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Welcome to the first issue of the Journal of Historical Fictions for 2025! It has been great to see the positive response to the relaunch of the Journal in late 2024. We are planning to introduce a reviews section to the Journal in the December issue, so please do get in touch if you would like to review a recent publication for the Journal.

The articles in this edition reflect the diversity of historical fiction, both now and in the past. The common theme that runs through these articles is the way that historical fiction can give voice to the experiences of marginalized people across history. Each article explores this theme through a different lens; a wonderful illustration of the depth and breadth of historical fiction studies.

Veronika Vargova’s article considers the representation of neurodivergence in historical romance novels. She carefully considers the role of neurodivergence in the romance narratives contained in Jennifer Ashley’s *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and Cat Sebastian’s *The Lawrence Browne Affair*, arguing that the love of the heroines for the neurodivergent heroes allows readers to understand neurodivergence in a new way. Further, she explores the persistent link between “madness” and genius in the historical novel, and how the isolation of the protagonists is ameliorated through the cleansing power of the romance plot.

Katie Brandt takes two novels written one hundred and fifty years apart—Herman Melville’s 1855 *Benito Cereno* and Jordy Rosenberg’s 2018 *Confessions of the Fox*—to consider the role of metalepsis in the historical novel. She argues that metalepsis is used by both authors

to both signal moments of violence, and to construct a form of collective history in these novels. Further, these moments of narrative intrusion allow for the expression of experiences from those usually denied a voice in historical narratives.

Sarah Beyvers and Sarah Faber focus on the exciting field of historical video games studies, taking as their focus games set in the Victorian period. Using the games *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One* and the delightfully-named *Max Gentlemen Sexy Business!*, they argue that neo-Victorian games encourage players to engage critically and thoughtfully with stories of disadvantage and oppression in the past. They utilise the concept of queer play to explore both literal and structural queerness, and demonstrate the potential of historical games to play an important role in shaping public history.

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Volume 6, Issue 1: “Sexy business and queer detecting: Playful subversions of Victorian dynamics of oppression” by Sarah Beyvers and Sarah Faber, pp. 3-25, 2025

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Sarah Beyvers teaches British literature and culture at the University of Passau, Germany. Her research interests include neo-Victorianism, fandom, video game narratology, and queer play. She has published articles on unreliable video game narration, fanfiction and collective creatorship, contemporary film as well as queer representation. Her PhD project is concerned with the role of spatial explorability and interactivity in video games that reimagine the Victorian age. In Walk Like a Victorian: Spatial Engagement and Embodied Mobility in Neo-Victorian Video Games, Sarah Beyvers examines the neo-Victorian potential of games based on their spatiality. She argues that the player’s exploration of neo-Victorian gamespaces allows them to engage with reworkings of Victorian spaces of class and gender through embodiment and mobility in a critical as well as playful manner.

Dr Sarah Faber’s central research areas are game studies, the fantastic, and 19th-century Britain, united by an overarching interest in narrative technique and constructions of identity and belonging. She was an associate at JGU Mainz – where she wrote her doctoral thesis on multiplayer narration – and Brandenburg University of Applied Sciences. Currently, she is an independent scholar. Her most recently published work is the collection Rethinking Gothic Transgressions of Gender and Sexuality (Routledge, 2024), co-edited with Dr Kerstin-Anja Münderlein.

Abstract

Video games that depict historical facets of marginalisation in the Victorian Age provide spaces to engage with the dynamics of oppression, motivate players to use existing rules creatively, and to innovate new ways of resistance against both the rules of the game and the oppression they illustrate. Highlighting the overlap of literal and structural queerness in case studies of two neo-Victorian games, *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One* (2021) and *Max Gentlemen Sexy Business!* (2020), this article traces how games that reimagine the Victorian era encourage players to engage critically with historical social structures through playful attitudes and what Bo Ruberg calls ‘queer play’.

Keywords: queer play, critical play, counterhegemonic play, critical historiography, marginalisation, LGBTQIA+ games, Victorian video games, indie games, transgressive play, resistance gaming, Sherlock Holmes

Sexy business and queer detecting:
Playful subversions of Victorian dynamics of oppression

Sarah Beyvers, University of Passau, Germany, and Sarah Faber, independent scholar

Introduction

Victorian Britain is often retrospectively framed as a place of strict social mores and wide-ranging, multifaceted oppression. Of course, scholars like Matthew Sweet are correct in pointing out that this is an oversimplification, ascribed to the Victorians by later generations convinced of their own progressiveness and that believing the myth of the repressed Victorians uncritically does us a disservice (Sweet 2001, xv-xxiii). It is also true that the Victorian Age saw tremendous advancements which lifted some of the weight of oppression faced by a multitude of marginalised groups. Nevertheless, the fact remains that everyone except cisgender heterosexual white men who owned land on a significant scale faced a legal and social system that placed them at a significant disadvantage for attaining a life of relative security and happiness; this included women, people of colour, queer people, disabled people, workers and people living in poverty, who encountered oppression to varying degrees and depending on intersectionalities between these groups.

Video games' strategies for engagement with the darker aspects of the Victorian Age varywidely, as do their ambitions to portray historical realities. In dealing with the tension between fascination with and concern over the realities of Victorian daily life, many neo-Victorian video games promote critical play through their direct portrayal of historical injustices—whether in a Dickensian, grim, more or less realistic manner (eg, *Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter*, or *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*), via fantastic refractions of history (eg, *Dishonored*, *American McGee's Alice*), or via the more light-hearted routes of parody and satire (eg, *Fallen London*). Other games decline to engage with the problematic nuances of historical oppression on the surface, only to (possibly inadvertently) encourage players to seek out these nuances on their own, bending the rules and exploiting unregulated spaces in the game to confront, reflect on, and sometimes rewrite histories of oppression. As Mary Flanagan has outlined, video games in particular lend themselves to these kinds of subversive practice, partly because of their rule-based structure (2009, 11).

Counterhegemonic play can either be inscribed on the surface of a game, if players engagewith the restrictions of Victorian culture by playing the game as it is designed, or players may actively play against the grain of the text, exploiting that which is not regulated for the purpose of etching their own story into the Victorian gameworld. Players of neo-Victorian games therefore have every opportunity to engage critically with the systemic structures of historical oppression through queer play and playful attitudes.

This article looks at different strategies of negotiating the more uncomfortable social and economic nuances of Victorian society, both on the players' and the developers' side. Using, among others, Bo Ruberg's notion of queer play and Michael Skolnik's scale of strong and weak procedurality, we conduct case studies of two games: the satirical indie game *Max Gentlemen Sexy Business!* (2020; strong procedurality) and Frogwares' *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One* (2021; weaker procedurality). These analyses illustrate different ways in which video games communicate facets of oppression and marginalisation in the Victorian Age and imply moral positions, as well as options for engagement with the topics these games offer. In Skolnik's terms, both games have aspects of 'interventionist games, ie, games that are designed to play with the fundamental beliefs of the player to change or reinforce these beliefs' (2013, 147), although this is not necessarily their main or only agenda. We study the options players are given to interact with and potentially subvert portrayals of history and the game mechanics used to create them. We will show that, far from offering either finger-wagging, dry didactics or rose-tinted nostalgia, neo-Victorian video games engage with historical oppression in a complex and critical manner—as do the players who challenge not only the rules of the game, but who roam the unregulated fissures and margins of gameplay in order to inscribe their own, counterhegemonic stories onto it. By self-reflexively transgressing the game's rules, players are induced to think critically about the nature of rules and regulations themselves.

Playing against the grain

Games are defined by both restriction and possibility. On the one hand, video games are, as computer programmes, governed by a predetermined set of rules, which, due to their limiting, unambiguous, fixed, shared, repeatable and binding nature (Salen and Zimmerman 2010, 125), determine the actions that players are allowed to carry out in their search for narrative meaning and playful challenge. This idea resonates with Jesper Juul's assertion that video

games are ‘half-real’ in the sense that, as he describes it, to ‘play a game is […] to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world’ (2005, 1). On the other hand, interacting with/in the ‘rule-based formal system’ (2005, 6) of a video game promotes playfulness. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define play as ‘free movement within a more rigid structure’(2010, 311), arguing that it ‘emerges both *because of* and *in opposition to*’ (2010, 311; emphasis in original) these restrictions. Working with this same notion, Ian Bogost points out that play is not stifled by game rules, but that the ‘possibility space’ between the rules and restrictions of the game facilitates play in the first place (2007a, 306). According to Bogost, the procedurality of a video game, its ‘defining ability to execute a series of rules’ (Murray 2016, 73), is exactly what enables video games to persuasively negotiate questions of political, cultural and social significance. Through their medium-specific mode of procedural rhetoric, the ‘art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions’ (Bogost 2007b, xi), video games prove to be persuasive texts that make convincing arguments, not merely on a representational but also on a structural level.

Michael Skolnik builds on Bogost’s work to establish his notion of interventionist gamesexisting on a spectrum of weak to strong procedurality. He emphasises the link between rules and normativity: ‘The rules of games are subject constituting, in that they structure the payer’s expectations and set the normative range of behaviours during the act of play’ (2013, 149). He then elaborates that strongly procedural games are characterised by ‘strongly thematic content, a very rigid rule set and a limited range of potential actions and play styles’, whereas a game with weak procedurality would be the opposite (150). He connects this framework of procedurality to the idea of political intervention: drawing on Baz Kershaw’s ideas on theatre, Skolnik states that ‘the goal of intervention is “[to play] with the audience’s fundamental beliefs, and [provoke] a crisis in those beliefs *without* producing immediate rejection” [...] This crisis can change or reinforce those beliefs’ (148-9, emphasis in original). Skolnik’s intervention has a clear authorial intent (149), which is interesting here because it applies to games that spark critical engagement by design (like *Sexy Business*), but not games that spark it because players may perceive its content as problematic (like *Chapter One* or *Victoria II*). The latter, rather than being thought-provoking by merit of a targetedintervention, may inadvertently produce critical engagement in the form of counterhegemonic play.

In addition to the spaces of possibility and persuasion that video games provide *because of* their rule-based structure, the rigidity of games also allows for a variety of queer, transformative, subversive and transgressive approaches to play that arise *in spite of* the rules. Confronted with the rule-based restrictions of games, may players map out these very boundaries and explore the margins of possibility of a ludic text. As Mary Flanagan explains, the regulatedness of games is precisely that which makes them 'particularly ripe for subversive practices' (2009, 11). Flanagan introduces the concept of critical play, which entails the creation (or occupation) of play spaces and activities that symbolise central questions of the human condition (2009, 6). The criticality Flanagan envisions emerges when players question a game's content as part of a critical attitude that they apply to their performance and reading of the text when playing. Critical play is thus 'characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces' (2009, 6).

However, critical play is more than simply taking a critical stance to what one encounters in the game (ie, 'cognitive interaction' on Eric Zimmerman's scale of interactivity; 2002, 158).Critical play also entails questioning the representations and power structures in the game through an active sounding-out of the margins of the rules, which often results in utilizing the game space in permissible but unintended ways and blurring the line between explicit and meta-interaction (2002, 158). There is an undeniably enjoyable component to this subversive attitude and the resulting ways of playing critically:

> a great deal of pleasure for players can be derived from subverting set interaction norms […]. Players will consistently explore what is permissible and what pushes at that boundary between rules and expectations, and a player's own agency, within any given play environment – no matter how structured that play is […]. Player subversion – as cheating, as open play, as social critique – is an intrinsic part of play. (Flanagan 2009, 13)

Therefore, video games exist as both spaces of rule-based restriction *and* critical engagement, which influence and determine one another in reciprocal fashion.

The reach of players' subversiveness can go even further, however, if one considers Espen Aarseth's notion of transgressive play. Aarseth borrows Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied

reader, ie, the theoretical construct of an ideal reader derived from the text itself, whose characteristics are designed in a way so that the literary work can fully exercise its effect (Iser 1978, 34). He proposes an implied player who exemplifies the game designers' expectations of how players will behave (2007, 132). In this light, the implied player represents and facilitates a 'boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice' (2007, 132). The (real) player who enters a game agrees to become subject to the rules governing this space, which, from this point forward, define the player's restriction, making them 'no longer a complete, free subject with the power to decide what to do next' (2007, 130).

However, as established above, the player's existence as an entity governed by rules often drives them to rebel against this structure, to map out and transgress the very boundaries that define their interaction with/in a game. Players may exploit bugs to their advantage, destroy the supposedly indestructible, loiter in areas that are not meant for loitering, or explore spaces that are meant to be off-limits. Whenever players behave in a way that was not anticipated by the creators—when they refuse to follow in the implied player's footsteps—they play transgressively (2007, 132). Transgressive play, then, is a 'symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself' (2007, 132).Constantly feeling the presence of the implied player who obeys the game's predetermination and follows its every rule, real players may glory in small 'wondrous acts of transgression, [which] are absolutely vital because they give us hope, true or false; they remind us that it is possible to regain control, however briefly, to dominate that which dominates us so completely' (2007, 133).

Extending the notion of transgressive play, Bo Ruberg explores the many ways in which video games have engaged with queerness from the start. They examine aspects like queer embodiment and affect, the queer potential of failure as well as queer movement through time and space. They argue that all games can be played queerly, and that all games can be subject to queer interpretation, since video games and queerness 'share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play' (2019, 1). One example of this kind of resistance Ruberg provides is the practice of hiking in *Halo*, a first-person shooter series that

is best known for its player-versus-player matches. A game designer Ruberg has interviewed explained that she and her friends refuse to submit to the 'distinctly […] hyperstraight […] and hypermasculine' culture of *Halo* by going on walks through the levels of the game (208). Ruberg asserts that, in 'its peaceful re-appropriation of the game, hiking in *Halo* represents a subversive act' (2019, 208), a way of reclaiming a heteronormative space through queer play. Queer play, therefore, exists as a decidedly political practice that refuses the teleological, chrononormative, capitalistic, colonial, nationalist, cis-heteronormative and binary implications of mainstream games and gaming. Transgressive play, as Aarseth envisions it, can be used for this purpose, but its rule-breaking and rebellious stance against the implied player only then takes on a political edge if players' attitudes and the structures they defy are charged with this meaning. In the case of neo-Victorian games, this means that players consciously engage with and rebel against the rules that serve as allegories for historical structures of oppression.

In order to establish the possibilities of transgressive, critical and queer play, we must first explore what kind of behaviour a game demands from players, what actions it allows, promotes, rewards or punishes. Only then can we map out where there are fissures to delve into, gaps to be exploited, and where spaces can be reclaimed for free movement and, to use Ruberg's words, 'alternative ways of being' (2019, 1). Whenever players reject the destiny of the implied player, when their play serves a *new* purpose, or *no* purpose, they perform a counterhegemonic action through which they are able to reclaim their agency and choose their own way on a predetermined path.

Our examination of *Max Gentlemen Sexy Business!* and *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One*illustrates that ways of playing against the grain in video games tie in perfectly with neo-Victorian practice. We are highlighting general medium-specific possibilities in video games that can be used particularly productively in historical settings, because the rule-regulated nature of games comes into dialogue with historical power structures and ideologies – societal rules, if you will. The neo-Victorian mode, in addition to its immersive and nostalgic impetus(Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014, 3), thrives on both the kind of playfulness that recipients bring to the table when approaching a text, and the kind of playful engagement with the past that the text itself provides (eg, Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011, 16). A neo-Victorian text 'engag[es] the reader in a game about its historical veracity and (inter)textuality,

and invit[es] reflections on its metafictional playfulness' (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 175). Sarah Gamble points out that the Victorian Age lives on today 'as an artifact or relic' (2009, 126), similarly to how Heilmann and Llewellyn note that '"the Victorian" has become a homogenized identity – even a signifier – in contemporary culture' (2010, 2). This construct is removed from historical reality; it can 'never [be] "known" in any authentic sense. It is in the intersection of gazes featured in this encounter—the contemporary gazing at the Victorian gazing at itself—that the neo-Victorian impulse emerges' (Gamble 2009, 126-27). This reduction and abstraction of history makes it productive in new ways: 'Sometimes it is easier to examine complex ethical questions honestly and openly in an historical rather than in a contemporary setting', perceiving depictions of history 'without disengaging entirely contemporary values and attitudes' (Mandler 2002, 147). In this sense, contemporary imaginations of history make at least as much a point about the present as they do about the past.

The critical engagement with the past inherent to the neo-Victorian mode in narrow definitions (eg, Carroll 2010, 173; Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4) can be offered by neo-Victorian video games as well, since they not only engage with the nineteenth century on the levels of plot, setting and characters, but the rule-based system of a game allows for the (re-)negotiation and transgression of historical as well as ludic boundaries through transgressive, queer and subversive ways of playing. As game rules and societal rules begin to appear as metaphors and stand-ins for each other, questioning and transgressing one can spark critical reflections of the other, prompting players to reflect on historical systems of oppression.

Tax the rich: Counterhegemonic thought and play in *Max Gentlemen Sexy Business!*

Max Gentlemen Sexy Business! (2020, *Sexy Business* hereafter) is an independently published game set in Victorian London. It blends a worker placement mechanic with visual novel elements and is described by its developers as the 'premiere Victorian Business Tycoon & Dating Simulator' ('Max Gentlemen Sexy Business'), which encapsulates the absurdist humour and generally hyperbolic storytelling of the game. Its linear narrative, fixed rules, limited options for player actions and clear authorial intent makes the game strongly procedural in Skolnik's terms (2013, 151). Its frivolous tone, colourful illustrations, and explicit content may initially incline critics and players alike to dismiss it as silly, not a work of art capable of producing valuable social, political and economic criticism. *Sexy Business*,

however, is both—an absurdist, irreverent, historically inaccurate romp *and* a highly critical work of interactive art.

It is a very queer game in the literal sense, but also holds significant potential for critical and queer play in the figurative sense outlined by Bo Ruberg. The game describes itself as aiming for sex positivity (*Sexy Business*, Tutorial), is very explicitly inclusive of different sexual orientations and gender identities, and its characters are of a variety of body types and skin tones. These decisions on the part of the game designers already invite a certain critical stance in the player, by highlighting the existence and, more than that, the joy and financial success of characters we are more used to seeing either downtrodden and desperate, or omitted altogether from many portrayals of the Victorian Age. Centring on queer and BIPOC Victorians creates immediate friction with commonly held ideas about history and represents one of the ways in which *Sexy Business* sparks critical play. It invites players to wonder exactly *how* far from 'historically correct' the depictions in the game are, and thus silently encourages research. If players follow this invitation, research reveals that, although historiography may often choose to look away, queer and BIPOC people did form a significant part of Victorian society and had ways of finding community and happiness—often in the physical and figurative margins.

This invitation to approach the game's narrative content critically and mindfully is intensified by the sheer absurdity of its humour. Ridiculous scenarios and excessively overdone punchlines abound, freely offering the game's subversive interpretations of history and ridiculing capitalism, colonialism, sex negativity and heteronormativity. Combining this with—underneath all the slapstick humour—often quite vulnerable writing and characters who are, despite their quirks and excessive whimsy, mostly lovable, the game's tone walks an absurdist tightrope between farce and serious social criticism, and its fictional world becomes an intentionally grotesque blend of utopia, hyper-capitalism and alternative history. These contrasts—between utopia and hellish capitalism, lovable characters and their comically exploitative business antics—create further friction, as players struggle to reconcile the conflicting signals the game sends about morality and its obscenely rich characters.

The game's dialogues constantly poke fun at the ridiculous decadence of the business moguls who make up most of the cast. For example, a 'fairly standard' nice restaurant 'boasts chandeliers, a fountain of molten gold, and human chairs', and menu items such as an 'all-

you-can-eat caviar platter', a 'brick of opium' and a simple 'money salad' (Fanny Date 3).The game mechanics reinforce this portrayal: besides money, the other crucial resource is employees, who are recruited from an area of the map bearing a cheerful banner labelled 'Commoners'. Dialogues and meta-text (in menus and item descriptions) refer to this part of town as 'the slums', even though the neat brown houses do not look particularly run-down—in fact, unlike the pretty, brightly coloured confections of buildings that make up the rest of the map, these houses look relatively normal, but clearly, we are perceiving the city through the eyes of a caricature of an obscenely wealthy person (a warped focalisation technique thatthe game implements with some consistency). All these satirical exaggerations employ ostensibly Victorian contexts to draw attention to the problematic nature of hyper-capitalism and overconsumption today in a blunt but effective manner, showing (stereotypical understandings of) past and present concerns in dialogue. The game's satirical nature also complicates Skolnik's concept of strong-procedurality interventions (2013, 148-51): the rule design rewards rapaciously capitalist gameplay, which the narrative superficially lauds and encourages, but which clashes with its overall satirical tone and implications. The intervention is produced through discomfort and complicity, by making the player continually carry out actions which the underlying tone and message of the game condemns.

The way the game insistently creates absurd punchlines out of the amorality and the out-of-touchness of the very wealthy produces a straightforward invocation of Mary Flanagan's critical play: these jokes invite the player to 'question an aspect of [the] game's "content"'—in this case, rich people's unnecessarily and often cruelly lavish lifestyles—and to critically examine 'a play scenario's function that might otherwise be considered a given' (2009, 6)—ie, the valorisation of extreme wealth, the nuances of which naturally functioned verydifferently in Victorian times and today, but which nevertheless bears relevance to an audience primed by contemporary contexts. Particularly amidst a cost-of-living crisis and inflation, in a time when slogans like 'Eat the Rich' are trending on social media, *Sexy Business*' portrayals of obscene wealth strike a nerve.

In a similar vein, the game keeps raising problematic dynamics that flourish under deregulated capitalism. One of these is that money can buy influence and a certain immunity to legal repercussions of one's actions. For example, several characters are appalled at the idea of

paying taxes (Campaign 3), and the protagonist repeatedly says things like, ‘Who knew laws applied to rich people as well?’ (Campaign 2). The characters often point out these unfortunate capitalist dynamics with a cheerful, earnest innocence—a discord that serves to intensify the jarring effect and underlines the invitation to play critically and to re-evaluate what has been said. Often, the game directly gives the player dialogue options like ‘Nepotism is what keeps the juices of capitalism flowing’ (Bonbon Date 1) or ‘You can’t arrest me! I’m rich!’ (Campaign 2), reinforcing the disconcerting effect further. Facing dialogue options like ‘I love slumming it with poor dirty folks’ (Campaign 2) forces players to consider these statements more deeply, to bear the responsibility for their potential inclusion in the narrative, and stand the embarrassment of their utter arrogance and ignorance. When the game thus implicates the player, practically and morally, in exaggeratedly unethical and inappropriatestatements, it removes the comfortable distance from such stances audiences enjoy in non-interactive media—by making the player (character) say it, players are forced to take responsibility to a far greater degree. This discomfort, while productive by itself as an interventionist technique in Skolnik’s terms, also works to potentially push players further, alienating them to the point of rebellion against the game, which is where queer play has room to emerge.

Continuing the theme of exploiting hyper-capitalist structures, players can send characters to the pub to ‘lobby’. Time spent at the pub equals progressively lower tax rates for the week. It is possible and, in terms of game strategy, advisable to plan ahead and exploit this mechanism to pay zero taxes. Money is a key resource in the game and paying taxes brings no advantages, so, ludically, it makes no sense to waste resources on tax payments. This mechanism puts the player in the uncomfortable position of personally experiencing how powerful lobbying and deregulation can be, and carrying full responsibility for the choice to exploit that (or not). The game provides an interesting ambivalence here: on the one hand, discussing these present concerns with economic politics under the guise of supposed Victorian problems provides distance that makes the issue arguably more palatable, easier to discuss and reconsider, while, on the other hand, the immediacy of an interactive medium removes some of that comfortable distance again. The result is a complex and unusualapplication of principles of depiction and alienation.

In the end, the player must engage in a balancing act of pragmatism and ethics. In this environment, choosing *not* to lobby and to actually pay taxes becomes counterhegemonic

play, a political act—the player accepts a voluntary, additional challenge, possible but not exactly desirable within the framework of the rules, in order to reject the option to exploit unfair advantages and evade their social and financial responsibility. The game acknowledges the player's choice in this matter, but its response to rogue tax paying is ambiguous: on the one hand, refusing to engage with corruption and unfair tax benefits clearly aligns with the game's overall message, and there is an achievement for paying £420,000 in taxes. However, the game also immediately proceeds to test the player's commitment by effectively punishing the good deed and increasing the standard tax percentage. The achievement is called 'Higher Taxes,' implying that, clearly, the player has taken up the call to tax wealth more strictly, so that is what they get. The process reverses the familiar mechanism of karma systems, by which many video games reward virtue and punish vice. The reversal draws attention to *Sexy Business*' warped surface-level ethos of profit as morally good (from the rich characters' point of view); the dissonance with a familiar game element stresses the uncomfortable nature of that ethos. Like going on peaceful walks in *Halo*, abandoning profit maximisation in a business simulation 'take[s] on a notably political valence' (Ruberg 2019, 208) as the player rejects the game world's declared goals and implied values.

Players who want to consistently enact their opposition to the extremely unequal distribution of wealth may even choose to rid the (game) world of at least one unconscionably rich person, and decide to intentionally lose the game by bankrupting the protagonist. This most extreme act of transgressive and counterhegemonic play is short-lived, however: a new campaign can always be started, and an angel investor will always show up to help the same protagonist recover their lost business empire. The game's resistance to counterhegemonic play in this matter is of layered significance. It is not only pragmatic to allow players to try again after Game Over, but it also makes a statement about our economic system that is consistent with the overall stance of the game: for the extremely wealthy, it is almost impossible to fail. Even comical levels of wilful incompetence or a determination to lose everything are not enough to break the system—a message driven home by the player's inability to truly 'regain control'through transgressive play (Aarseth 2007, 133). Thwarting this final attempt at transgressive play is, perhaps, the game's most effective provocation, as it renders the complete supremacy of the economic system over the individual palpable.

Overall, *Max Gentlemen Sexy Business!* constantly challenges its players to re-evaluate what is being said and shown. It portrays several marginalised groups in overtly ahistorical fashion, creating an almost utopian version of the past, a Victorian Age that is incongruous and thought-provoking in its peaceful acceptance of all identities and all bodies. The gameprovides some superficially blunt but very consistently integrated social criticism by cleverly manoeuvring the player into positions of discomfort, where they have to engage with historical and present facets of wealth inequality and misuse of financial power. Players may choose 'symbolic gesture[s] of rebellion' (Aarseth 132) such as paying high taxes or even squandering the protagonist's riches, performing a moral victory even as they lose the game. Although it gives the player little leeway for alternative playstyles, the game's satirical tonemeans it does not push the player to act in direct agreement with a straight-faced message or authorial intent, but rather nudges the player into a position of discomfort, where their capitalist actions become a matter of ridicule, implying questions about their validity.

Dressing up heteronormativity? *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One* in between stereotypes, critical engagement and queer play

Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One (*Chapter One* hereafter) is the ninth instalment of Frogwares' adventure game series on the famous detective. It serves as a prequel to the rest of the franchise and features a twenty-one-year-old Sherlock who returns to his childhood home, the fictional Mediterranean island of Cordona, to visit his mother's grave and, ultimately, find out how she died. For the first time in the series, players get to explore an open world with optional activities and side missions instead of following the strictly linear path of a string of cases that must be investigated within the confines of a few restricted gamespaces. Therefore, *Chapter One* stands out because of the agency and mobility with which it endows players. This emphasis on agency is of particular importance due to the game's positioning within Victorian structures of exploitation and oppression, as the game foregrounds questions of rule-based restrictions and the possibilities of resistance against them as a way of practicing neo-Victorian engagement interactively. The following investigates the ways in which *Chapter One* portrays the Victorian Age in a rather problematic fashion on the one hand, while, on the

other, also allowing for subversive practices through which players can challenge these notions.

At the very beginning of the game, *Chapter One* positions itself within discourses of social justice through the disclaimer that the game

> depicts racial, ethnic, and sexual prejudices that have sadly been commonplace in society. This includes mistreatment of minorities and negative depictions of some cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and they are wrong now, but rather than pretend they never existed, they have been included to acknowledge the harsh reality of life for many in that era.(Frogwares 2020)

None of the previous games contain such an explanatory note, and *Chapter One* is the first instalment of the series to show awareness of the problematic potential of copying the Victorian Age uncritically. As becomes clear throughout the game, *Chapter One* tries to comment on the nineteenth century and its injustices but often fails to deliver a truly critical message.

The island of Cordona, the game's setting, is colonised by the British, and its exploitation by the Empire is rendered visible on different occasions. For instance, posters that players encounter frequently show a sailor posing in front of the White Ensign of the Royal Navy with the slogan: 'WE ARE HERE – FOR YOUR SAKE!' (Frogwares 2020). This poster is often accompanied by another depicting a battle at sea, which says, 'THE EMPIRE STRIKES HARD' (Frogwares 2020). The placement of reminders of the Empire's strength and supposed benevolence and protection right next to one another will be interpreted by many twenty-first-century players as satirically exaggerated, as the two posters are obviously contradictory. In addition to the game's disclaimer at the beginning, this self-aware depiction of colonialist propaganda could be interpreted as the kind of intervention with clear authorial intent described by Skolnik. *Chapter One*, on the one hand, proves an interventionist game because it engages with players' expectations of depictions of colonialism in a game which reworks the Victorian era.

On the other hand, the game's weak procedurality prompts players to seek their own path of critical engagement with the nineteenth century when *Chapter One* regularly flaunts its lack of criticality. The promotional description of the game on *Steam*, for instance, describes Cordona

as a place where 'political corruption and crime run rampant while the islanders cling to tradition and eschew outsiders, making [Sherlock's] […] job even more difficult'('Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One'). The oppressed inhabitants of Cordona are framed as a nuisance that the main character has to deal with, while Sherlock's agency and privilege as a white, middle-class man is ubiquitous. As the description on *Steam* goes on to explain, 'the proud islanders have their own ideas about truth and justice. It's up to you to decide whether uncovering the truth will do more harm than good – and how that will shape the man you'll become'. The game's often patronising stance towards the locals is juxtaposed with Sherlock's final and unwavering authority over the lives of colonial subjects. While this theoretically could spark discomfort, and therefore cause the attitude players need for critical play in Flanagan's definition, the positioning of Sherlock as an ultimately likeable, morally good character and the game's main goal of swooping in and conditioning the island—an explicitly colonialist stance—rob its critical potential of much of its rigor.

Players regularly encounter instances of colonialist, capitalist and gendered exploitation, which is commonplace on Cordona, but they cannot do anything about it most of the time.Sherlock Holmes, in his 'youthful arrogance and naiveté' ('Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One'), does not concern himself with the struggles of those who do not possess his privilege, often expressing his view of marginalised people by, for example, complaining about the 'feebleness of women' or refusing to return an object to its owner, rudely asking: 'What are the staff here for then?' (Frogwares 2020). Sherlock constantly performs gender- and class-related spatial mobility, since he can move unhindered through the city, entering working- and upper-class spaces alike. As a loading screen reminds players, 'Cordona is a classist society – its citizens won't acknowledge you if you don't look like their equal. Fit in with a disguise'(Frogwares 2020). Whereas Sherlock can move freely, the marginalised and othered among the inhabitants of Cordona are restricted by mechanisms of spatial exclusion. *Chapter One*therefore often depicts Victorian structures of oppression in a way that does not acknowledge their problematic nature. Rather than reworking marginalisation in a critical manner, it is often shown as an inevitable part of the Victorian world, and players are regularly asked to participate in the disempowerment of those in colonial spaces. All decisions ultimately converge on the main character, and Sherlock is free to disregard the express

wishes of locals and decide for himself when to suppress or publish intensely private information relating to cases.

Within this constellation of uncritical portrayals of colonialism, *Chapter One* attempts to negotiate queer identities. However, parallel to the game's usage of notions of empire and colony, its work with queerness is unlikely to satisfy players who want to see the game breaking with Victorian heteronormativity. As this game takes place before Sherlock Holmes meets John Watson, Sherlock is accompanied by his imaginary friend Jon, who has been with him since childhood and comments on the detective's activities. At the beginning of the game, it is not clear that Jon does not exist. When Sherlock arrives on Cordona, the receptionist of the hotel he plans to stay in asks whether Sherlock needs a second key, since the reservation was made for two people. Sherlock glances at Jon and replies, 'No, I think we'll stick together' (Frogwares 2020). This initial portrayal of Jon implies a queer reading of his relationship with Sherlock from the beginning. However, this never goes any further, which means that *Chapter One* engages in the practice of queerbaiting that many other contemporary adaptations of Doyle's stories have been accused of (eg, Mueller 2009; Ng2017).

In another mission, 'A Gilded Cage', Sherlock encounters professional sailor Paul Perks at Salacia Yacht Club, whose slogan is 'Real Sport for Real Men!' (Frogwares 2020) and which does not allow women to join. While analysing Paul's appearance, Sherlock deduces that he is 'female' because of his broad hips and lack of an Adam's apple, continuously calling him 'a woman' in his notes and during his conversation with Paul. Sherlock threatens to expose Paul to the Yacht Club and disrespectfully questions his identity by calling it his 'feminine secret'(Frogwares 2020). When Sherlock calls Paul 'Ms. Perks', Paul strongly objects, saying, 'Don't call me that!' (Frogwares 2020), which has the potential to make players feel uncomfortable with Sherlock's ignorant behaviour. In this case as many others, the framing of this conversation and other characters' reactions (or lack thereof) show little criticality towards Sherlock assuming and using his position of multilayered privilege; this may be 'historically accurate', but the manner of presentation aligns the game's implied ethos very closely with those supposed positions of historical oppressiveness, which are taken for granted and implicitly reaffirmed rather than questioned by the game—missing the potential for critical dialogue between past and present outlined by Mandler (2002, 147). As this brief

example illustrates, *Chapter One* attempts to cover the topic of queerness within its reproduction of Victorian society, but instead clumsily perpetuates stereotypes and fails to negotiate queer identity in a meaningful way; it does not go beyond depicting contemporary ideas of historical wrongs without offering further means of engagement with them.

The uncritical ways in which *Chapter One* depicts marginalised communities, in turn, introduce many possibilities of rejecting these implications, of experimenting with different ways of being in this gameworld and of straying from predetermined paths—in short, of playing queerly. The characters of *Chapter One* are much less diverse than those of *Sexy Business*, and the game's conventional structure leaves no room for queer readings on the surface. Since *Chapter One* does not do any of the heavy lifting involved in critical engagement with the Victorians, this leaves players with two options: they can either be perfectly satisfied with the game's overall lack of criticality, or they can channel their disappointment with the ways in which *Chapter One* deals with the injustices of the nineteenth century into the subversive attitude necessary for transgressive and queer ways of playing. The following illustrates two examples of the latter approach, which enable players to refuse the heteronormativity displayed by the game and therefore engage with nineteenth-century power structures in a neo-Victorian—rebellious, verging on revisionist—fashion themselves.

First, players can celebrate queer movement and ambiguity by rejecting the teleology of the detective story, which centres upon a puzzle or mystery that the detective must uncover or solve (Nusser 2009, 3). The 'distinctive "tripartite" structure' of the genre, which dictates the phases of 'discovery, suspicion, and investigation/solution' (Nicol 2009, 171), means that 'detective fiction favors and supports linearity through the narration of a story that requires a teleological interpretation' (Sikik 2014, 6878). *Chapter One* celebrates this orderliness and structural rigidity despite its open world and (superficial) freedom of exploration. Even though there are different outcomes to most cases, there is only ever one correct interpretation of the facts, one accurate web of connections in Sherlock's mind palace. Hence, the only latitude granted by the game applies to reaching the wrong conclusion or making a moral choice at the end, like letting the perpetrator go instead of calling the authorities. If one conforms to the game's demands, all efforts undertaken by Sherlock, and the player, are geared towards progression and resolution. All activities in the large open world of *Chapter One* serve the purpose of solving a case (or picking up a new one), which means that, despite the game's

open-world structure, free exploration of the city is discouraged, whereas the purposeful movement through the city in order to solve a case is promoted by the design of the gameworld and its narrative structure.

Within the context of this promotion of linearity and purposeful movement, rejecting the teleological organisation of *Chapter One* and moving without a purpose becomes a subversive act that challenges chrononormativity, 'the set of expectations that dictate how individual lives and larger historical narratives should progress' (Ruberg 2019, 185). As Ruberg explains, drawing on Elizabeth Freeman, Heather Love and Jack Halberstam, queer temporality and spatiality 'represent […] a resistance to the standard logics that dictate what one should do, where, when, and at what speed' (2019, 185). The deliberate performance of alternative modes of movement in games, like speedrunning or slow strolling, thus turns into a way of challenging 'standards of what it means to play in ways that are normal, valuable, or right' which also negotiates the queer potential of the 'desire to rush, [or] the desire to linger'(2019, 186). By exploring Cordona without a (given) purpose and lingering in spaces that are not imbued with any function in the goal-oriented structure of the game, by refusing to solve any cases as demanded by the game and by intentionally trying to circumvent rules and spatial restrictions, in Aarseth's sense of transgressive play, players of *Chapter One* can defy and question the ways in which the game reworks nineteenth-century discourses and identities. By revelling in a sense of ambiguity and incompleteness rather than chasing a single solution and a 'proper' reading of the world, players can refuse the implications of chrononormativity and perform a kind of mobility in the gameworld of *Chapter One* that supports individual identity construction and challenges the conformity that the game itself reinforces.

The second example of queer play as neo-Victorian engagement encompasses the act of queering the main character himself. As has been explained above, *Chapter One*'s Sherlock Holmes serves as the embodiment of white masculinity whose agency is underlined at every turn. However, players who take a closer look at the disguises that can be bought and equipped will find that *Chapter One* includes a way of disrupting Sherlock's problematic version of masculinity: next to fake bruises and beards, hats and glasses, *Chapter One* also allows players to apply a full face of make-up, which, according to the description in the disguise menu, 'brings out your best features' (Frogwares 2020). Additionally, there are three

dresses that Sherlock can wear, namely the 'Female Ottoman Outfit' (description: 'Shawl dressed up and nowhere to go.'), the 'Red Queen Dress' ('Sumptuous and sanguine.') and the 'Mother Outfit' ('A boy's best friend is his mother.') (Frogwares 2020). Players can then consciously subvert this by, for instance, entering the Yacht Club, which does not allow women, dressed as the Red Queen. By doing so, players might bring an attitude of defiance to the table, daring the game to try and thwart their efforts of playing queerly, to stop them from subverting the game's design.

However, wearing a dress and make-up remains unremarked upon in most situations—NPCs only sometimes utter sentences like, 'Always glad to help a lady' (Frogwares 2020) when asked for information on a piece of evidence. Even though these non-normative ways of dressing-up are included in the game itself, and are therefore also intended to be used, they are contextualised as disguises employed for detective work rather than serious alternative clothing choices, which tacitly divorces this pragmatic crossdressing from queer readings. Furthermore, in *Chapter One*, Sherlock's suit is regularly re-equipped, for example during the police training scene, which implies that there is a 'right' way to dress in certain situations and a 'wrong' one, and that the game respects some of the player's aesthetic choices (cut scenes show a beard if players chose to grow one) but not others (dresses and other 'disguises' are strictly for practical, not aesthetic use and are unequipped after they have outlived their usefulness). This type of resistance the game and its structures show to such behaviours highlight and define queer play; it is clearly unintended, unforeseen and possible but not desirable under the rules. In a dress, you are playing against the grain, and the grain makes itself known. The game's superficial acceptance of queer play with its main character, in addition to the inclusion of nonnormative clothing choices in the first place, creates a sense of cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, *Chapter One* allows subversions of its depiction of Sherlock Holmes, which, on the other hand, clashes with the game's problematic handling of queerness as a topic itself. This contradiction might encourage more players to play queerly.

Players who are dissatisfied with the ways in which *Chapter One* works with queerness might be inspired to reject Sherlock's depiction and instead decide to play with the queer possibilities of wearing make-up and dresses as a character whose behaviour hinges on his classed and gendered agency. However, going beyond the interventionist potential described by Skolnik, this rejection of the game's message may prompt players to find new ways of playing with the

Victorian era. Due to its weak procedurality, the game offers the possibility of deliberately performing the queer mobilities described above as Sherlock Holmes in a dress, thus breaking both with the goal-orientedness and the cis-heteronormativity of the game. However, the actualisation of this queer potential depends on the player's reading of it as subversive and intentional queer performance.

Conclusion

The interactive and rule-based nature of video games make them a perfect fit for the negotiation of Victorian structures of oppression. As players learn to work with and against the fundamental rules of a game, they are not only given the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which the contexts of the nineteenth century presuppose the restrictions they are confronted with—as a form of neo-Victorian engagement, they might also seize upon any chance to subvert, challenge, defy, resist and transgress these rules and restrictions. As ourcritical reading of two examples shows, neo-Victorian video games and their players can engage with the period in many different ways. *Sexy Business* challenges players through the employment of absurd humour within the serious topics of hypercapitalism and overconsumption, playing with the desire to break the system and living up to the queer *content* of the game through queer *gameplay*. *Chapter One*, in contrast, tries to deal with the inequalities of the nineteenth century in a serious and meaningful way, but arguably fails to do so. Although it regularly asks players to take part in the marginalisation and exploitation of colonised people and celebrates the same practices of queerbaiting other adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes stories are built on, *Chapter One* can nonetheless be utilised for queer play.This form of neo-Victorian resistance is provoked and rendered possible by the restrictions the game imposes on the player.

Practices of breaking the rules, rebelling against the implied player, and playing subversively and queerly offer meaningful ways for players to engage with and express resistance against historical structures of oppression. Ultimately, games set in the Victorian Age that tell stories of marginalisation, subjection and exploitation—whether they are designed to offer critical engagement or not—lend themselves perfectly to reflecting on systemic oppression.

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“Reader, the violence they did”: Employing Metalepsis Towards a Collective Narrative in the Historical Novel

Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive.
--Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”

It may be observed that, in the description of the principal outrages, reference has been had to the best authorities of that time, such as they are; and that the account given in this Tale, of all of the main features of the Riots, is substantially correct.
--Charles Dickens, preface to *Barnaby Rudge; A Tale of the Riots of ‘Eighty*

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INTRODUCTION

By its own conventions, the historical novel as genre has been saddled with a somewhat Herculean task: it is expected to portray the spirit of the epoch which it addresses and represent the social, cultural, and political conditions of its age all while doing so with the strictest attention to accurate and realistic detail in illustrating the fictional (or fictionalized) characters, events, and objects within. Although a great deal has been written about the historical novel—its formal qualities, its attempts at realism, its bourgeois origins and constraints, etc.—few scholars have identified the rhetorical device of metalepsis, as described by Gerard Genette, as a formal and critical method of disrupting the violence of traditional narratology in the historical novel. In this paper, I argue that in two historical novels written in and portraying vastly different historical periods, Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) and Jordy Rosenberg’s *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), the authors employ metalepsis, or narrative intrusion in some form, to two distinct ends: first, to alert the reader to moments of violence—cultural, imperial, racial, or otherwise—and second, to create a dialectic space which allows for the construction of a more collective history in their texts. Working through the narratology theory of Genette, with attention to Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* and Hayden White’s *The Content of the Form,* and in some tension with Georg Lukács’s and Walter Benjamin’s respective theories of the novel, I argue

that the usage of metalepsis in both Melville and Rosenberg's historical novels creates ruptures in the stories through which the authors can draw attention to spaces in traditional narrative forms where certain populations (enslaved people, sex workers, and trans folx, just to name a non-exhaustive few in whom Melville and Rosenberg are invested) have been denied a voice and, in doing so, approach a fictionalization of historical personages and events more inclusive of a range of experiences across non-linear time. Through metalepsis, these authors offer their readers an opportunity to divest themselves from the narrative mechanisms of the historical novel that have traditionally prevented marginalized voices from participating in and solidifying their stories whether in fiction or in archival history. By doing so, they create spaces for these histories to exist and persist through the potential for dialectic interpretative exchange that their metaleptic narrators invite.

While at first glance, it may seem that these two novels have little in common and that it is arbitrary to analyze them in tandem, I have placed them together for several reasons. To start, and maybe most obvious, is that they are two novels of the same sub-genre: historical fiction. But beyond that similarity, and despite the vast gap in history between their publications and difference in their subject matter, both novels operate through an exploration of power and revolt, in the respective slave rebellion of *Benito Cereno* and the lawless antics of Jack Sheppard in response to the economic, sexual, gendered, and racial discrimination and oppression of eighteenth-century London in *Confessions of the Fox.* What I am not doing is making a historical claim about empire and its transits; rather, I am identifying a particular formal technique in both authors' usage of metalepsis and paratexts to show an intervention in the problem of historical violence. Why these two novels work so well together is because of their specific reliance on metaleptic moments as an attempt to disable the violent silencing of others and in their disruption of linear time to further allow for a range of historically occluded voices. This appropriation of paratextual techniques into the historical novel as genre, then, works to divest the form from its bourgeois and imperial origins.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS

Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin have both addressed the limitations of the historical novel in portraying a collective history; specifically, they criticize its inability to separate itself from its singular author and bourgeoise origins and, as a result, foster narratives inclusive of a wider range of experiences across classes. While it is not at all my aim to dismiss or

contest Lukàcs's or Benjamin's criticism of the historical novel, my analysis of the novels on which this paper is focused functions through its tension with these two theorists' fundamental claims. In *The Historical Novel* (1955), writing about the nineteenth-century historical novel, specifically Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* (1818), Lukács claims that "the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many-sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and the sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed" (39). Lukács names this quality in Scott's writing as a hallmark of the genre, a convention which emerged from "the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century" (31). While Lukács does not say which great novels to which he refers in this section[1], one example might be Samuel Richardson's epistolary tragic novel *Clarissa: The History of a Young Lady* (1748), in which Richardson explores both the hour-to-hour external happenings as well as the intense internal psychological fluctuations of his characters through the multitudinous letters they exchange with each other. As such, for Lukács, the historical novel as entity must pay special attention to realism and individuality while also "deriv[ing]…the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of the age" (19). However, Lukàcs notes that even if the historical novel is able to accomplish this feat of historically-grounded realism, it faces two distinct limitations towards "mak[ing] history a *mass experience*" (23): first, in its roots in the preservation of a record of bourgeois life and second, in the tendency of the author to display too much of his or her own modern senses and prejudices in the text. The eighteenth-century social novels from which *Waverly* and its successors inherited some of their most distinguishable traits were borne of writers that Lukács characterizes as "historian[s] of bourgeoise society" (20). As such, this historical novel, beholden to this disadvantage, can never fully represent the true circumstances of history amongst and between the classes because they are products *of* the bourgeois *about* the bourgeois made possible *by* the rise of bourgeois society. What Lukács identifies in the historical novel after 1848 is that the author's personal, subjective experiences, biases, and ideologies intrude upon the historical integrity of the text, and this definitively cheapens its effectiveness as a work aimed at an accurate representation of history. Ultimately, while Lukács acknowledges some formal accomplishments of the historical novel through his analysis of *Waverly*, he argues that the genre remains susceptible to the personal ideologies of its author, particularly after 1848, and thus closes off possibilities for including a wider range of collective experience.

Walter Benjamin, in his earlier essay “The Storyteller,” (1936) takes up many of the same issues that Lukács later identified in *The Historical Novel*. For Benjamin, we share collective experience of history through storytelling, but the advent of the novel diametrically opposes this. He argues, “The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times” (87). Whereas Lukács specifically addresses the genealogy, structure, and limitations of the historical novel, Benjamin focuses his criticism more generally on the novel and its destruction of the art of collective storytelling. However, like Lukács, Benjamin is troubled by the contained subjectivity of the novel:

> What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those that are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. (87)

Benjamin insists that that written, printed nature of novels (a formal element of the novel in itself indebted to the whims of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism) automatically negates its potential for collective experience because it is finite and closed off, both by its fixed nature on the page as well as by the nature of the novelist herself. Because there is no dialectic relationship between speaker and listener where there is a possibility for exchange, and no possibility for a retelling as in the passing along of a fable or myth, the experience belongs singularly to the author and her characters. However, many historical novels style themselves to some extent as “tales” rather than “histories” or “novels.” Notable examples are two I have already mentioned, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge; A Tale of the Riots of ‘Eighty*, as well as *Benito Cereno*, which was originally published in *Putnam’s Monthly* but then later revised for *The Piazza Tales.*[2] By styling them as tales, their authors bestowed upon their texts some of the rhetorical power of the oral tradition with which Benjamin is so invested. This explains why many of these novels assume the almost-fairy-tale-like exposition of “Once Upon A Time” in their opening lines: Dickens adapts this most obviously with “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” keeping his setting temporally general, but Melville revises this convention by beginning *Benito Cereno,* “In the

year 1799”—which, of course, is not the year when the historical event of the Haitian slave revolt occurred.[3] That event took place in 1791. As such, *Benito Cereno* deftly hovers in the liminal zones between story and novel, time immemorial and historical time, factual events and fictional storytelling, singular events and collective experience. Rosenberg, too, repurposes the convention of “Once Upon a Time” at the beginning of his “Editor’s Forward” which begins, “Some time ago—never mind how long precisely—I slipped off the map of the world” (ix). Although Rosenberg’s text is titled *Confessions of the Fox: A Novel*, he nevertheless employs the language of the tale (in this instance, both temporally and spatially vague) to set his narrative, refashioning the conventions of oral traditional storytelling to the historical novel. As such, both *Benito Cereno* and *Confessions of the Fox* offer versions of the historical novel which do not suffer from but instead enlist authorial subjectivity to mitigate their bourgeois origins and pressure existing Marxist criticisms of the genre that claim they cannot construct a truly collective history by inviting the reader to participate in the telling of the tale, and in the collective experience of creating narrative history.

Gayatri Spivak and Hayden White’s respective criticism on the archive, an archive which both *Benito Cereno* and *Confessions of the Fox* mobilize as an important plot point as well as a mode of narration, further complicates constructing and preserving a collective history, particularly when applied to the genre of historical novel and its conventions. In *The Content of the Form*, White makes the important claim that what properly gets called “history,” including so-called non-narrative forms of historiography like archive and chronicle (as opposed to texts written *about* the events of history, like text books or non-fiction works), is in fact a form of historical representation rather than a token of object historical reality because it represents a discourse about what was worth preserving and not empirical evidence of things as they were. For White, annals, chronicle, and even archival documents are merely “particular products of possible conceptions of historical reality” (6), his language indicating that the description of events and personages recorded is not to be taken objectively as fact but instead was in some way constructed by the subjective thoughts of its author. Spivak revisits White’s argument in her chapter “History” from *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* In it, she claims:

> To me, literature and the archives seem complicit in that they are both a crosshatching of condensations, a traffic in telescoped symbols, that can only too easily be read as each other’s repetition-with-a-displacement. The authority of the

> author is matched by the control of the archon, the official custodian of truth. It is archivization that interests us, naturally. (205)

To a great extent, it is archivization that interests Melville and Rosenberg, too. According to Spivak, both the archive and the fictional text receive their authority from a subjective source, and neither should be fetishized as truth. The trace of the author, the archon, the colonizer, or Imperialism, is the only thing that is for certain left behind in the overlapping and dense "telescoped symbols" that are presented respectively as history or fiction. Using several examples of when historical documents or parts of them were revised, edited, or altogether removed, Spivak illustrates how imperial violence works to alter the historical unfolding of its legacy as well as silence "othered" populations. Spivak claims that the changes made to these historical documents indicate how power is invested in creating knowledge and meaning (215).

As we will see, the creation of the archive, its limitations towards historical truth, and its relationship to fiction are concerns that both Melville and Rosenberg explore in their texts. So if, as Lukács and Benjamin have alerted us, we cannot trust the novel due to its bourgeoise origins and authorial subjectivity, and if, as White and Spivak have taught us, we also cannot trust the archive as exemplary of empirical and historical "truth," where does that leave the historical novel and its authors in a project of representing a more inclusive experience of history? As alluded to previously, turning to and adapting Gerard Genette's definition of metalepsis creates a theoretical passageway and opens a range of interpretive possibilities through which we can see how both Melville and Rosenberg's fictionalized historical texts simultaneously cue the critical reader to moments of violence while also making space for what otherwise would have been silenced narratives. In *Narrative Discourse* (1979), Gerard Genette defined *metalepsis* as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) or the inverse (as in Cortázar), produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical (when, as in Sterne or Diderot, it is presented in a joking tone) or fantastic" (234-5). Genette's definition sets up two important qualities of metalepsis: narrative intrusion between the text's "universes"; and the creation of an uncanny effect of either humor or astonishment on part of the reader. I take Genette's description of "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator" to include free-indirect discourse, allusions, references to the text's own production, narrator addresses directly to the reader, extra-textual features (footnotes,

marginal notes, parentheticals, addendums), and any other number of literary devices that effectively place the narrator in the narrative.[4] The authors I am concerned with implement many of these modes of narrative intrusion as metalepsis. The second half of Genette's definition, which is concerned with effect and readerly reception, requires a more thorough parsing. I want to expand somewhat upon Genette's terminology of "comic" and "fantastic" as they relate to Melville and Rosenberg's texts. The fantastic effect refers more generally to the uncanny and often uncomfortable experience of encountering an intrusive narrator. However, the comical cannot so easily be reduced to the aesthetics of humor. The comic effect of metalepsis I wish to explore in *Benito Cereno* and *Confessions of the Fox* is the effect produced by a shared secret with the author, a joke between storyteller and listener which the former can only hope that the latter will understand. Enhancing Genette's study of metalepsis is Saartje Gobyn's revised definition: "*Narrative metalepsis is a text-internal transgression of hierarchically ordered diegetic universes which reveals the internal structure of the text*" (121). Metalepsis, then, is not only a formal device that these authors employ towards a dramatic effect, but a larger manifestation of the content of the work in which text's meaning is dependent upon the blurring of narrative boundaries. With these theoretical considerations of the novel and the archive in place, we can now turn to the texts themselves to illuminate how these authors exert metaleptic narrative intrusion, in moments when the violence of power operates, to work towards a more collective understanding of history inclusive of a broader range of experience.

BENITO CERENO'S METALEPTIC SHIFTS

In *Benito Cereno* (1855), Melville relates the story of a Spanish slave ship overthrown by its captives and leader Babo. The ship is headed by Captain Don Benito, and though not known to be in revolt, is unsuccessfully offered aid by the self-possessed Captain Amasa Delano. In *Benito Cereno*, Herman Melville employs metalepsis most notably through free-indirect discourse to signal moments of racist ideology and the violence of slavery, creating an interpretive space for a reader to question Captain Delano's goodness while simultaneously considering their own personal allegiances. In this section, I claim that Melville's usage of metalepsis and free-indirect discourse does not indicate unnecessary authorial subjectivity intruding upon the historical events but rather heightens his ability to form a more collective historical discourse. One of the first and most striking instances of

Melville's use of free-indirect discourse as narrative intrusion happens when Captain Delano notices the rogue ship idling near his own vessel:

> To Captain Delano's surprise, the stranger, viewed through the glass, showed no colors; though to do so upon entering a haven, however uninhabited its shores, where but a single other ship might be lying, was the custom among peaceful seamen of all nations. Considering the lawlessness and loneliness of the spot, and the sort of stories, at that day, associated with those seas, Captain Delano's surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign evil in man. Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. (35)

The shift from the third-person omniscient narrator who is privy to objective fact and the personal opinions and ruminations of Captain Delano happens discreetly yet perceptibly in this paragraph, and Melville's use of the word "undistrustful" (as opposed to "trusting," "naïve," or "gullible") indicates the possibility of an unreliable narrator on whom a careful reader should keep her eye. Melville begins the passage firmly rooted in the third-person omniscient narrator's register of Delano's "surprise" at the ship's lack of flag to display its national or private affiliation. Although this phrase literally signifies that the ship bears no national flag, Melville already alerts the reader towards Delano's interest in color and nationality as a marker of who gets coded as friend or foe. While subtle, this example hearkens to the racist and eugenic tendencies that we come to learn the seemingly amiable Delano truly harbors. Once the narrator asks the reader to start "considering," the delineation of whose thoughts are whose is less exact. Are we to assume that Delano, the narrator, or the reader has considerations regarding the safety of the sea in that area? Instantly, Melville reinserts us into Delano's surprise, but here, the narrator's description of it is conditional indicated by usage of the verb phrase "might have deepened." Using free-indirect discourse throughout this paragraph invites the reader to question who is speaking and to ask themselves if it is them—do they harbor these same concerns? Melville further invites the reader's insertion into the text in the last sentence of the passage when the narrator literally

prompts the reader to question Delano's qualities. Melville engages in what Jared Hickman describes as

> …the mapping of the shifting relations of a former cosmic others within the now, single dynamic cosmos of the planet, a project that confounds easy distinction between the material and the ideal, the practical and the theoretical, the real and the representational, and the secular and the religious…the deep structure of modern discourse—the reason all we say and do can ultimately be translated as a shaping of a finite, particular world. (42)

Through this interactive metaleptic intervention, *Benito Cereno* shifts from the history of the "former" personages and events to the inclusion of the "now"—the reader and the cosmos that they inhabit. These moments of metalepsis not only fortify the text against a notion of the historical novel's finite authorial subjectivity that Lukàcs insists upon but also situate it in the speaker-listening dialectic that Benjamin claims constructs shared historical experience over time.

Later in the narrative, these instances of free-indirect discourse function more obviously to alert the reader to Delano's racist and imperial violence. This occurs in the scene in which Melville describes the oakum-pickers and hatchet-polishers. The passage begins with a listing of objective observations of the ship and its enslaved people: what they are doing, what tools they are using, what sounds they make, and any number of empirical descriptions of the scene. It reads, "The quarter-deck rose into an ample elevated poop, upon the forward verge of which, lifted, like the oakum-pickers, some eight feet above the general throng, sat along in a row, separated by regular spaces, the cross-legged figures of six other blacks, each with a rusty hatchet in his hand…" (39). This passage uses descriptive language, but it is devoid of any subjective commentary. However, the paragraph ends with a description of the six hatchet-polishers as having "the peculiar love in negroes of uniting industry with pastime" and "the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans" (39). The blatant insertion of these offensive *opinions* of the slaves at the end of a long section of third-person omniscient depiction of the *actions* of the slaves signals a moment of racist ideology, opening a space in the narrative for the reader to go through a number of interpretive upheavals. They must not only ask themselves the ever-important critical question of "who is speaking—Delano, narrator, or Melville?" but they must also necessarily ask themselves, "Is it me?" As such, Melville uses these metaleptic moments to invite the reader across

historical time periods to participate in a collective refashioning of whose story is lionized or despised over time. Thus, the goal is not, as Spivak says, “to describe ‘the way things really were’ or to privilege the narrative of history as imperialism as the best version of history” but instead to “continue to account of how one explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one” (267). Melville invites the critical reader to question how racial and imperial violence exist in the nineteenth-century and may indeed persist in their own time through these narrative intrusions.

Moments of free-indirect discourse continue throughout the novella but reach their dramatic peak in the two paragraphs describing the Africans’ fitness for servitude alongside Captain Delano’s personal treatment of black people. This passage illustrates perfectly the effect of the fantastic and the comical which Genette attributes specifically to metalepsis and which Melville employs through free-indirect discourse. Immediately following a paragraph of third-person omniscient narrative of the events, the narrator begins, “There is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person” and concludes that “God had set the whole negro to some pleasant tune” (70-71). The sudden shift from third-person narrative to free-indirect discourse has a double effect in that it both creates the fantastic effect Genette describes—the jarring change gives the uncanny feeling of being unsure of who is speaking—but it also tips the reader to this moment of racial violence, a recodification of an entire race of black people as destined to a finite range of possibilities limited to serving their white superiors. As Hickman states, “Race is ontological in the historically qualified sense. Race is woven into the global cosmos by virtue of its historical role in mapping—not only retrospectively and descriptively but prospectively and prescriptively—that cosmos” (51). The fantastic effect of Melville’s metaleptic moment alerts the reader to this moment of racist ideology constructing the cosmos. Race does not “play over something else” in the text but is the very thing to which Melville’s narrative structure is attuned. However, more important in this example and related to Hickman’s claim of race mapping the cosmos is the “comical” effect of this instance of metalepsis on the reader. After the reader has been told how the Africans were divinely created with the express purpose to cheerfully serve whites, there is a description of Delano’s feelings towards black people:

> Captain Delano’s nature was not only benign, but familiarly and humorously so. At home, he had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of color at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor,

> invariably he was on chatty, and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to negroes not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men took to Newfoundland dogs (71).

The moment begs the reader to consider whether it is Delano, the narrator, or Melville who think Delano to be "benign" as well as "of good, blithe heart." The imagery of a hairy, slobbering canine juxtaposed with human men in conjunction with the narrative strangeness of the passage creates a doubly comic effect; not only are the images themselves humorous, but the interspersed free-indirect discourse tells Melville's joke, a joke that asks the reader to find humor in the preposterousness of Delano's supposedly "benign" association of humans with animals. Catharine Shipps has written about how *Benito Cereno's* message has continued relevance in the contemporary efforts of activism, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement, to illuminate how figures of power can construct or destruct the actions, motives, and lives of black citizens (1). She suggests that the use of free-indirect discourse throughout makes *Benito Cereno* "a text with a powerful message about authority which has long outlived its intended audience: one cannot assume authority figures are objective" (4). At this juncture, and with Shipps's comments in mind, that we can now examine Melville's inclusion of the deposition in the narrative.

In addition to his usage of free-indirect discourse to both a "comical" and "fantastic" effect, Melville's creation, insertion, and explanation of a fictionalized archival report attempts to fill in the narrative gaps that the story proper misses and, in effect, reconstructs its own idealized version of actual, historical events. Melville introduces the deposition, explaining that "the following extracts, translated from one of the official Spanish documents, will it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative, as well as, in the first place, reveal…the true history of the San Dominick's voyage…" (89). Melville prefaces the included historical-archival information by offering it as empirical truth of the events and history of the personages involved in the revolt. However, the extreme metaleptic shifting into the paratext complicates this reading. As Shipps claims, "Upon reaching the deposition, the reader is likely yearning for clarification or is completely skeptical of the text's perspectival game, and therefore skeptical of the 'official document' that is introduced" (3). Of course, the "official document" is not official at all; it is instead Melville's fictionalized revision of the archival documentation that actually existed. As such, Melville has styled himself with the strange liminal identity of being both historian of facts and author of fiction. As Mark C. Anderson

notes, “[that] he alters and adds to the tale in no way discredits his version as history any more than does Delano's imperfect recollection of reality (moreover, as will be discussed, Delano also altered the documents). In fact, in so doing, Melville attempts what all good history writing does-to interpret the past in order to make sense of the present” (64). The insertion of the deposition functions both as a metaleptic moment, as it represents a crossing of diegetic worlds, but paratextual inclusion also represents an attempt at a more inclusive history that can more fully tell the tale. Notwithstanding, Melville’s deposition, a document completely fabricated and that could be constructed entirely to Melville’s ends, fundamentally denies Babo an opportunity to tell his story. The final two paragraphs express Babo’s “voiceless end” (102) and refusal of participation in the deposition. Arguably, for Michel-Rolph Trouillot, this could signify a moment of unthinkable history: “When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse” (72). While Trouillot’s work specifically addresses the Haitian Revolution, there are obvious connections to the events described in Melville’s fictionalized legal documents. Altering the historical event to rename the ship the San Dominick ties it to the Haitian Revolution of the late eighteenth century, creating an important link across geographical space as well as historical time. But the continued silencing of Babo has complex implications for Melville’s collective history, presenting two possibilities: either Melville is enacting the very repression of the “history of the impossible” (73) of which Trouillot speaks—in this case a successful slave revolt in which the leader’s voice is heard and recorded—or, as Shipps suggests, Melville’s silencing is deliberate, wherein “the deposition gives flesh to Babo’s character, showing his power as a leader and will to gain freedom, but removes his only means of communicating his perspective, thus reminding the reader that at the time Babo did not and could not legally have a voice” (3). As such, the inclusion of the fictionalized archival documentation of the events simultaneously conceals and reveals the entire truth of the history of the revolt on the San Dominick, complicating the novel’s relationship to Delano’s racist ideologies. Turning now to *Confessions of the Fox*, I will examine how many of these same metaleptic and paratextual techniques function similarly in the historical novel of the twenty-first century.

METALEPSIS AND PARATEXT IN CONFESSIONS OF THE FOX

Jordy Rosenberg's recent historical novel *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) is a text deeply concerned with the mechanisms of intersectional violence. Telling two entwined stories taking place centuries apart, the novel focuses on present-day academic Dr. Voth, who has discovered the lost manuscript of eighteenth-century jailbreaker and legend Jack Sheppard (both trans men according to Rosenberg). The novel primarily documents Sheppard's criminal exploits with his partner Bess, a sex worker, while Voth's narrative occurs primarily in the footnotes, or what Genette would call "paratext," and centers on his fraught relationships, both professional and personal. While Melville uses metalepsis to alert the reader specifically to racist ideology, Rosenberg uses metalepsis to illustrate how power mechanisms operate across historical time periods while also creating a narrative space for combatting the classist, racist, sexist, and literal bodily violence that pervades the book's two convergent narratives. Like Melville, Rosenberg employs free-indirect discourse in the Sheppard storyline to signal such moments, particularly as they occur between Jack and Bess. The first instance of this in the Sheppard manuscript occurs just before he is to be executed, an event that happens at the beginning and then again at the end of the narrative. As the mob grows and the executioner approaches, Jack remembers Bess's last words to him, which are italicized in the text. Rosenberg then sandwiches the following questions between two large blank spaces on the page. The questions read, "But *is* Bess at the bat house? Is she, indeed, even alive?" (8). There is nothing to indicate that Jack asks these questions himself, and the formal use of additional space between the text separates it from the rest of the omniscient narrator's exposition of the scene. They allude to the violence that both Jack and Bess experience—the literal bodily violence of injury, execution, and death, but also the classist and sexist violence they face as rogues and sex workers, societal outcasts of their historical time. As Valerie Traub has noted, "a metaleptic sleight of hand enables the ground of critique to keep shifting" (31). In *Confessions,* these tricky modes of narration create space for critical discourse to ensue.

Another such instance occurs later in the Sheppard manuscript but earlier in linear time when Jack and Bess first formally meet. As the two size each other up, Bess "cocked her head. Squinted. What an odd bird he was. But then Bess's taste ran towards the Odd" (42). While Bess's movements and the explanation of her personal preference in a romantic partner are squarely omniscient narration, the strange non-question and non-exclamation rhetorical phrase "what an odd bird he was" cannot easily be attributed to Bess. Nestled into

the narration, the free-indirect discourse forces the reader to consider Jack's oddness, what makes him odd, and how there is indeed a space for the odd within the realm of somebody else's desire in a way that is not fetishized or ashamed. As Traub notes, "the material, social, and psychic conditions of queer life may not always be served by the presumption of an exclusive queerness: perhaps at least some of us, and the worlds in which we live, are queer and gay, queer and bi, queer and trans, queer and lesbian, queer and heterosexual" (33). Just as there is a violence associated with a hierarchical implementation of male/female and gay/straight binaries, Traub acutely attunes her reader to the violence of exclusivity within queer communities as well. "What an odd bird" is not just Bess or the narrator's flippant observation of Jack's uncategorizable-ness, but an immensely powerful moment of free-indirect discourse in which we are delivered a question in the form of an exclamation with a period at the end. Jack exhibits oddness but the phrase also signals the potential for an evolution past imposed identities of normal versus odd, indicated in Rosenberg's use of the past tense "was." As such, it is no coincidence that in this same scene, Jack self-constructs his identity by "*saying himself into being*" and therefore, cements his rightful place in the course of historical time. Here, too, a strange metaleptic moment is at work in the italicized text. Rosenberg generally indicates the characters' verbatim thoughts—things said to themselves—with italics (as opposed to quotations), but the moment creates a Genettian "fantastic" moment in which it is unclear whether or not those are Jack's words, the narrator's, Voth's, or even Rosenberg's. On the next page, Rosenberg explains, "He was becoming Jack Sheppard. He was entering History" (44). The metaleptic moment invites a space in which the reader can consider what it means to "become" who you are, but it also re-inscribes Jack's history, his former life as P—a dead name we never hear or see—and provides a narrative moment in which the experience of the other, the "odd bird," can speak truth to power.

Aside from his usage of traditional free-indirect discourse towards narrative intrusion, Rosenberg also employs the preface as well as the textual footnotes to insert another diegetic universe, one both fully invested in and temporally and narratively divergent from the Sheppard manuscript, into his text. The "Editor's Foreword" structures the two narrative universes of eighteenth-century London in the Sheppard manuscript and the contemporary American university in the footnoted Voth text. The strange vacillation between where each narrative occurs—forward, textual body, footnotes—disrupts the linear teleology of history as

well as the narrative of events in the novel. While the first few footnotes seem to be of the traditional, clarifying nature, Voth makes a metaleptic appearance fairly quickly as in the footnote for “bat house” which reads, “Sex workers. I settle on this annotation rather than ‘prostitute’ as, in the anti-vagrancy laws of the period, the doxy was condemned specifically as someone who would not go gently into the *good night* of the capitalist workday” (7). While a traditional explanation of the term in the footnote certainly occurs, it also contains an indication of Voth’s personal interests and allegiances outside of the manuscript, evidenced by the sarcastic allusion to Dylan Thomas in describing Bess’s refusal of the mechanisms of capitalist violence. At the end of the same chapter, Voth returns in another footnote to her previous clarification on the “bat house”; since the exact meaning of the phrase “is not corroborated in any reference materials, I must surmise that it is in fact not meant cruelly here, but it is used in a loving and familiar manner, such as would be exercised only by a member of the subculture to which it applies. But I’ve gotten ahead of myself. We’ve only just begun” (10). Voth’s self-insertion into the narrative here is significant for several reasons: first, it sets up the framework for the limitations of the archive—something was missing from the existing reference materials that could fully explain this term in way that was meaningful to the marginalized peoples to which it referred. Additionally, it reinforces a fuller inclusion of individual experiences across history in the strangeness of its temporality wherein Voth is already “ahead” of the story as it commences. This collective experience is further privileged in Voth’s movement from the first-person singular pronoun “I” to the first-person plural pronoun “we.” Through the footnotes, Rosenberg is able to create narrative interruptions that alert the reader to the violence of omission while filling in the blanks with fictionalized archival construction and improved inclusion of previously those left out.

Like Melville, Rosenberg uses metaleptic moments to deliberately play with the notion of the archive as concept, including its deficits, its merits, and ultimately, how we can alter it to form a more perfect archive as a utopic version of historical record-keeping. Rosenberg initiates this in the entirely metaleptic “Editor’s Foreword” when he depicts Professor Voth’s former university purging itself of archival material: “Several months prior to my precipitous departure, as a kind of Welcome Back to School/Fuck You event, the University held a book sale. It seemed that over the summer the Chancellor’s office had emptied out the seventeenth to twentieth floors of the library for a big renovation. Deans’ offices and a dining atrium for upper-echelon administrators” (x). Voth explains how “the

University's entire collection of philosophy, linguistics, and post-colonial theory" (x) are essentially deleted from the university "archive," the library in a move to make space for high-paid academic administrators—the same administrators who we can assume are complicit, if not instrumental, in Voth's firing, exploitation, and attempted appropriation of the manuscript. This act essentially purges the institution of a range of human narratives. By initially taking the manuscript, Voth attempts to mitigate the institutional violence imposed by the university in the destruction of its library.

Perhaps the most striking moment of this institutional violence within the metanarrative of the footnotes occurs in the email Voth receives from P-Quad Industries requesting they fund his work on the Sheppard manuscript. Voth prefaces the email by incredulously asking "can you believe they quoted Derrida in their email to me?" (84). P-Quad's email then goes on to quote a line from Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* in which Derrida claims, as Voth nicely summarizes for us, "The archive is less a record of what has been said, and more an ongoing problem of what cannot be. What is forgotten, repressed, and disallowed" (84). Rosenberg's allusion to Derrida in the moment is particularly salient because at the same time it shows the hypocrisy of P-Quad's position and poor understanding of Derrida, it also sets up the possibility of identifying and inserting the missing elements. Most importantly, it gives Rosenberg a means to send out a signal; "I mean, Reader, the violence they did to Derrida in this email was truly unconscionable" (84). By employing the capital "R," Rosenberg employs the same sort of "trying to say something" (76) that Voth describes in his courting of Ursula. While Ursula could see the signal of desire but not the other signal, in the end, Voth can only hope that the Reader is a better reader than Ursula, or possibly just a different type of reader altogether.

CONCLUSION

What these two texts deftly identify is that neither the archive nor fiction can ever be the sole arbiter of universal truth. Both hold immense power in granting narrative authority, and to separate them entirely or privilege one over the other further upholds the structures of institutionalized silencing that have persisted in modern Western culture. Both Melville and Rosenberg use metaleptic narrative intrusions, either through free-indirect discourse or the strangeness of the formal elements within the novels themselves, to alert the reader to instances of imposed violence on silenced peoples.

These texts not only rely on metalepsis to create collective narrative across historical periods but also a particular Reader, a reader with a capital “R”, who is in on the joke of these metaleptic interferences. It is this reader who understands the code, the reader who reads better than Delano, who reads “only through tears” (xiv) and the Reader who Voth “edited this for, the one I stole this for” (316). It is this reader to whom these metalepses speak, and it through this signal that these texts reach out to us across time and allow us to unsee the mechanisms of power that prevent solidarity.

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[1] Earlier, he refers to Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* as eighteenth-century novels that demonstrate a "broad, realistic portrayal of the present takes in here and there important events of contemporary history which it links with the fortunes of the characters" (20). His mention of *Moll Flanders* is significant, as it functions as main source of stylistic influence on Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox.*

[2] For information on the publication history of *Benito Cereno,* I use Dan McCall's editorial notes in the Norton Critical Edition of *Melville's Short Novels* as my source.

[3] For a further analysis of Dickens as storyteller and his relationship to Benjamin, refer to my article "'The Golden Thread': Uniting Benjamin and Dickens through Memory and Death," previously published in *Interpretations: SFSU's Graduate Literary Journal (2017).*

[4] I want to make an important distinction here: I am not claiming that *any* time footnotes, free-indirect discourse, or any of the literary devices mentioned above are used that it qualifies as metalepsis as Genette or I define it. What I am saying that any of those devices listed can be marshalled towards a metaleptic narrative intrusion.

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Abstract

While there has been a noticeable increase in contemporary romance novels with neurodiversity representation, historical romance novels with autistic-coded characters should not be overlooked. This paper aims to analyse the representation of neurodiversity in two historical romance novels: The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie by Jennifer Ashley and The Lawrence Browne Affair by Cat Sebastian, arguing that today, the "madness" of the protagonists would be recognised as neurodivergence, specifically autism. However, the love interests consistently disagree with the perception that the protagonists are mad, arguing instead that their minds are simply different, and they encourage the protagonists to embrace these differences and their unique expressions of emotions. Consequently, the novels offer

contemporary readers who are familiar with the contemporary notion of autism a historical context for the ongoing debate on whether autism should be considered a disorder, or a form of neurodivergence. Additionally, there is a contrasting representation of autism as genius, as the protagonists are characterised as both madmen and geniuses. The novels also depict four forms of isolation – voluntary, involuntary, emotional and physical — as a consequence of the protagonists' neurodivergence, which they believe to have inherited from their abusive fathers.

Keywords: historical romance, neurodiversity, madness, autism, heroes

“What will you do with yourself when you grasp that your mind is only different, not deranged?”: Madness and Neurodivergent Heroes in Historical Romance Novels

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Introduction — Why historical romance?

Over the past seven years, there has been a noticeable increase in contemporary romance novels featuring neurodivergent characters and particularly autism; the most well-known examples being novels by Helen Hoang and Chloe Liese. Of interest for this paper however are two historical romances: *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* (2009) by Jennifer Ashley and *The Lawrence Browne Affair* (2017) by Cat Sebastian, in which both male protagonists are considered to be “mad”. However, both Ashley and Sebastian have confirmed that the protagonists would today be considered autistic, and they have intentionally written them as autistic.

The central argument of this paper is that autism is characterized as a form of neurodivergence through the actions of the love interests and their perceptions of the protagonists as different rather than mad. This distinction challenges prevailing stigmas associated with autism and highlights the importance of acceptance and understanding as the foundation of meaningful relationships between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. By illustrating how these perceptions can lead to a more compassionate view of neurodivergence, the paper underscores the potential contribution of the romance genre to re-evaluating societal attitudes towards autism and promoting inclusivity.

The love interests’ perception is consistently contrasted with the secondary characters' interpretations, who perceive the protagonists' behaviours as madness. Furthermore, the novels explore the interplay between the protagonists’ neurodivergence and their consequent isolation. The objective of this paper is to analyse how these themes are intertwined within the historical setting of the novels, which are products of popular culture, written by authors and read by readers with contemporary knowledge of autism. It aims to evaluate the potential literary contributions of this analysis to the ongoing discourse on autism and the neurodiversity movement.

Popular culture is one of the most accessible ways of engaging with history and historical practices. It is also one of the most common sources of knowledge of history for the

general reader (Hackett and Coghlan 2021), including historical representation of what today is known as neurodiversity. One specific form of popular culture which presents history to the contemporary reader is the historical romance novel. In these novels, the author intentionally sets the plot during a historical period from the one in which it was published (Ficke 2021, 118). It is this distance in time which allows for —even requires— a different representation of neurodiversity than a contemporary novel, and consequently, a different way of reading these neurodivergent-coded characters.

Kristin Ramsdell defines popular historical romance novels as “love stories with historical settings” (2012, 185). Furthermore, there are no specific rules or guidelines controlling the extent of the historical in a historical romance (Ficke 2021, 118), and as argued by Lisa Fletcher, “historical romance fiction is constituted by an awareness of the instability of its narratological and ideological foundations,” (Fletcher 2008, 14). Diane Elam interprets this in the context of postmodernism as “confronting the past as predicament”, rethinking the past in the present instead (Elam 1992, 53). Historical romance, with its blend of creative freedom and the responsibility to maintain some degree of historical accuracy, is also being written today by authors such as Ashley and Sebastian, who have contemporary knowledge of autism and neurodiversity. Consequently, it offers a unique opportunity for representing neurodiversity in a historical context, thus effectively affirming that neurodiversity has always existed throughout history.

However, the representation of disability in romance is still dominated by tragedy-model perspectives, challenging the disabled protagonist’s worthiness of love and therefore undermining the very essence of the genre (Cheyne 2019, 138). A common theme in novels with disability representation is the cure narrative, in which the disabled character is “cured” by the “normal” character. Cheyne points out that in romance novels, this narrative tends to evoke two very different futures: a joyful future with a loving partner, where disability has been eradicated or ameliorated; and an unhappy and lonely future to which disability adheres (Cheyne 2019, 142). A typical pattern for romance cure narratives is that the cure comes at the end of the story and is used to intensify the happiness of the ending – the protagonists each found their perfect partner and their lives have been transformed for the better by overcoming their disability (Cheyne 2019, 143). Sebastian however seems to be intentionally challenging this narrative:

Lawrence in *The Lawrence Browne Affair* will always have anxiety and autism

spectrum issues, but he learns how to structure his life so he can thrive. He also has a supportive partner and a pet who functions as a service animal (Sebastian 2022). Because the most fundamental principle of neurodiversity is that variation in human minds is natural and not due to a deficit which can be cured, neurodiversity-informed readings can be "a cure" for the cure narrative.

According to Lisa J. Hackett and Jo Coghlan (2021), historical romance allows authors to address historical social issues, which in turn provides the opportunity for readers to engage with and learn about history outside of the education system through these novels. For example, Beverly Jenkins, a romance author known for her contribution to diversity in the genre, hopes that her novels provide her readers with "edutainment," a literary fusion of education and entertainment (Dandridge 2010). The educational aspect is especially present in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* through the depiction of Ian's institutionalisation in an asylum and his treatment as a patient and after his release. Moreover, romance novels can also address and challenge stereotypes. As argued by Ria Cheyne, "[r]omance novels with disabled heroes or heroines require the reader to enter into an imaginative engagement with a world in which disabled people are not only worthy and desiring of love, but succeed in securing it," (2019, 139). Therefore, by the most crucial element of the genre, which is a guaranteed happy ending for the main couple, romance novels have the potential to challenge one of the most problematic stereotypes about autistic people – that they are unable to love and find happiness in a fulfilling romantic relationship.

Theoretical framework — the neurodiversity paradigm

Traditionally, in the modern West, differences in human bodies and minds have been interpreted through the pathology paradigm, which has its ideological foundation in medicine and normativity. The pathology paradigm is a framework that views deviations from the norm, particularly in relation to mental health, neurodevelopment, or behaviour, as deficits or disorders that need to be "fixed" or cured. It assumes that certain conditions, such as autism or ADHD, are inherently negative or abnormal and should be treated or corrected to align with societal expectations of normality (Walker 2021; Chapman 2023). This paradigm has been extensively criticized by scholars as well as activists and self-advocates for reinforcing stigma and failing to recognize the value and strengths of individuals who think or function differently (Walker 2021; Chapman 2023, Price 2022, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. 2020, Milton 2020). It

is from this opposition that the neurodiversity paradigm, which is based on the principle of neurodiversity, has emerged.

Neurodiversity refers to the diversity of human minds and the countless different ways they function. It is a neutral biological fact (Walker 34). It is a concept which argues that "people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one 'right' way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits" (Baumer and Frueh 2021). Though most frequently associated with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the neurodiversity umbrella also covers dyslexia, dyspraxia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and also includes neurological conditions such as Meares-Irlen syndrome, Tourette's syndrome, and synaesthesia ('Neurodiversity & Neurodivergent: Meanings, Types & Examples'). There are also acquired forms of neurodivergence, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, or alterations in the brain caused by drugs and medication (Walker 2021, 38). Therefore, the core idea of the neurodiversity paradigm can be summarised as "different, not disordered." As will be argued in this paper, it is also how the love interests in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Brown Affair* see the protagonists.

Reading autistic-coded characters (not only) in historical novels

One of the aims of this paper is to argue that despite how the two protagonists are perceived by society, they should not be read as having a disorder, nor is there an attempt to diagnose them, since the very word "diagnosis" serves the pathology paradigm and is contradictory to a literary paper that argues for reading through a neurodivergent lens. Melanie Yergeau argues that autism is "a mode of becoming, is continuous motion that defies the clinical," (Yergeau 2017, 43) and that "autistic people themselves have their own unique mental states, beliefs, and desires" (Yergeau 2013). Yergeau's conceptualisation of autistic identity is exactly how autism is represented in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Brown Affair*. In both stories, the reader follows an autistic-coded protagonist who is slowly discovering the full potential of his neurodivergent mind and learning to accept his unique personality, all while trying to overcome the stigma of madness and falling in love with the love interest.

What makes autism identification, definition and delineation possible at all—including identifying autistic-coded literary characters such as Ian and Lawrence— is autism's cultural product, its text. Rodas sees this as an

> autism diagnosis game [which] is embedded in the inseparability of autistic text from autistic identity; the clinical and the aesthetic are fully interwoven practices, mutually informed dimensions of autism discourse, a circumstance that contributes to understanding the complex web of critical responses to the expansive set of literatures that suggest an autistic aesthetic. (Rodas 2018, 13)

The question then becomes whether such text resonates with autistic readers, instead of whether it was written by an autistic author (Rodas 2018, 29). Rab Houston and Uta Frith claim in their book *Autism in History* that it is possible to conclude that a person from the past was autistic based on contemporary knowledge and criteria (cited in Fitzgerald 2004, 12). This line of thought contends that autistic people and what today is known as the autism spectrum with all its various characteristics have always existed. "Autism" is simply the most recent widely used label. By identifying common characteristics of autism in these historical romance novels and exploring the challenges and opportunities these traits present within the fictional societies of the narratives, readers can begin to recognize autistic expression as a pervasive element in all forms of cultural products (Rodas 2018, 30). Moreover, by knowing what characteristics define an autistic character, readers will be able to more accurately read and interpret autistic-coded characters, or characters in historical novels which cannot be explicitly written as autistic due to the lack of relevant language in a different time.

This perspective extends to the process of diagnosing a mental health condition, where the everyday behaviour of the person provides clues that form the basis for the diagnosis. The literary genre most useful for this is biography (Fitzgerald 2004, 14). *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Browne Affair* focus so much on the protagonists that they read almost as fictional biographies. Romance can therefore serve a similar purpose as biography by providing detailed insights into the lives and minds of its main protagonists. However, it achieves this through fictional narratives rather than factual accounts. Moreover, no other genre by their most essential characteristics directly contradicts several of the most perpetuated autism stereotypes — that autistic people are incapable of feeling complex emotions and being happy in a fulfilling romantic relationship.

In considering the difference between fact and fiction in romance novels versus biographies, it's important to acknowledge that ultimately, both genres serve a similar purpose when exploring neurodiversity. Biographies—and memoirs—provide factual, often linear accounts of individuals' lives, offering readers a concrete look at neurodivergent experiences grounded in real-world events[1]. This fact-based narrative can give readers insight into the socio-historical contexts surrounding neurodivergent individuals, revealing how societal norms, stigma, and even medical understandings of conditions like autism evolved over time and across cultures. However, depending on the author's writing style and the amount of factual detail included, some readers may find it challenging to relate to the experiences presented in biographies and memoirs.

Fiction, including romance novels, brings a different, equally valuable perspective. Through imaginative storytelling, romance can depict neurodivergence in a way that resonates emotionally and subjectively with readers. While the narratives are fictional, the experiences portrayed can offer intimate insights into the thought processes and feelings of neurodivergent characters. These fictions can humanize and destigmatize neurodiversity in ways that factual accounts might not always accomplish, given the focus in fiction on empathy and personal connection. In this way, while biographies offer factual legitimacy and a grounded perspective, romance novels provide a powerful narrative space for empathy and engagement, making neurodivergence more accessible to wider audiences.

Fitzgerald also stresses that the literary accounts of the famous personalities he is analysing in his book were not intentionally written as examples to be diagnostically analysed. Therefore, "the *ad hominem* argument does not apply here because the author does not attack the person of the writer, politician, etc. but attempts to increase our understanding of these individuals by explaining their psychopathology" (Fitzgerald 2004, 13). A similar approach was chosen by Jennifer Ashley and Cat Sebastian when writing their autistic protagonists. The authors themselves have confirmed that they intentionally wrote Ian and Lawrence as autistic (Ashley 2009; Sebastian 2022). And as will be demonstrated in examples in the following

[1] Some examples of recent autistic "self-help" books by American and British authors that are also partial memoirs include *Unmasking Autism* (2022) by Devon Price, *Untypical* (2023) by Pete Wharmby, and *Unmasked* (2023) and *How to Be You* (2024) by Ellie Middleton. Recently published memoires by autistic authors include *Strong Female Character* (2023) by Fern Brady and *Girl Unmasked* (2024) by Emily Katy. These memoirs are also additional examples of criticism of the pathology paradigm, focusing on personal experience.

sections of this paper, they are constantly *shown* being autistic, and so their actions and thoughts speak for themselves. It would be redundant to try to "diagnose" them as such. What seems to be expected of the reader instead is to empathise with these characters and simply enjoy learning more about their neurodivergent minds while following their romance.

The most significant implication Fitzgerald's work has on reading neurodivergent-coded characters such as Ian and Lawrence is that his psychohistorical approach validates such readings, although Fitzgerald argues that the "diagnosing" should be seen as a hypothesis, which allows the readers to judge whether or not the hypothesis stands up to scrutiny (Fitzgerald 2004, 13). However, a major issue with the psychohistorical approach is that since it has been designed by psychiatrists, the very word "diagnosing" operates in the pathology paradigm used by psychiatrists and other medical professionals. A reading guided by the neurodiversity paradigm such as the one in the following sections of this paper contributes to solving this issue. Readings and interpretations of neurodivergent-coded characters based on the neurodiversity paradigm and grounded in literary criticism will remove the "diagnostic" aspect of the act, which is tied to the institution of psychiatry and the pathology paradigm.

Representation of autism as madness

As argued by the esteemed British historian of medicine Roy Porter in his book *Madness: A Brief History*, "[a]ll societies judge some people mad: any strict clinical justification aside, it is part of the business of marking out the different, deviant, and perhaps dangerous," (Porter 2002, 62). Indeed, the interrogation of the meaning of madness of a "deviant and dangerous" nineteenth-century British aristocrat is the central theme of both novels. When asked about her motivation behind creating a character such as Ian, Ashley responded: "I wrote about Ian because I got to pondering how people in the past dealt with autism or Aspergers" (Ashley 2009). In addition to the detailed descriptions of Ian's thinking process and behaviour, arguably the most valuable aspect of the novel is indeed its depiction of how he was treated by others.

Because of his madness and his father's need to ensure Ian's words lack credibility after he witnessed his father murdering his mother when he was eight years old, Ian was sent to an asylum. He spent most of his childhood and adolescence subjected to many abusive treatments, such as shock therapy, beatings, and ice baths:

> "…austere surroundings, cold baths, exercise, electric shock to stimulate healing. Regular beatings to suppress his rages. The treatment is effective, gentlemen. He has calmed considerably since he first came to me."
>
> If Ian had "calmed," it was because he'd realized that if he suppressed his rages and abrupt speeches, he'd be left alone. He'd learned to become an automaton, a clockwork boy that moved and talked in a certain way.
>
> (…)
>
> The doctor responsible for Ian's treatment describes him during a presentation as:
>
> "His is a typical case of haughty resentment which is festering his brain. Notice how he avoids your eyes, which shows declined trust and lack of truthfulness. Note how his attention wanders when he is spoken to, how he interrupts with an inappropriate comment or question that has nothing to do with the topic at hand. This is arrogance taken to the point of hysteria—the patient can no longer connect with people he deems beneath him.
>
> (Ashley 2011, 269)
>
> (…)
>
> "The arrogance of his class coupled with his resentment toward his family has created a blockage in his brain," Dr. Edwards would explain to his enthusiastic audiences. "He can read and remember but not understand. He also shows no interest in his father, never asks after him or writes to him even when it is suggested to him. He also makes no sign that he misses his dear, departed mother." (Ashley 2011, 270)

According to the doctor, Ian's madness seems to be caused by external factors, as opposed to being inherited, as Ian believes it to be. However, an indication of certain hereditary qualities of autism was also confirmed by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger in their seminal articles, with Kanner observing that the parents of almost all the children in his study were also exceptionally intelligent and did not appear to be particularly emotional (1943, 250), and Asperger noting that autistic traits had been observed in family members of all 200 autistic children he worked with (1991, 84). The hereditary aspect of autism has been debated since the very beginning; and, although no genetic cause has been discovered to date, many personal narratives shared by people on the spectrum also confirm an autistic family member, often several.

In the case of the two protagonists, madness is presented as inherited, with both Ian and Lawrence blaming their abusive and negligent fathers for their madness:

> "There's nothing in here to love. Nothing. I am insane. My father knew it. Hart knows it. You can't nurse me back to health. I have my father's rages, and you can never be sure what I'll do—" He broke off, his headache beating at him. He rubbed his temple furiously, angry at the pain. (Ashley 2011, 203)

Moreover, Lawrence's father regularly experienced episodes of mania and melancholy, and seems to have drunk excessively during his depressive episodes: "My father used to spend weeks at a time in bed, generally quite drunk. He was a miserable sod. One day, I came home from riding and found him dead in the stables. We told everyone he died while cleaning his gun, but he left a note. I burnt it" (Sebastian 2017, 96). With contemporary knowledge of psychology, Lawrence's father's behaviour is recognisable as bipolar, which, as mentioned earlier, also belongs under the neurodiversity umbrella.

Representation of autism as genius

In stark opposition to the madness stands the protagonists' remarkable intelligence. Ian is a recognised expert on and collector of Ming Dynasty porcelain bowls, is mathematically gifted, and has exceptional memory. Lawrence is an inventor and natural scientist, working on developing an invention which is essentially the telegraph. However, both Ian and Lawrence are repeatedly taken advantage of and used for their genius skills, despite being considered mad. Hart regularly has Ian accompany him on business trips to read treaties and contracts to memorize them and find any inconsistencies or signs of fraudulent intentions: "Isabella explained that Hart had Ian read political correspondences and treaties for him and commit them to memory, then alert Hart to those with particular phrases Hart told him to watch for," (Ashley 2011, 87). Apart from accompanying his brother on all important business meetings and reading through all the necessary documents, Ian also keeps the family ledgers.

Whereas Ian's skills are ultimately being used for the benefit of his family, Lawrence is sharing his life's work in correspondence with "a friend" he has never met, risking having it stolen. Indeed, Georgie[2] immediately suspects that Lawrence's friend is a scammer and

[2] Georgie Turner is a former thief and con artist. Being unemployed and in hiding, he is asked by his brother to travel to Lawrence's castle Penkellis and confirm whether the rumours about Lawrence being mad are true. Georgie agrees and, with the help of a mutual acquaintance, he is introduced to Lawrence as his new secretary. Lawrence and Georgie are attracted to each other from the moment they meet, though Lawrence does not hide his discomfort at having a stranger in his space who is disrupting his routine. However, he gradually sees that Georgie's presence is invaluable for the management of Penkellis, as well as for his own mental health.

maintains correspondence with Lawrence only to gather information about his latest invention so that he can sell it, and have it patented as his once it is done. This is however later resolved; and, though Lawrence's patent was not stolen, the recipient of his correspondence and the man he considered a friend was, in fact, the man's wife. Meanwhile, Georgie himself lies to Lawrence about the true reason why he came to Penkellis to be Lawrence's secretary, which is to assess whether he is actually mad. Therefore, there is deception involved. Furthermore, Lawrence risks having his intellectual property stolen and losing the money he could earn by selling the invention.

As argued by Anthony D. Baker in his chapter "Recognizing Jake: Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film" in which he analyses the representation of autism in several movies released between 1985 and 2003, the savant skills, for which autistic characters are so valued, are intrinsic abilities, hence are neither intentionally developed nor acquired. And although the autistic characters have savant skills, they are unable to use these skills for their own benefit. The skills and their product are there to be ultimately used by the neurotypical characters, consequently objectifying the autistic character and denying their agency (2009, 237). In theory, Ian and Lawrence do have the agency to not allow their skills to be exploited; Ian can refuse to assist his brother, and Lawrence can stop sharing his work with a man he never met. However, doing so would mean losing an essential part of their very limited social lives. Ian would disappoint the one person who had helped him unconditionally every time he needed it, and Lawrence would end the only friendship he values.

In addition to making use of the protagonists' savant skills, because the protagonists are neurodivergent, they do not lie and struggle with recognising lies. This leaves them susceptible to betrayal. Hart initially does not believe that Beth[3] genuinely loves Ian:

> "You've known him, what, all of a few weeks? You saw that Ian is rich and insane, and you couldn't resist taking down such an easy mark." (Ashley 2011, 174).

His suspicion indicates that he is aware that his brother is vulnerable because of his inability to lie and recognise lies. Similarly, because Lawrence does not leave his tower, smugglers

[3] Beth Ackerley is a young, wealthy widow, initially engaged to Lyndon Mather, Ian's acquaintance, and fellow Ming porcelain collector. As soon as Ian and Beth meet, they are attracted to each other, and Ian becomes obsessed with her, repeatedly suggesting that she should become his lover. Beth quickly ends her engagement to Mather and starts a relationship with Ian, first as lovers and shortly after as a married couple.

are able to exploit his unawareness and use his land for smuggling. Moreover, Lawrence married the sister of his brother's friend because she was unmarried and pregnant. Her reputation would otherwise be ruined, and she would not have the financial means to raise the child. However, she soon left him for another man and died unexpectedly. Therefore, he is suspicious about Georgie's sudden appearance at Penkellis as his secretary, when he has no prior experience:

> Perhaps because Turner, like Isabella, only wanted to get close to Lawrence for a reason. Now, as to what that reason might be, Lawrence could only speculate. Isabella had found herself pregnant and in need of a husband. Lawrence hadn't seen any reason not to oblige her. (Sebastian 2017, 115)

Ultimately, the protagonists being both mad and geniuses leads to isolation and aloneness. In his 1943 article, Kanner presents the concept of "autistic aloneness", which has since become one of the defining characteristics of autism as well as the most frequently perpetuated autism stereotypes:

> There is a from the start an extreme autistic aloneness that, whenever possible, disregards, ignores, shuts out anything that comes to the child from the outside. Direct physical contact or such motion or noise as threatens to disrupt the aloneness is either treated 'as if it weren't there' or, if this is no longer sufficient, resented painfully as distressing interference. (1943, 242)

Autistic aloneness is therefore first and foremost the autistic person's attempt to isolate themselves mentally from the possibility of intrusion into their personal space or body from the outside. This may also entail physical isolation. In the historical setting of the novels, autistic aloneness is depicted through several forms of isolation—physical, emotional, voluntary, and involuntary—each providing the contemporary reader with an idea of how an autistic person of Ian's and Lawrence's social status and with their specific experiences used aloneness as a coping mechanism or how they were forced to be isolated by others.

As they are perceived to be "mad", Ian and Lawrence have been isolated for the majority of their lives, either voluntarily (Lawrence) or involuntarily (Ian). After he is released from the asylum, Ian becomes nonverbal for several months:

> "When I was first released from the asylum I wouldn't speak for three months. . . I hadn't forgotten how—I simply didn't want to. I didn't know it distressed my brothers until they told me." (Ashley 2011, 76)

Selective mutism, as confirmed in Rudy Simone's interviews with autistic women (2010, 69), is often experienced by those on the autism spectrum. For Ian, it was a much-needed coping mechanism employed to help him process the transition from being an asylum patient to a brother of a duke. Moreover, Ian frequently disappears to be alone:

> "He's used to me disappearing. I always turn up again. He knows that."
>
> Beth studied him. "Why do you disappear?"
>
> "Sometimes it gets too much for me. Trying to follow what people say, trying to remember what I'm supposed to do so people will think I'm normal. Sometimes the rules are too hard. So I go. . . Sometimes I take a train to a place I've never been or hire a horse and ride into the countryside. To find somewhere I can be alone." (Ashley 2011, 143)

By voluntarily isolating himself when he needs to and not speaking unless he wants to, he is reclaiming agency as well as the choice to do so, which he was denied in the asylum. Furthermore, his ability to travel freely is in direct contrast with his life in the asylum, where his freedom of movement was non-existent.

Lawrence is isolating himself primarily because he is convinced that, as a madman, he is dangerous to other people, including his adopted son, whom he has not seen in eight years and refuses to have a relationship with out of fear and shame:

> "No." Lawrence felt the already fraying edges of his composure unravelling fast. "Simon is not coming here."
>
> "You can't keep him off forever, you know, now that he's back in England. It's his home, and he'll own it one day." When Lawrence was safely dead and buried, Simon was welcome to come here and do what he pleased. "I don't want him here." Penkellis was no place for a child, madmen were not fit guardians, and nobody knew those facts better than Lawrence himself, who had been raised under precisely those conditions. (Sebastian 2017, 3–4)

The novels also depict two very different attitudes to socialisation typical for autistic people, reflecting the spectrum nature of autism. Ian has three older brothers and sees at least one of them almost daily and he attends social events with them rather frequently. Moreover, he has acquaintances through his collecting. Conversely, once he becomes an earl after his brother's death, Lawrence does not interact with anyone except with his two employees, Georgie and several fellow inventors with whom he

exchanges letters about their latest creations: “For all he was a hermit, the earl was an enthusiastic letter writer who maintained regular correspondence with several men of science,” (Sebastian 2017, 46). Autistic people are often more comfortable expressing themselves in writing as opposed to verbally (Simone 2010, 99–100). By limiting their conversation to correspondence, Lawrence has the ability to consider carefully every word before he writes it. He has the agency to decide when and if he will reply to the letters and still maintain a form of friendship.

Romance, madness and neurodiversity

Pamela Regis identifies the barrier as one of the essential elements of the romance novel, and the difficulty of this barrier should be significant enough to ensure that overcoming it provides a rewarding emotional experience for the reader by the story's conclusion (2007, 13–14). Moreover, as noted by Sebastian:

> In order for a romance novel to deliver a satisfying conclusion, the reader must believe that the characters deserve happiness, that they deserve the love and respect of a partner. If the reader doesn’t believe the characters worthy of love, the book inevitably falls flat. (Sebastian 2018)

In romances with disabled protagonists, disability itself is rarely a barrier to love, regardless of whether it is a cure narrative or not. In fact, the protagonists of disability romances generally have a positive attitude towards falling in love and developing a romantic relationship with a disabled individual (Cheyne 2019, 144), or as is the case in the present paper, with one who is perceived to be mad.

Despite the numerous warnings about Ian and Lawrence being mad, Beth and Georgie are not discouraged from building a relationship with them, which gradually progresses from acquaintance to romance. By having the love interests perceive the protagonists in this way, Ashley and Sebastian offer a very much-needed representation of a romantic relationship in which the neurodivergent person is loved unconditionally by a partner who fully accepts them as they are. Most importantly, Beth and Georgie repeatedly insist that Ian and Lawrence are not mad; they are simply different. They also never argue madness as the issue during disagreements, as opposed to Ian and Lawrence, who believe their madness to be the main cause:

> “You’d take the word of a madman?” he asked.

> “You’re not a madman.”
> “I was put into that asylum for a reason. I couldn’t convince the commission that I was sane.” (Ashley 2011, 76)

> But Georgie hadn’t come to Penkellis expecting anything resembling normal. Nor had he seen any evidence of the earl’s madness, however. If untidiness, rudeness, and fits of mild violence constituted madness, then Mayfair was filled with madmen—just ask any lord’s servants. (Sebastian 2017, 24)

> “I’ve been here for two weeks, and I’m still waiting to see evidence of this madness.” Turner’s voice was clipped, ironic. If he had displayed the faintest trace of sympathy, Lawrence would have found it easier to dismiss his words as so much charity or flattery. “I have to say, I’m fairly disappointed. I had hoped for some good old-fashioned howling at the moon, and all you do is build ingenious inventions and eat too much ham.” (Sebastian 2017, 95–96)

Although such behaviour is expected of a love interest, their overall perception of madness as a difference rather than a deficit hints at the contemporary neurodiversity paradigm, which challenges the notion that neurodivergent people should be seen as having a disorder. Instead, it argues that there is no “normal” way one’s mind should function and the various forms of neurodivergence should therefore be perceived as a difference. A similar point regarding the arbitrariness of the concept of normal can also be found in Mary Balogh’s *Simply Perfect* (2008), in which the female protagonist Claudia notes that definitions of normality are socially constructed, commenting that

> “…*all* girls are different from the norm. In other words, the norm does not exist except in the minds of those who like tidy statistics,” (2009, 114).

According to Rodas, the qualities that define autism—such as unconventional sociality, expressions of emotions and sensitivity—are also the characteristics which consistently have been used to justify the dehumanisation of autistic individuals (2018, 101). When one of the characters dehumanises Ian or Lawrence or calls them mad, Beth and Georgie do not hesitate to defend them by enumerating their positive characteristics instead. The point of difference is reiterated, regardless of whether the other person is a stranger or a family member, further supporting the use of the neurodiversity paradigm in the novels:

> “Is he a real devil?” she whispered.

> “The dog?” Barnabus was enthusiastically rolling around in chicken shite. “He’s much the same as any other dog, only larger.”
>
> “No, him.” She tilted her chin in the direction of Penkellis.
>
> “The earl? No, he’s only different. He’s also very large.” (Sebastian 2017, 68)

> “Ian is—“ Hart broke off and swung away to stare into the multicolored sky.
>
> “What? A madman?”
>
> “No.” The word was harsh. “He’s… vulnerable.”
>
> “He’s stubborn and smart and does exactly what he pleases.” (Ashley 2011, 174)

An interesting, shared aspect of how madness is characterised in both novels is the link that Ashley and Sebastian make between madness and/as homosexuality. In *The Lawrence Brown Affair,* the romance is between two men. Consequently, homosexuality is integral to the story and Lawrence’s characterization, especially in terms of how he perceives his own sexuality. To manage his attraction to men, Lawrence regularly joined his older brother Percy and his friends to drink and smoke excessively:

> But Percy’s set had all been utterly crackbrained, a bunch of half-mad, thoroughly drunk, opium-eating libertines. Any practice or desire Lawrence found in common with them seemed proof of his own incipient madness. (Sebastian 2017, 39)

Alcohol also helped him tolerate social situations. Substance abuse is a common masking strategy employed by autistic people to mask their autistic traits or to aid them in maintaining the “mask” during social interactions in order to appear normal (Price 108; Bargiela et al. 3287). Alcohol, cigarettes and even drugs are the most readily available forms of temporary relief in such situations, since their presence and consumption are usually expected (Sedgewick, Hull, and Ellis 2021, chap. 4). Therefore, by associating with his brother’s friends whom he considers to be fellow madmen and partaking in common activities which are socially acceptable for titled men in late nineteenth century, Lawrence temporarily achieves a sense of normalcy and sanity. Since Lawrence himself so profoundly associates his homosexuality with his madness, it can be considered a further contribution to reading him as an autistic.

In addition, Lawrence believes that his homosexuality is the cause of his madness and a major part of the reason why he isolates himself:

> “Is that why you avoid people?” Turner asked.
>
> “What?” Lawrence panted.

> “Do you think your . . . tendencies disqualify you for human company? That simply by being around another man you’ll contaminate him? Because if it is, I’ll let you know that isn’t how it works at all.” (Sebastian 2017, 95)

Homosexuality is also associated with madness in *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie*. One of Ian’s acquaintances, Arden, a patient in the asylum at the same time as Ian, was institutionalised for being openly homosexual:

> “Arden was in the asylum with me.”
>
> “So I gathered. He doesn’t look insane.”
>
> Disgust flickered across Ian’s face. “His father had him committed, wanted the doctors to cure him of his affliction any way possible.”
>
> Beth glanced to where Arden was speaking to Graves by the hazard table. They had their heads together, Arden’s nose almost on Graves’s cheek. Graves clamped a gloved hand on Arden’s elbow, then softened his grip and moved his hand to Arden’s back.
>
> “Mr. Arden prefers the company of gentlemen,” Beth concluded.
>
> “Yes, he’s an unnatural.” (Ashley 2011, 128)

There is a proven connection between autism and homosexuality. Statistically, people on the spectrum identify as non-heterosexual in significantly greater numbers than neurotypical people (Mendes and Maroney 2019, 19). Recent studies found that 24% of 129 single autistic adults identified as being homosexual or bisexual (Byers, Nichols, and Voyer 2013, 2624–25) and a study by Goldie A. McQuaid et.al concluded that the number can be as high as 41% (2023, 14). With similar results, a meta-analysis of nine studies of autistic adolescents and adults conducted by Pecora et al. found that 15–35% of all participants identified as either homosexual or bisexual (2016, 3544). The presence of homosexuality in association with madness in both novels can therefore be considered an additional contribution to reading Ian and Lawrence as autistic.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to present a neurodivergent reading of the protagonists of Jennifer Ashley’s *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and Cat Sebastian’s *The Lawrence Browne Affair*, arguing that through the behaviour of the love interests and their treatment of the protagonists, the novels provide a historical context for the contemporary neurodiversity paradigm. Despite

numerous warnings from the other characters, their distinctive personalities and behaviours are seen as differences by their love interests. In contrast, the other characters in the novels view Ian and Lawrence as mad, implying they are not of sound mind. The conceptualisation of the protagonists' madness as a difference rather than as a disorder or impairment is particularly important, especially considering the time period in which the novels are set.

Through characters in novels such as *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* and *The Lawrence Brown Affair*, authors can direct the reader's attention to an issue that they otherwise might not be aware of. They have the platform to create and subsequently promote positive representation of the autism spectrum and neurodiversity in general. Specifically, what both novels ultimately achieve is telling the stories of two men who are "mad", yet they do not change to fit into society, nor are they "cured" by their partner's love. Instead, their character development is in allowing themselves to be their most genuine selves in a safe environment, unconditionally loved by a supportive partner.

However, since the novels are set in the nineteenth century and the label "autism" did not exist at that time, the protagonists are considered mad. By making the connection between what has been referred to as madness in the past and what is known as autism today in the context of reading fictional characters such as Ian and Lawrence, a similar process could be applied by historians to achieve a better understanding of the lives and treatment of those who were autistic in the past. This has already been done, for example, by Rab Houston and Uta Frith in their book *Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue*, which presents extensive evidence that the eponymous eighteenth-century Scottish laird who had his marriage annulled on the grounds of an alleged lack of mental capacity, would today be considered autistic.

While historians are frequently cautious about applying contemporary classifications and frameworks to past societies, as doing so risks misrepresenting socio-historical contexts, in this specific case, the only potential issue is with the specific word used as a label, and not the concept itself. People who are today referred to as autistic have always existed, although, due to the different socio-historical contexts, they would have experienced different stimuli and been subject to different societal norms and notions of the self that shaped their behaviour and interactions than those in modern times. However, this difference is not so substantial that there would be no basis for making the connection.

It is of course impossible to “diagnose” Ian and Lawrence as autistic since they are fictional characters and autism as a distinct condition would not be recognised for 60 more years after the 1880s, when the plot of *The Madness of Lord Ian Mackenzie* is set, and it would be another almost 4 decades before it is officially included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1980 as a specific diagnosis. Furthermore, using a concept with such medical connotation as a diagnosis would contradict the main point of the novels as well as the present paper. What is important here is to recognise that characters such as Ian and Lawrence exhibit traits that align with what is known as autism today. How they think and their unique ways of interacting with the world are central to who they are, distinguishing them in meaningful ways.

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