiliar with “Fred Yoong and Maxwell Jones,” McMurphy’s lack of literary awareness allows the boxer shorts to act as a Trojan Horse: “I don’t know Helen,” McMurphy responds to Harding in a discussion of great feminine beauty (56, 69). McMurphy’s illiteracy isolates him in his monumental sense of masculinity. Most pointedly, this creates a distance between the informed reader, clearly occupied with reading the world through a literary lens, and McMurphy whose inability to recognize literary reference makes him incapable of reading the real world situations he needs to navigate. Specific to McMurphy’s situation, he would certainly be better equipped to navigate the mental institution if he had a basic background in psychoanalytic theory and better able, or perhaps more willing, to work with Nurse Ratched if he understood the potential power of women, like Helen of Troy, to command armies. Harding has this background and at the beginning of the novel Harding backs Nurse Ratched as an effective and caring psychiatric nurse. The construction of McMurphy’s masculine gender identity relies on a passive femininity, which the co-ed subverts in her reading of Melville and which Nurse Ratched disrupts by invading male dominated space. Though McMurphy doesn’t see this, Harding does: “[o]ne weapon, and with every passing year in this hip, motivationally researched

society, more and more people are discovering how to render that weapon useless and conquer those who have hitherto been the conquerors—“ (Kesey 68). Shrouding his “weapon” in a feminine reading of *Moby Dick*, the co-ed redefines McMurphy’s masculinity by reconstructing the historical context on which society monumentalizes misogyny in 20th century readings of canonical American literature. By snapping the elastic waist band of his boxer shorts, McMurphy ironically demonstrates the mutability of historical gender constructs in the minds of female readers.

While his inability to understand the joke highlights the continual invisibility of disenfranchised groups, Nurse Ratched’s control over McMurphy ensures a confrontation between patriarchal masculinity and an emerging feminine voice. Because Chief Bromden and his duplicitous narrative demonize Nurse Ratched, the critical reader must make an exceptional effort to find contradictions in Bromden’s portrayal of Ratched. We must attempt to extrapolate a more realistic Nurse Ratched from what little Bromden tells us of her and, more importantly, what he shows us of her. Chief Bromden tells his audience that Nurse Ratched began her career as an army nurse. From this readers can recognize that Nurse Ratched invades male dominated space in two distinct and interlinked ways; both the military and the medical professions are male dominated. In “Sexual Harassment as an Occupational Hazard in Nursing,” Alice J. Dan et al. assert that “Florence Nightingale tried to protect nursing students from sexual harassment by requiring students to live in dormitories with strict curfews, wear restrictive uniforms, and behave in a ladylike manner” (564). Though Nightingale specifically intends this approach to diminish sexual harassment by diminishing feminine sexuality, the concealment of her breasts can be read as Nurse Ratched’s intentional remove from a discourse she might perceive as oppressive. Nurse Ratched’s anti-feminine approach to her male patients works in both practical,

immediate terms and as a form of silent resistance. Women invading masculine space have to abandon what men might read as overtly sexual forms of femininity and adopt asexual appearances and mannerisms in order to avoid the oppressive frames created by patriarchal gender constructs. Bromden's regular demonization of Nurse Ratched complements McMurphy's harassment. Both men object to her professional approach to nursing:

[L]aughing at the black boys, frustrating the whole staff, even going so far as to step up to the Big Nurse in the hall one time and ask her, if she didn't mind tellin', just what was the actual inch-by-inch measurement on them great big ol' breasts that she did her best to conceal. [. . .] Ignoring him just like she chose to ignore the way nature had tagged her with those outsized badges of femininity. (Kesey 150-151)

Nurse Ratched's apparent use of psychiatric care to take punitive action against men on the ward troubles feminist readers and allies uncritical readers with McMurphy as it justifies his assault. This is, of course, an instance in which Bromden's demonization begins to fall apart. First, nurses cannot prescribe treatment, only the doctors can be held responsible for the administration of treatment, especially McMurphy's lobotomy, which would require a surgeon's and a doctor's approval. Harding bears most if not all the responsibility for this misconception. In response to McMurphy's comments about psychiatric treatment: [Harding:] "Frontal-lobe castration. I guess if she can't cut below the belt she'll do it above the eyes." [McMurphy:] "You mean Ratched." [Harding:] "I do indeed." [McMurphy:] "I didn't think the nurse had the say-so on this kind of thing." [Harding:] "She does indeed"" (180). This notion is largely dismissed when we see a group of doctors making decision about McMurphy's treatment in consultation with nurses.¹³

¹³ In fact, in "Sexual Harassment as an Occupational Hazard in Nursing," Dan et al. find that male doctors are often as responsible for sexual harassment perpetrated against female nurses as patients are.

Second, though some of the treatments depicted in *Cuckoo's Nest* may seem medieval, it was the accepted practice of the time and the reader has no real reason, apart from Bromden's opinion, to read treatment, whoever prescribed it, as punitive, as Harding tells McMurphy): "A number of supposed Irrecoverables were brought back into contact with shock, just as a number were helped with lobotomy and leucotomy. Shock treatment has some advantages; it's cheap, quick, entirely painless. It simply induces a seizure" (178). Third, psychotherapy, conducted by Ratched under Spivey's immediate supervision, is depicted as invasive, unnecessary, and punitive:

"Is this the usual *pro-cedure* for these Group Ther'py shindigs? Bunch of chickens at a peckin' party?" [. . . (Harding responds)] "A 'pecking party'? I fear your quaint down-home speech is wasted on me, my friend. I have not the slightest inclination what you're talking about.' 'Why then, I'll just explain it to you.'" McMurphy raises his voice; though he doesn't look at the other Acutes listening behind him, it's them he's talking to. 'The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to *peckin'* at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the *flock* gets spotted in the fracas, then it's their turn.'" (55)

The feminist reader should not be concerned with Ratched's bad acts but with the way her good, or at least reasonable, acts are portrayed. Consider, for instance, Harding's sarcastic assessment of McMurphy's "peckin' party" thesis:

"Oh yes; I forgot to add that I noticed your primitive brutality also this morning. Psychopath with definite sadistic tendencies, probably motivated by an unreasoning egomania. Yes. As you see, all these natural talents certainly qualify you as competent therapist and render you quite capable of criticizing Miss

Ratched's meeting procedure, in spite of the fact that she is a highly regarded psychiatric nurse with twenty years in the field. Yes, with your talent, my friend, you could work subconscious miracles, sooth the aching id and heal the wounded superego. You could probably bring about a cure for the whole ward, Vegetables and all, in six short months ladies and gentlemen or your money back." (57).

Though McMurphy is, on occasion, able to work the Acutes into a witch hunt, even he has his doubts about Ratched's intention: "They talk for a while about whether she's the root of all the trouble here or not, and Harding says she's the root of most of it. Most of the other guys think so too, but McMurphy isn't so sure any more. He says he thought so at one time but now he don't know. He says he don't think getting her out of the way would really make much difference" (181). Ratched becomes the target of the mentally ill men in this novel because of their predisposal to misogynistic ideologies. While these ideologies are most present on the ward after McMurphy begins a campaign of insurrection, they are most egregious when coming from the nurse on the disturbed ward, the nameless Asian nurse, because, as a woman, she affords misogyny authority: "Army nurses, trying to run an Army hospital. They are a little sick themselves. I sometimes think all single nurses should be fired after they reach thirty-five" (266). Finally, the responsible reader cannot in good conscience justify McMurphy's abhorrent sexual assault even *if* Ratched manipulates the doctors, advocating for unnecessary shock treatment.

To read Nurse Ratched as vindictive and violent not only fails to sympathize with Ratched but also fails to acknowledge how Bromden's narrative manipulations try to overshadow the extent to which she compassionately engages her patients. This is most clear when Sefelt has a seizure in the cafeteria: "[h]er face is smiling, pitying, patient, and disgusted all at once—a trained expression" (Kesey 167). Regardless of Bromden's ability to recognize the

mix of emotional conflict straining Nurse Ratched's work, he attributes this seizure to her vindictive use of EST: "Sefelt and Fredrickson never been to the Shock Shop. They're manufactured to generate their own voltage, store it in their spines and can be turned on remote from the steel door in the Nurse's Station if they get out of line. [. . .] It saves the trouble of taking them over to that room" (Kesey 169). Fredrickson shares Chief Bromden's sentiment if not his perception of causality: "shaking his fist at [Nurse Ratched]," Fredrickson protests what he perceives as her lack of compassion: "[o]h, is that it? Is that it, huh? You gonna crucify old Seef just as if he was doing it to *spite* you or something?" (Kesey 167). Fredrickson, however, apologizes for his outburst: "The nurse smiles and pats [Fredrickson's] arm and heads for the door, glares at the Acutes to shame them for gathering around watching such a thing; when she's gone, Fredrickson shivers and tries to smile. 'I don't know *what* I got mad at the old girl about—I mean, she didn't do anything to give me a reason to blow up like that, did she?'" (169). Chief Bromden never explains the complexity of Nurse Ratched to his audience because he can't possibly understand her. Assimilated into a patriarchal America, Bromden's descriptions and understanding of Nurse Ratched work to align his audience with her oppression: "her painted smile twists, stretches to an open snarl [. . .]" (5). In this Bromden fails to sympathize with the emotional strain Nurse Ratched works under. Dan et al., in "Sexual Harassment as an Occupational Hazard in Nursing," explain that nurse participants reported "feeling annoyed, upset, shocked, threatened, uncomfortable, anxious, disgusted, tense, bothered, steamed, unhappy, angry, embarrassed, isolated, resentful, intimidated, furious, frightened, mortified, guilty, worried, afraid, irritated, frustrated, nervous, enraged, and vulnerable" (Dan et al. 572). One specific nurse states "I kept my cool, [while] inside I was dying a thousand deaths" (572). Even if sympathy with Nurse Ratched cannot completely relieve readers of Bromden's

monstrous depiction of her, Dan et al. explain that “[t]hese interviews suggest a number of ways that sexual harassment could affect female nurses’ quality of patient care” (575). In reading Nurse Ratched as the villain, uncritical readers endorse McMurphy’s blame-the-victim narrative. Dan et al. goes on to say that “[s]ome coping strategies lead to distance from the patient and distraction from patient care. For example, to protect themselves, some nurses have taken on a ‘Nurse Ratchet’ [sic] role: . . . rigid, cold, and like ‘an icebox’” (575). In the context of this study, readers can attribute all of Nurse Ratched’s negative qualities to the effects of sexual harassment and the perceptions that perpetuate it.

The novel, however, denies readers access to Nurse Ratched. Though the implied Kesey denies access to the internal workings of all characters other than Chief Bromden, he more significantly limits access to Nurse Ratched than, say, McMurphy. As Leslie Horst points out, the implied Kesey allows more depth in Bromden’s depiction of McMurphy than he does any female characters. While I feel that Ratched’s silence plays thematically with ideas of voicelessness, it is at least as likely and significant that even a sympathetic implied Kesey simply lacks the experience and/or imagination to offer a more three dimensional Ratched. This certainly is a weakness in the text and a significant challenge to readers, opening the door to sexist readings of the text. Instead of complicating Bromden’s unreliability with my own unreliable assumptions about Nurse Ratched, we should read Ratched from her reflection in patients she cares for, accepting the premise set forth by the novel: a critique of male only discourse. With a more compassionate understanding of Nurse Ratched, she can emerge a strong and compassionate nurse and the reader can escape Chief Bromden’s oppressive narrative as is the case with Harding’s initial evaluation. We must keep in mind that, as Harding tells McMurphy, “there are only a few men on the ward who *are* committed. Only Scanlon and –well,

I guess some of the Chronicles. And you. Not many commitments in the whole hospital. No, not many at all” (183). The voluntary patients on the ward want Ratched’s help and if they found her therapy damaging they could simply leave: “What other reason would we have for submitting ourselves to it, my friend? The staff desires our cure as much as we do. They aren’t monsters. Miss Ratched may be a strict middle-aged lady, but she’s not some kind of giant monster of the poultry clan, bent on sadistically pecking out our eyes” (57). Notice that early in the novel, Harding and the other Acutes seem well disposed to the efficacy of talk therapy; prolonged exposure to McMurphy and his heroic bent on statutory rape changes that. While we cannot trust Bromden’s perspective, we can and should trust his report of events and dialogue: his hallucinations are obvious as any reasonable reader cannot believe that the dormitory descends into a hellish basement furnace or that Nurse Ratched fogs the ward with a WWII cloaking device. Where Harding once passionately advocated for Freudian analysis—a clear communication between implied author and implied reader—Keseey offers a reading of Ratched which empowers the men through misogyny.

Nurse Ratched demonstrates her mastery in navigating the language of male dominated space by using her silence to reshape the conversation concerning McMurphy’s diagnosis: “[j]ust sitting there, smiling up at the ceiling and not saying anything, she has taken control again and made everyone aware that she’s the force in here to be dealt with” (Keseey 145). Again, we cannot trust Bromden’s assessment of power dynamics in the hospital, and I assert that Ratched does not have anything close to the level of control Bromden suggests. However, silence as a means of denying or protesting marginalization is a literary trope and the only authentic voice Ratched could have. Consider, for instance, the silence of Babo in Melville’s “Benito Cerano.” At the end of “Benito Cerano” the entire story is retold as an official court record. During

McMurphy's intake Ratched's attempt to expose McMurphy's psychopathic tendencies toward violence, particularly sexual violence, she is regularly silenced by McMurphy's interruptions: reframing his history in a narrative form, painting himself either the hero or the victim dependent on convenience. Using silence to compel her male colleagues to be absolutely for her, Nurse Ratched reverses Fanon's understanding of language and finally manages to define McMurphy as "a man and no more, and is subject to all the fears and all the cowardice and all the timidity that any other man is subject to" (Kesey 149). Notice that her attempts to undermine McMurphy do not demonize him but make him realistic. This directly contradicts Bromden's portrayal of McMurphy as a Christ figure crucified on the EST table or a god whose booming voice proceeds him on the ward, announcing the great power to come. Reading this scene as a demonstration of Ratched's power in the hospital fails to recognize the connotation of silence and the apparent need for the male staff to approve Nurse Ratched's diagnosis. Nurse Ratched, here, emerges as a clear hero figure for Bromden even if he can only see her "[j]ust at the edge of [his] vision [. . .] that white enamel face in the Nurses' Station teetering over the desk, see it warp and flow as it tries to pull back into shape" (Kesey 141). Because, in her uniform, mannerisms and language, Nurse Ratched models a proactive use of silent resistance and her recognition of universal human frailty, she can be read as offering Chief Bromden the tools he needs to escape the binary construct, white/other, male/female, trapping him.

Nurse Ratched's success in treating Chief Bromden becomes most particularly evident immediately following his final shock treatment. Though Bromden demonizes shock treatment as harmful and lacking in therapeutic value throughout the novel, he seems cured as he emerges from his last shock therapy session. Both the metaphorical and the literal implications in this apparent cure should be considered in assessing the role of shock treatment on Bromden's

mental/colonized state. In *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America*, Dana Lucian argues that Melville constructs “Benito Cereno” as “a kind of shock treatment—an attempt to jolt the reader out of received thought patterns, uncritical habits learned from exposure to self-satisfied accounts of Americanness [. . .]” (194). Though Luciano certainly doesn’t have Kesey in mind, Kesey does have Melville in mind and the metaphor could not be more apt in describing Bromden’s narrative affect. In Leslie Fiedler’s “The Higher Sentimentality”¹⁴ he asserts that Kesey engages madness as the new West. While Terry Sherwood¹⁵ rebukes this argument, reminding his audience that McMurphy acts to cure Bromden’s mental illness, it is more likely that Nurse Ratched’s treatment, shock and psychoanalytic, work toward curing Bromden and that Kesey intends to shock his readers out of insane ideologies regularly accepted as normative. Nurse Ratched’s shock treatment, coinciding with Chief Bromden’s apparent relief, supports this notion¹⁶.

All through the novel, as we’ve seen, Bromden struggles with perceptions of time. He attributes time control to Nurse Ratched and describes this as “fake time;” Nurse Ratched’s relation to time control implies the progressivity of therapy while Chief Bromden’s resistance to Nurse Ratched’s temporalities further evidences the dislocated space-time I discuss above (Kesey 73). Chief Bromden describes the shock treatment prescribed by Nurse Ratched with an explosion of anachronistic memories jumbled incoherently together, which end with Bromden finally able to navigate the temporal landscape of his narrative:

¹⁴ From Fiedler’s *The Return of the Vanishing American*, 1968.

¹⁵ “Rebuke” may not be the right word. Sherwood rather timidly includes this critique in the end notes to his “*One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest and the Comic Strip*.”

¹⁶ Though the efficacy of shock therapy, now known as electroconvulsive therapy, is likely beyond Kesey’s purview, we should note that ECT is currently in use and its efficacy well supported by clinical study. Though, as Matherw V. Rudorfer et al. assert, its use has declined since the 1960’s due to advances in pharmacotherapy it remains a significant and effective form of therapy for certain psychological disorders, particularly of a severe nature. See Tasman, Allan, Jerald Kay, and Jeffrey A. Lieberman. *Psychiatry: Volume 2*. Chichester, West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons, 2003. Print.

I stand, stood up slowly, feeling numb between the shoulders. The white pillows on the floor of the Seclusion Room were soaked from me peeing on them while I was out. I couldn't remember all of it yet, but I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands and tried to clear my head. I worked at it. I'd never worked at coming out of it before.

I staggered toward the little round chicken-wired window in the door of the room and tapped it with my knuckles. I saw an aide coming up the hall with a tray for me and knew this time I had them beat. (Kesey 275)

Bromden has mastered his use of the past tense in storytelling and manages to take responsibility for his own bodily presence. This directly follows a refrain of the first line of the novel; “[t]hey’re out there. Black boys in white suits peeing under the door on me, come in later and accuse me of soaking all six these pillows I’m lying on!” (Kesey 275). By acknowledging his part in soiling the pillows, Chief Bromden, to an extent, breaks free of the colonial ideologies defining the black boys in exclusively biological terms and by extension, his own participation in the colonized view. His colonized perspective has, up to this point, rationalized McMurphy’s violent sexual behavior. And though Bromden is not afforded much opportunity to correct course in this regard, we should begin to question his motive for suffocating McMurphy at the end of the novel. Bromden can be read, in this act, as acting in accordance with Nurse Ratched, recognizing the danger McMurphy represents and the damage he has caused.

While uncritical readers may see a diagnosis of psychopath as an assault on a hero, McMurphy’s desire to relate sex and violence¹⁷ in a frame of masculinity suggests rape as a cultural practice and supports Nurse Ratched’s diagnosis. In fact, McMurphy seems to see rape

¹⁷ This is part of an ongoing theme, relating the penis to a weapon: Harding says it most directly but it’s also present in the cotton mill scene when the rifle becomes a euphemism and on McMurphy’s first morning on the ward as he threatens to expose himself to Nurse Ratched.

as the solution to all problems on the ward, for the Acutes and for Ratched's "icy-heart:" "if it was no more'n you say, if it was, say, just this old nurse and her sex worries, then the solution to all your problems would be to just throw her down and solve her worries, wouldn't it?" (Kesey 181). His description, here, eerily parallels his actual actions immediately following Billy Bibbit's suicide though he does not complete the act. Additionally, McMurphy's attempt to define Nurse Ratched as a "ball-cutter," through the narrator/reader/character alliance, largely succeeds. But Chief Bromden passively relates a story about Old Rawler who commits suicide by cutting off his own testicles while sitting on the toilet. Rather than understanding this as the inevitable consequence of Nurse Ratched's emasculation, I read this as an indication that monumental notions of masculinity—the penis as a weapon—must be discarded as waste. Suicide never behaves as the result of external factors but is always, by definition, self-inflicted. Even when readers understand this, the temptation to blame Nurse Ratched for Billy Bibbit's death overwhelms uncritical readers. But in this easily overlooked scene, Bromden unintentionally clears Nurse Ratched of these charges by reminding readers that these men are insane and at times suicidal. Even more startling to the critical reader, Old Rawler's approach to suicide clears Nurse Ratched of the emasculation McMurphy accuses her of. This suicide also reinforces the idea that constructions of masculinity which isolate men from the domestic also work to disrupt, rather than maintain, functional masculinity. McMurphy's inability to save Cheswick, whose ambiguous death narrative suggests suicide, creates sympathy in the mind of the uncritical reader while a similar relation to Bibbit's suicide conjures resentment toward Nurse Ratched. Though Bromden's narrative voice regularly leads critics to read Nurse Ratched as a villain,¹⁸ two particular critics take this bias a step further. Stripping Ratched of her

¹⁸ Fred Madden's 1986 article, "Sanity and Responsibility: Big Chief and Executioner," is a rare exception. And the prevalent critical approach opposes Madden's view. In 2010, Lars Bernaerts published "Interactions in *Cuckoo's*

professional title, Elena Semino refers to the nurse as “Miss Ratched” and Felix Nicolau refers to her as “Mrs. Ratched” (n. pag., 304). While these critics seem to haphazardly attach titles, they also bring an interesting narrative problem to our attention: Bromden speculates about, with the other guys, but does not know Nurse Ratched’s marital status. McMurphy, assuming she is single, joins the nurse on the disturbed ward, demonizing Ratched for her lack of appropriate feminine engagement.

Where the narrator/character/reader alliance demonizes Nurse Ratched for her prudish approach to femininity, the same narrative structure condemns Candy Star to the role of “whore.” The term “whore” persists in defining Candy, particularly in the mind of the reader as she passes from McMurphy to Billy as a sexual object. Regardless of his recognition of a three dimensional Nurse Ratched, Laszlo Géfin continues to read Candy as a “prostitute” (97). Géfin is not alone. Many critics,¹⁹ regardless of their take on other women in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, allow McMurphy to define Candy as a whore. Reading Candy as a whore presents two significant problems. First, it insists that Candy has no choice in her sexual partners but fails to acknowledge that the removal of choice in this matter makes her a victim or prostituted woman, not a whore. Whore is, in fact, a single word narrative which supports the work of pimping by concealing the subjugation of prostituted women and making an overt moral judgement exclusively aimed at women involved in the sex trade. Further diminishing this reading, Candy seems genuinely interested in Billy Bibbit: “[e]verybody was kind of surprised that Billy had volunteered, took his life jacket off right away when we found we were short, and helped the girl into it, but everybody was even

Nest: Elements of Narrative Speech-Act Analysis,” directly refuting Madden’s claims: “Ratched’s power is not illusory; it is real and concrete. It is more precise to say that the text questions the foundations or the legitimization of her power” (296).

¹⁹ Michael Meloy, “Fixing Men: Castration, Impotence, And Masculinity In Ken Kesey's One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest”; Christopher Eagle, "Organic Hesitancies: Stuttering And Sexuality In Melville, Kesey, And Mishima"; Marcia Falk in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*; and, to a lesser extent, Leslie Horst “Bitches, Twitches, and Eunuchs: Sex-Role Failure and Caricature.”

more surprised that McMurphy hadn't insisted that he be one of the heroes" (Kesey 240). In fact, Billy takes every opportunity to flirt with Candy, he offers her his coat, he opens her beer and he helps her up when she falls. But more importantly to the characterization of Candy, she seems to reciprocate his flirtatious appreciation: "The girl was sleeping against Billy's chest, and when she raised up his arm'd gone dead holding her all that way in such an awkward position and she rubbed it for him" (Kesey 242). This is a relatively sweet and traditional courtship. But Chief Bromden does not limit his treacherous narrative to a single duplicitous alliance. After asking Candy for a date, Billy allows McMurphy to control the relationship: "she said she could come to visit in two weeks if he'd tell her what time, and Billy looked at McMurphy for an answer" (Kesey 242). Billy's alliance with McMurphy further entrenches the uncritical reader in a notion of McMurphy as heroic, in this selfless act of good will toward Billy, even immediately after Chief Bromden expresses surprise over McMurphy's lack of heroism:

Everybody was kind of surprised that Billy had volunteered, took his life jacket off right away when we found we were short, and helped the girl into it, but everybody was even more surprised that McMurphy hadn't insisted that he be one of the heroes; all during the fuss he'd stood with his back against the cabin, bracing against the pitch of the boat, and watched the guys without saying a word. Just grinning and watching. (240)

Additionally, the uncritical reader must assume that women who engage in casual sex, switching sexual partners with little ceremony, must be whores. Ultimately, by allowing a Chief Bromden/McMurphy alliance to label Candy as a whore, the uncritical reader fails to acknowledge the complexity of Candy as a woman and the satirical nature of her breasts as they are exposed. Defining Candy as a sexually liberated feminine product of the 1960s reveals potent

imagery in the exposure of her breasts on the fishing boat. The appearance of her bare breasts on board the fishing boat challenges ideas of binary femininity:

She's on her feet, got the butt of the pole scissored in her crotch and both arms wrapped below the reel and the reel crank knocking against her as the line spins out: 'Oh no you don't!' She's still got on Billy's green jacket, but that reel's whipped it open and everybody on board sees the T-shirt she had on is gone—everybody gawking, trying to play his own fish, dodge mine slamming around the boat bottom, with the crank of that reel fluttering her breast at such a speed the nipple's just a red blur!

Billy jumps to help. All he can think to do is reach around from behind and help her squeeze the pole tighter in between her breasts until the reel's finally stopped by nothing more than the pressure of her flesh. By this time she's flexed so taut and her breasts look so firm I think she and Billy could both turn loose with their hands and arms and she'd *still* keep hold of that pole. (237)

Though insinuated earlier, this is the first open, visual indication that Candy and McMurphy have had sex in the boat cabin. And, in response, the Acutes behave similarly to the “bunch of loafers” on the docks who made them all feel terribly uncomfortable by paying unwanted sexual attention to Candy (231). But Bromden misses the connection; paralleling his experience in the cotton mill, Bromden lays out one sexual innuendo after the next: all unintended. Following Bromden's linguistic misstep, Billy's attempt to help reduces Candy's utility to “the pressure of her flesh.” In the context of Melville's deceptive narration in “Benito Cereno,” Candy's exposed breasts on a boat conjure the dim-witted assessment of Amasa Delano when confronted with a topless slave woman feeding her infant. Where most of the narrative at that point has been

confusing to Delano, this image most easily fits his self-satisfied ideas of his own privilege because he can read this topless slave woman as sub-human (O'Connell 189). Exposing Candy's breasts to all of the men on the boat allows the reader to most easily identify her as a whore. But this is a self-satisfied notion, positioning the self over the other and aligning the reader with McMurphy, a violent misogynist. While Patricia Reis' article "Good Breast, Bad Breast, This Is the Cuckoo's Nest: Ken Kesey and the Myth of Matriarchy" reads gender in *Cuckoo's Nest* as binary, she avoids the image of Candy's breasts, "one white and one smarting red" (Kesey 237). Though this image could beautifully reinforce Patricia Reis' thesis, it does better, perhaps, to engage her conclusion. In her thesis, Reis argues that "Kesey . . . inadvertently [taps] into the patriarchal imagination's deeply held mythos about the split mother goddess, good and terrible, and her matriarchal realm" (77). Reis concludes: "In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey, whether consciously or not, has also shown us a way out" of the binary good mother/bad mother dichotomy trapping Candy and Ratched in a misogynistic narrative frame (96). Reis attaches her exit strategy to the moon light illuminating Chief Bromden's escape at the end of the novel, asserting that the femininity implied by moonlight suggests, as it illuminates Bromden's path to freedom, a more equitable understanding of femininity in his future. This assessment fails, however, to allow any exit for the reader's understanding of Candy. If the only escape from dysfunctional gender imposed by McMurphy leads out a window, *Cuckoo's Nest* loses all its women to the good breast/bad breast dichotomy. McMurphy's imposition of the label "whore" on Candy is actually another example of his own domestic displacement. Candy's interaction with this label reveals McMurphy as equally vulnerable to binary gender constructs; where she may be understood and treated like a whore in a narrative largely shaped by McMurphy's manipulative influence, McMurphy's domestic displacement matches hers. If we understand that

dysfunctional gender constructs also trap McMurphy, we can begin to see Candy's breasts as a satirical image. By perfectly presenting the good and the bad breast attached to one woman, *Cuckoo's Nest* conflates two fallacious and mutually exclusive concepts in one place in order to undo both, allowing the emergence of a complex notion of femininity.

The final scene of *Cuckoo's Nest* confounds the reader more than any other, and every scholarly assessment has seemingly generated at least one new interpretation of Chief Bromden's escape from the asylum. But the critical reader, capable of appreciating the complexity this ambiguity allows, can read the final scene as an endorsement of a complex reading of all women in the novel: "[t]he glass splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth" (Kesey 310). While Reis and others point to the feminine representation of moonlight in this passage, the shattering glass recalling the violence of McMurphy's assault on Nurse Ratched takes precedence and works to further confound the reader. Most plausibly this indicates a final act of treachery in Chief Bromden's narrative as the uncritical reader attributes this breakout to McMurphy's original plan. But reading through the prankster narrative, a critical reader can plausibly understand this as the inevitable result of Nurse Ratched's lessons in navigating the combine or mechanization of society that works to oppress the colonized with binary constructs: "[t]he moon straining through the screen of the tub-room windows showed the hunched, heavy shape of the control panel, glinted off the chrome fixtures and glass gauges so cold I could almost hear the click of it striking" (Kesey 310). This scene does not speak to Chief Bromden's images of McMurphy but to those he attributes to Nurse Ratched in her glass box with her control panel. And just as Nurse Ratched has shown Chief Bromden the way out, critical readers find a way out of the binary gender constructs confining their reading of *Cuckoo's Nest* by first acknowledging the unspoken complexities of Nurse Ratched.

By embracing Randall Patrick McMurphy and his frontier-man's/gambler's philosophy, Chief Bromden satirizes the established American male power structure. Voiceless, condemned to a mute life in the asylum, Chief Bromden's embrace of McMurphy's world view cannot be taken seriously as an endorsement. Rather, it remains an exposure of the inherent harm in the effects of colonization to the marginalized groups at play in the asylum. Colonization conflates enculturation and acculturation for the colonized, ultimately confusing division between the self and the other allowing Chief Bromden to misidentify McMurphy as a heroic figure, Nurse Ratched as a villain and Candy as a whore. When Chief Bromden confesses "[a]nd it's the truth even if it never happened," he means the audience to understand that his experience, Bromden's truth, should not define the reader's experience of the novel (Kesey8). Though this engages a highly ambiguous narrative structure, this ambiguity makes possible more realistically complex characters whose narratives challenge overly simplistic stereotyping central to the progressive cultural movements of the generation that birthed Kesey's novel.

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