MALS Quarterly Mission Statement

The Dartmouth MALS Quarterly is the journal for the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program at Dartmouth College. The publication is broad in scope, and accepts submissions of any scholarly or creative work from current MALS students and all MALS alumni. It is a priority that all work is accessible to full disciplinary range of MALS community members.

Our primary goal is to publish the best current work being done in MALS from the four tracks: Globalization, Cultural Studies, Creative Writing, and General Studies. Through publishing this work, we intend to initiate and encourage scholarly dialogue within the MALS community.

Submissions may be sent to: MALS.Quarterly@dartmouth.edu

Cover Photograph: JENNIFER CURRIER

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Editor’s Note:

I first read the story of Uncle Reggie a year ago, when it was a mere twelve-page draft; an assignment for Professor Tom Powers’ Narrative Nonfiction course. I remember sitting around a large wooden table during the workshop discussion, laughter ringing off the exposed metal pipes that snaked across the ceiling. Every person in the class raved over Reggie: the masterful dialogue; the colorful characters; the lush, tactile descriptions. Our main critique was that it just wasn’t long enough.

Since that time, I have actively pursued Daniel Mukhsian to expand the tale and submit it to the Quarterly. And believe me, it has been quite the chase. Like all writers, Dan is extremely self-critical and never satisfied that ‘good enough’ is good enough for now. Once I pried it from his fists and got a chance to read the final final final version, I knew I had something very special to share with the MALS community. Please enjoy “The Resurrection of Uncle Reggie” on page 24.

Fortunately for the Quarterly staff, the other students who are featured in this issue were not as challenging to pursue. Julian Fenn’s piece detailing Dependency and Neo-Liberalism (page 4) is detailed, yet approachable. And Dustin Sewell’s Globalization paper “Computer Science and Gender Inequality: Are Women Allowed Equal Space in the Silicon Sandbox Yet?” (page 13) shines a light on the interesting example of gender equality, and possibly female-domination, in Malaysian IT fields.

Once again, I will take the opportunity here to plead with the students and alumni of the MALS Program to submit creative and academic works. Please, please, please. Our modest publication credit will bulk up your growing CV and give your fellow students a chance to see what amazing work you’ve been doing here at Dartmouth. The submission deadline is rolling. We would love to hear from you, (please don’t make us hunt you down).

Thank you for reading the MALS Quarterly!

Stephanie Reighart
Editor-In-Chief
CONTRIBUTORS

DANIEL MUKSIAN:
Prior to enrolling in MALS, I taught high school English and coached boys’ soccer in my home state of Rhode Island after graduating from St. Lawrence University. I credit SLU professors Singer, Ponce, De-aniel, Cowser, and Sondgren for any strides I made with my writing. Here at Dartmouth I owe any continued growth with my writing to professors Lechuk, Powers, and Kreiger. Thanks to professor Kreiger’s confidence in me and her guidance both in and out of the classroom I have been able to stay afloat since arriving in Hanover two summers ago. I must also thank those classmates who were kind enough to read my work outside of class and to Wole and Carole in the MALS office for their sincere interest in my sanity. In Hanover I enjoy playing basketball at noon a few days week, juggling a soccer ball around Occum Pond, woodworking, the Dartmouth/Loew film series, $2 PBRs at the golf course, and throwing parties so my fellow classmates can dance since it is not allowed in town. I see myself back in the classroom soon enough, either in New England, San Francisco, or overseas. I’ll have to discuss this with the dogs first, of course.

JULIAN FENN:
I grew up in the small farm town of Wilson, New York and received my Bachelors degree from the State University of New York at Geneseo in Sociology and International Relations in 2009. I came to Dartmouth in the hopes that it would help me figure out what I want to do with my life, and so far it seems to be working out alright. I really enjoy reading, writing, and bird watching, and hope one day to get my PhD in Sociology, or at least find a position that pays enough to allow me to pay off my student loans over the course of a few decades.

JENNIFER CURRIER:
I arrived in the Upper Valley from the warm, dry state of New Mexico, where I earned my Bachelor’s degree in Biology and minored in Psychology. During and immediately following my undergraduate studies, I spent time in the marine mammal training field where I trained dolphins in Florida and Hawaii, and then returned to New Mexico to work as a part-time teacher of middle and high school math and science. I joined the MALS program to gain experience in creative writing, a passion I have always had.

GREG HILL:
I am currently working on my creative writing thesis in West Hartford, Connecticut. I plan on submitting a collection of poems for my final MALS project.

DUSTIN SEWELL:
While I may never fully appreciate my less traveled roads, I can offer that the sum of my parts were molded and framed by the life and times of Alaska, North Carolina, Massachusetts, California, Washington, Virginia, Mexico, Canada, Honduras, Japan, and Korea. Traveling through, between, around, and within these disparate geographic settings, I did “hard time” in 13 different schools, served 8 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, and sold my soul one paycheck at a time to the American corporate machine for the past decade. Now, as fortune’s favor would have it, I find myself trying to live deliberately in the whispering woods of New Hampshire.

STEPHANIE REIGHART and JOSEPH SHAFER:
We participated in the MALS sponsored Oxford Summer School this past Summer Term. It was fantastic!
An Investigation Into Dependency and Neo-Liberalism

JULIAN FENN

“The power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated when compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.”
—John Maynard Keynes (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg 24)

INTRODUCTION
When the words “dependency theory” are brought up in casual conversation (as they so often are by the average American), images of mass suffering, neo-Marxists handing out literature on a street corner, and armed peasants roaming the countryside tend to come to mind. Asked about “Neo-liberalism,” one might imagine huge Nike factories in Vietnam, a meeting of the WTO, or Ronald Reagan behind a podium extolling the virtues of the free market. But what, really, do these terms mean—and where did they come from? What currents of thought were circulating to which these theories were responses? These questions must be unpacked before one can really grasp the ideas of dependency and neo-liberalism, understand why they make certain claims, and offer a meaningful critique of their shortcomings.

The history of dependency goes back to the late ’40s, as the map of the world was being re-drawn and colonial empires were beginning to crumble around the world. With the independence of India in 1947, a wave of what came to be known as “de-colonization” led to the creation of many new autonomous nation-states, no longer subject to the direct control of a European power. The wave was huge—between 1947 and the mid ’80s, the number of countries would swell from 55 to over 150 (Yergin and Stanislaw, pg. 57). Due to the legacy of exploitative Western colonialism, most of these nations found themselves being born into the global world with very limited infrastructure, little capital, and absolutely no industrial base. Spurred on by humanitarian aims and the newly created United Nations, the developed world felt itself obligated to bring these nations “up to speed,” assuming that those nations wished to follow the Western trajectory and become “modern” states. Quickly, a literature grew up around the idea of developing the third world into a group of “modern” states, and modernization theory, the father of dependency theory, was born.

Without delay, the Western world set out to test its theories on modernization and bring the third world happily along the uni-linear path to development and wellbeing. At first, this meant producing primary goods and exporting them to the developed world in return for industrial goods (So, pg. 93). After a few years, however, Raul Presbishi, a Latin American scholar and head of the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), denounced this arrange-
ment on the grounds that it would lead a deterioration in the terms of trade and limit Latin America’s ability to accumulate capital (So, pg. 93). In what came to be known as the “ECLA Manifesto,” Prebisch argued for a new method by which Latin American countries raised trade barriers and produced domestically what they had been importing from abroad. This method, reproduced in other countries around the world, was known as import substitution industrialization (ISI), and it too failed, as it “simply shifted [import dependency] from consumption goods to capital goods (Hettne in So, pg. 94)” and led to “balance-of-payments pressures, negative redistribution of income, declining GNP and investment rates, flight of capital, and so on (So, pg. 145).” However, some saw potential in many of the ideas espoused by ECLA, and these—in radical form, would help make up the core of classical dependency theory.

Concurrent with ECLA was another series of events that would help shape dependency theory and radicalize many of its ideas. In the Chinese and Cuban Communist revolutions of 1949 and 1959 peasants overthrew their governments and set up a Communist state, bypassing the stage of bourgeois revolution and industrialization stated by Marx as a necessary component to establishment a Socialist society. These events threw a wrench into the gears of Orthodox Marxist ideology and spawned a new generation of Marxist scholars. These Neo-Marxists dismissed the idea of the two step revolution and advocated that the oppressed nations of the world sever all ties with the capitalist countries and initiate socialist revolutions regardless of their place in the historical process. When a number of these scholars combined their ideological beliefs with the experience of ECLA and ISI in the third world essays like Frank’s The Development of Underdevelopment were born, and with it the beginnings of the dependency theory literature as a challenge to the dominant modernization paradigm.

The history of Neo-liberalism can be traced back even further—to Friedrich von Hayak and his experiences during the First World War. As a young man, Hayak fought in the Great War on the side of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and saw that empire crumble beneath his feet. The things he saw during the war would affect him for the rest of his life—imbuing him with a distrust for large, influential governments and a revulsion to nationalism—which he saw as the driving force behind the carnage of his youth. Hayak came out of the war hoping to help build a better, more rational world, and quickly came under the sway of Ludwig von Mises, a prominent member of the Austrian School of economics (Yergin & Stanislaw pg. 124). Under von Mises, Hayak had another experience that would later influence his writing and his worldview. As von Mises’ assistant, Hayak found his salary rise from five hundred kronen a month to over one million per month—he saw first hand what inflation could do to the value of money and its ability to purchase the necessities of life. Later he went on to teach at the London School of Economics and eventually wrote The Road to Serfdom—a work that greatly emphasized the role of the market and the dangers of macroeconomic planning and government interference in the economic world, in large part because of his fears founded in the First World War and the horrors of the Nazi regime. This work would greatly influence some of the biggest players who later shaped the neo-liberal agenda.

Across the ocean, another economist was busy creating what would come to be known as the “Chicago school” of economics, which also emphasized a laissez-faire, free market, de-regulated economy. Milton Friedman believed that, when left to their own devices, markets produced the best outcomes, and that prices were always the best allocators of resources (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 128). He even went so far as to say that “private unregulated monopoly” was the lesser of the evils “when compared to government regulation and ownership (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg 129).” While at the University of Chicago, Friedman developed the idea of monetarism, and did more than any other American economist to push the free-market agenda forward.

At the same time Hayak produced his seminal works in near obscurity and Friedman produced his Nobel prize winning work, another economist’s work was re-shaping the way governments and markets operated. Keynesianism found a home in post-WWII Europe and America, and drown out any alternative economic models for several decades. In a Keynesian system, the state was a conscious player in the national economy, functioning by means of macroeconomic adjustments (like upping government spending in times of depression) in order to maintain optimal employment and minimal loss to the average citizen in times of economic slump. During the “30 glorious years” lasting roughly from 1945 to 1975, this system worked well. Unemployment in France, for example, stood at 1.3% between 1945 and 1969 (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 26), and the American middle class grew by 23% (class notes 7/21). However, this began to change in the early 1970s. In 1971, Nixon put a freeze on wages and prices in an effort to curb an ever growing rate of inflation (Yergin & Stanislaw pg 44). However these had only a temporary effect. Coupled with this was record unemployment, at 9.2% in 1974 (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 46). The ensuing economic crisis was christened “stagflation”.

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This phenomenon was new, and had never been experienced before. The Keynesian model had no solution for it. Keynesianism had hit the wall (or so neo-liberals claim).

It was this “failure” of government guided economy that set the stage for groups like the Center for Policy Studies, the Institute for Public Affairs, and the Hoover institute along with a handful of charismatic, conservative politicians to challenge the Keynesian model and the welfare state as a whole. With Hayak and Friedman in hand, a new type of conservative arrived on the political scene and took power both in Britain and the United States. As Yergin and Stanslaw put it, “What began around the seminar tables in research institutes in the 1970s and took shape in the Thatcher program of the 1980s would do much to set the global agenda for the 1990s (pg. 75)”. The neo-liberal revolution had begun.

CLAIMS OF CLASSICAL DEPENDENCY THEORY

The classical dependency school makes a number of claims regarding the world system and the relationship between nations within it. According to the dependency theorists, the world is bifurcated into two unequal branches at the national level. Frank labels these branches the “metropolis” (the strong, imperial states or first world) and the “satellite” (the weak, formerly colonial states or third world). Others, like Dos Santos, refer to these two regions as the “core” and the “periphery”, but mean essentially the same thing. In this bifurcated world an exploitative trading process plays out, to the detriment of the Third World states. As evidence of this fact, Dos Santos points out that for every dollar that entered dependent countries between 1946 and 1967, $2.73 were transferred back to the core (So, pg. 100).

This theory operates on several basic assumptions. First, it is assumed to be a general process, applicable to all of the Third World (So, pg. 104). Second, it is seen as a process imposed externally upon the periphery—that is, as a result of happenings outside of a nation’s borders (So, pg. 104). Third, it is seen as an economic process, disregarding factors such as culture and politics (So, pg. 104). Finally, the process is seen as incompatible with development. In their view, the dependent nations can never escape underdevelopment so long as they remain in their subservient position. In short, “The imposition of external conditions on the Third World countries results in dependency, and dependency in turn steers Third World countries in the direction of underdevelopment (So, pg. 129)”.

This naturally leads to the assumption that all contact with the core countries is harmful for the periphery, and that nothing good can be gotten from contact with the core (So, pg. 105). As such, the dependency school recommended two things—first that the masses of the periphery nations take up arms and engage in a Socialist revolution so that the State (i.e. the people as a whole) can run the affairs of the country to the benefit of the masses. Second, it is recommended that these (socialist or still capitalist) nations, like China in ’49 and Cuba in ’59, pull themselves out of the global economy and become self reliant, so as to avoid exploitation, debt traps, and unequal terms of trade (So, pg. 105). By following these measures, the dependency theorists claim that countries can pull themselves out of poverty and develop along their own lines.

These claims can be substantiated by several studies and sets of statistics: First, one can look at Latin America’s ’debt trap’ problem as discussed by the authors of The Monthly Review. This problem began in the early ’70s when Latin American countries, with encouragement from the West, began borrowing large sums of money to spend on social programs and infrastructure under the assumption that they could use their export revenues and oil money to manage the debt without much trouble. However, under compound interest that rose dramatically in the early ’80s due to massive borrowing by the US and a slump in the oil market, these sums quickly became enormous. Brazil, for example went from having $4 billion in debt in the early 1970s to $121 billion by 1989 (So, pg. 116). Similar troubles were found in Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, and Colombia (So, pg. 116). Under these conditions Mexico found itself by the late ’80s to be spending 80% of its export earnings on interest payments on its massive debt, without touching the principle (So, pg. 116). When the Latin American countries couldn’t keep up, the IMF and World Bank set up austerity measures and instituted structural readjustment, effectively putting them in control of how these nations spent their money. The authors at The Monthly Review saw this crisis and the methods used to resolve it as evidence of financial dependency and imperialism in the Third World, with the Latin American countries forced to subject their spending to First World scrutiny and give up what surpluses they could accumulate and turn them over to the First World to pay up on debts with outrageous interest and unfair terms.

Some other statistics also reveal trends that tend to support the claims of the dependency school. First, in looking at the income gap, Sub-Saharan Africa has gone from making 12.1% of the income of the developed world in 1960 to making only 4.1% in 1999 (Robinson, Rojas. International Capital: A Threat to Human Dignity and Life on Earth. Avail-
able at: www.rrojasdatabase.info/Globalss.doc). Robinson also points out that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, GDP as a percentage of aggregate GDP (for 156 countries) has dropped from 2.5% in 1960 to 1.1% in 1999. Finally he notes that, globally, income for the bottom 20% of the population dropped 21% between 1960 and 1993 while income for the top 20% increased by 107%.

Add to this Misagh’s (class notes 7/7) observation that conditions actually worsened for 54 countries between 1990 and 2001, and one can make a compelling argument that dependence is very real and making life worse for a large segment of the global population. The prospects for Marxist revolution to solve this problem, however, seem slim and bring us to our next point of interest.

CRITIQUE OF CLASSICAL DEPENDENCY THEORY

Classical dependency theory has its share of critics, from both inside and outside the dependency school. The “new” dependency studies probably provide the most thorough critique of the classic studies as they attempt to rectify what they see as problems within them. These include rethinking the claims that the dependency process is general, external, economic, and incompatible with development. Concrete case studies also provide a solid critique of these, and other, claims of the classic dependency school and, indeed, the logic of the school as a whole.

Cardoso is perhaps the best known critic of the classical studies from within the dependency school. His work on associated-dependent development in Brazil in particular challenges the four basic assumptions of the classical theorists. First, in choosing to study a particular place (Brazil) at a particular time (during and just after the 1964 military take over), Cardoso challenges the assumption that dependency is a general process. Instead, he makes it clear that dependency can play out differently in different places and should be analyzed on a case by case basis. Second, in his analysis on Brazil, Cardoso emphasizes the role of the military and local bourgeoisie, challenging the assumption that dependence is a purely externally imposed phenomenon (So, pg. 142). Third, his focus on the military state dismantling workers’ organizations to achieve a high degree of political tranquility and promoting the ideology of social mobility (So, pg. 142) suggests a sociopolitical, and not economic, process taking place. Finally, he clearly argues that dependency and development are not mutually exclusive in writing, “to some extent, the interests of foreign corporations become compatible with the internal prosperity of the dependent countries. In this, sense they help to promote development (In So, pg. 141).” Thus, in one study, a legitimate critique of all four of classical dependency’s basic claims can be found.

More broadly, a number of case studies exist that question the legitimacy of dependency theory as a whole, as their history and trajectory seem to invalidate many, even all, of the basic claims of the dependency school. The first of these is the second largest of the “little tigers”, Taiwan (with a population of just over twenty three million). Its economic trajectory over the past one hundred years stands in direct contrast to even the most basic tenets of dependency theory. In 1910 Taiwan was a largely agrarian Japanese colony with a suppressed entrepreneurial class (Harrison, pg. 89). By 1987 it had a flourishing industrial economy with a per capita GNP of about $5,000, a literacy rate of over 90%, an average life expectancy of over seventy years, and a highly equitable income distribution (Harrison, pg. 86). In fact, the income distribution in Taiwan in 2000, at .326 (GINI coefficient) was more equitable than the United States, at .408 (UN Legislative Council Secretariat, available at: http://www.scribd.com/doc/328232/United-Nations-Gini-Coefficient). How did they achieve this incredible growth that the dependency theorists claimed was impossible? In several ways, all of which the dependency theorists abhor. First, they accepted massive amounts of aid from the United States following the Second World War—so much so that American aid counted for 40% of their gross domestic capital in the ’50s (Harrison, pg. 91). In all, they accepted $1.4 billion from the US between 1949 and 1965, a move that dependency theorists would claim would lead only to economic dependency and an opening for imperialist exploitation. Second, after a brief period of import substitution industrialization, the Taiwanese jumped head first into export led industrialization, under the watchful eye of an active (authoritarian) government. But how did they achieve this feat while so many other countries fail? Harrison argues that the “engine for the miracle seems to have come from within (Pg. 86)”. A modified Confusion ethic, combined with a few economic advantages seem to have been the triggers for this economic miracle that defies dependency logic.

A second case study involves dependencies model states, China and Cuba. According to the dependency model these countries should be among the most developed in the world. Both did exactly as the classical theorists prescribed—engaged in Socialist revolution and then closed themselves off from the global economy (or at least the economy of the West) in order to build themselves up without imperialist hegemony. While both nations have been quite successful
in some areas (both nations built up excellent education and healthcare systems fairly soon after revolution), time proved that they were unable to develop without access to the world market. China began to liberalize in the early '70s and now, despite being nominally Communist, it has one of the greatest capitalist economies in the world. Cuba, too, has liberalized over time, though to a far lesser degree—as is reflected in its GDP per capita of just $9,700 (CIA factbook, available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html). As such, the “model states” of dependency themselves have invalidated its prescriptions for development.

CLAIMS OF NEO-LIBERALISM

As Misagh stated in class, Neo-liberalism is not a unified theory. It consists of policy recommendations to reform the post-war economy (class notes 7/19). When Thatcher and Reagan came to power under the guidance of the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Hoover Foundation they certainly came prepared with quite a few recommendations—in tended to change the shape and basic function of government in the Western world (among other things). Herbert Stein summed the ideology up well:

“We were at the end of two decades in which govern ment spending, government taxes, government deficits, government regulations and government expansion of the money supply had all increased rapidly, and at the end of those two decades the inflation rate was high, real economic growth was slow and our ‘normal’ unemployment rate…was higher than ever. Nothing was more natural than the conclusion that these problems were caused by all these government increases and would be cured by reversing, or at least stopping them (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 47).”

Neo-liberalism has a number of components, mostly concerning the relationship between government and the economy. It has taken on various forms depending on where it has been implemented (or contemplated), but in general neo-liberals can be said to believe in the following: the privatization of state enterprises; the deregulation of the economy to promote competition; the elimination of price controls; the elimination of government subsidies, except promoting primary education, primary healthcare, and infrastructure investment (i.e. the elimination of social welfare programs); moderate taxation; trade liberalization, the elimination of import restrictions and the lowering of tariffs; the simplification of licensing; and encouragement of investment in transnational corporations (class notes 7/19). One can probably add the disempowerment of organized labor, the lowering of labor standards, the reduction of the size of federal governments, and allowing the market to cycle naturally (not resorting to Keynesian control mechanisms during times of depression) to that list. In short, neo-liberals believe in the supremacy of the free market and the submission of governments to it in the name of efficiency and economic freedom.

According to the neo-liberals, adherence to these policy recommendations will have a number of positive effects. First, allowing the market to cycle naturally and eliminating price controls will keep inflation low, which they claim is more important than trying to assure full employment as in a Keynesian/Welfare state model. Second, they argue that reducing taxes will bolster investment, leading to higher growth and greater government revenue (class notes 7/21). Third, they believe that liberalizing trade and reducing trade barriers/tariffs will increase the overall volume of trade and allow nations to fill the niche they are best suited for, to the benefit of all parties. It will also allow the developing nations to accumulate capital and begin down the path of modernization. This, they argue is the key to development in the Third World. Fourth, investing in transnational corporations will allow them to grow and bring jobs to the third world, aiding them in their attempts to develop and modernize. Fifth, the privatization of state-run enterprises will allow them to operate more efficiently, and therefore provide better products/services to the consumer/citizen. Sixth, they argue that eliminating subsidies will facilitate unfettered competition, forcing those who are not fit out of the market and raising overall efficiency. Seventh, by attacking labor and reducing wages, neo-liberals claim that profit margins will rise, allowing companies to re-invest and strengthen the economy. Finally, the elimination of social welfare programs will have a number of positive effects including: giving people incentive to ‘pull themselves up by their bootstraps’, forcing services onto the private sector where they will be more efficiently run, and lighten government spending substantially, allowing the government to be that much closer to running a balanced budget.

One example of these principles in action is the privatization of the giant Italian oil firm ENI. Originally a “state champion” owned by the State, corruption, inflexibility and inefficiency had brought the company to its knees by the mid ’90s. Its corporate culture, mode of operation, pride and sense of mission, and its ability to attract skills and mobilize technology had faded (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 116). It was losing money, and its taxes and revenues had “turned into subsidies and obstacles to growth (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 116).”
Changes needed to be made. In 1995 the CEO of the enterprise, Franco Barnabe, came to America and proclaimed, “We have to privatize. There is no other choice (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 115).” Later that year, ENI shares were put up on European and American stock markets, signaling the transition to private ownership (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 116). With the loss of government subsidies and access to the public coffers, ENI transformed itself almost overnight and became a profitable and efficient corporation, earning $3 billion in profits in 1996. This was one of neo-liberalisms success stories. In this case, privatization worked and the market reigned in an unwieldy and ineffective company. New Zealand in the late 1980s and early ‘90s represents another successful attempt at neo-liberal reform, underscoring many of the claims made above. Prior to reform, New Zealand’s politico-economic system was a typical post-war welfare State, with “cradle-to-grave” protection, heavy economic regulation and economic policies designed to ensure full employment (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 122). Per capita income was falling relative to other countries, and debt as a share of GDP was on the rise. This went on until 1984, when high unemployment and a foreign exchange crisis led to a change in government. The new Labour government embarked on a rapid program of liberalization that had dramatic effects (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 122). Over the course of a few years, this government de-regulated and privatized state owned businesses, eliminated trade barriers, and slashed taxes—essentially following all of the suggestions of the neo-liberal camp. Soon thereafter unemployment and inflation went down, growth increased, and debt as a share of GDP went down (Yergin & Stanislaw, pg. 122). Essentially, the liberalization worked, and in this case the claims of the neo-liberal camp were validated.

**CRITIQUES OF NEO-LIBERALISM**

The other day I put up a post on Facebook discussing critiques of neo-liberalism. One of my undergraduate professors responded to the post by writing “we are living the critique.” After some thought, and a thorough reading of Lester Thurow, I found myself amazed by the fundamental truth behind his comment. The state of America in 2010 is indeed a reflection of twenty years (Reagan-Bush-Bush) of neo-liberal policymaking—and it is not a very flattering image. The fact of the matter is that the average American is worse off today than she was thirty years ago. This claim can be validated in a number of ways. For starters, despite a 36% rise in GDP between 1973 and 1995, the real hourly wages of nonsupervisory workers declined by 14% (Thurow, pg. 2). This decline covers approximately 4/5 of the full time male workforce, the bottom fifth of which saw losses of 23% (Thurow, pg. 23). Another strong indicator is the fact that between 1979 and 1989 the percentage of full-time male workers aged eighteen to twenty-four who earned less than $12,195 (1990 dollars) rose from 18% to 40% (Thurow, pg. 26). Meanwhile, CEO pay has grown six-fold since 1980 with the 2009 average at $9.25 million while the average median income sat at $50,000, approximately 185 times less (Cracking the CEO Pay Puzzle, available at: http://www.american.com/archive/2008/march-april-magazine-contents/cracking-the-ceo-pay-puzzle) (Executive Pay Watch, available at: http://www.aflcio.org/corporatewatch/paywatch/). As such it comes as no surprise that the US finds its inequality levels (.408 GINI coefficient) sitting with Cambodia (.404), Turkmenistan (.408), Senegal (.413) and Singapore (.425) while other developed countries like Denmark and Germany find themselves at .247 and .289 respectively (UN Legislative Council Secretariat, available at: http://www.scribd.com/doc/328232/United-Nations-Gini-Coefficient). On these points Thurow remarks: “No country not experiencing a revolution or a military defeat with a subsequent occupation has probably ever had as rapid or as widespread an increase in inequality as has occurred in the United States in the past two decades. Never before have Americans seen the current pattern of real-wage reductions in the face of a rising per capita GDP (pg. 42).” Coupled with rising inequality and falling wages has been deterioration in educational standards, resulting in America’s falling behind most of the industrial world in math and science (class notes, 7/21). It is said that mine is the first generation in American history that will not make more money than that of my parents. If current trends, many started under Reagan in the mid ‘80s, continue, I have no doubt that this will in fact be the case. In fact, I’d bet on a worse fate than that.
ing over one hundred more than doubled. He also points out that in this period those employed in industry grew by nearly 80 percent, from 110,588 to 197,605 (though it is worth pointing out that this is a relatively small portion of the population, and thus evidence based on percentages can be somewhat misleading) (O’Hearn, pg 579). This program came to an end in the 1950s, though, as a result of pressures from the US and economic recession. It was replaced by the neo-liberals favored ELI approach to development which, O’Hearn argues, had disastrous effects on Ireland’s economy and rate of growth. He points out that, as ELI set in, transnationals began to set up shop in the country, and that this resulted in the destruction of many domestic industries. For example, he cites that between 1973 and 1986 eighty-five to ninety percent of jobs in pre-1955 clothing and textile firms were lost (pg 580). He goes on to argue that, despite a huge inflow of foreign investment and a commitment to the ELI model, Ireland showed little growth. He writes: “Ireland’s annual rate of economic growth over the 30 years of ELI was the lowest in Europe, well below rates of growth in the European periphery (4-6 percent) and the average rates of growth for upper income LDCs (about 5 percent) (pg. 586).” He notes that these growth rates actually dipped into the negative after Ireland joined the EEC and was forced into full-fledged free trade (pg. 587). So, with Ireland we find a case in which the facts run counter to the claims of the neo-liberals. Ireland is one of the few examples of a democratic state whose government stayed out of economic affairs (unlike Taiwan and Korea) that attempted ELI, and it was a failure. The process did more harm than good, and that fact can still be seen in Ireland today. O’Hearn concludes: “The route of free trade, free enterprise, foreign penetration, and the new modernization is not the way to go (pg. 594)” and, in this case at least, I would have to agree.

CONCLUSIONS

The dependency theorists and neo-liberals do not have much in common. But they do share a common goal—to promote freedom and development around the world, so that the average person can lead a decent life. How far they have strayed from that goal in practice, however, is up for debate, and has in a way been the purpose of this paper. By offering critiques of these and other ways of the world, one can learn from them and perhaps create a new reality and a better society. Or at least better understand the one they live in. •

WORKS CITED


It is more correct to say I audited the class, rather than took it for credit. What I mean by that is I did not complete the assignment of writing a full-length screenplay for submission. I did read everyone else’s drafts scene by scene as they were submitted and passed around each week. What I do remember from the class is the professor’s insistence about dialogue: that plot should be apparent even with the sound muted. I have had the displeasure of verifying this on an overnight transatlantic flight in which the animated film playing for a sleeping boy in the row ahead of me was a most distracting light source. Tonight is also one of those nights when I cannot sleep, though this time I am not strapped into too small a chair in the middle of a row back by the wings. As the fog settles around a full moon, in my cold apartment I look out the window across the street to the neighbor one house over. His television is playing that same film, one where animals all talk, apparently, and despite a dearth of opposable thumbs the heroes are able to locate and rescue, in under two hours, the family of humans whose camping trip was saved only because everyone was able to set aside differences and work together. My own television is on mute too, showing one of those action movies from the eighties in which plot is an unnecessary distraction between gunfights and car chase sequences, and where every post-apocalyptic building explodes in unbelievable but stimulating detonations of excessive fuel. I would like to write a screenplay some day. Perhaps I can write about the man across the street. Life in his place is easy to follow without any sound. He may have a well-furnished home, but his girlfriend, who is into yoga and fruit smoothies, would—I can tell—rather be dating a screenwriter than a guy who watches cartoons.
Computer Science and Gender Inequality: Are women allowed equal space in the silicon sandbox yet?

DUSTIN SEWELL

Catherine MacKinnon (1982) makes a sardonic correlation when she writes “[s]exuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away” (p. 182). She argues that Marxist theory defines “work” as a social process—a process that shapes and molds that which is material with that which is social. People, as socially constructed beings, create value while work conducts it. At the heart of Marxism’s construction of work is the issue of control over distribution (e.g., hierarchical structures of class as they relate to production and capital). “Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument: the molding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes—women and men—which division underlies the totality of social relations” (p. 182). It is this relationship, as it applies to the genderization of technology—specifically in the computer science (CS) and information technology (IT) fields of education and employment—that will be examined further. Although academic scholarship offers a variety of investigations and hypotheses surrounding the phenomenon of male overrepresentation and control in CS and IT branches of education and employment, some scholars perceive Malaysia’s relative gender-neutrality, if not female dominance, of these fields as a cause for celebration and emulation. This paper intends to illustrate the complex socio-cultural substructure that allows Malaysian women access to these areas while maintaining traditionally constructed patriarchal methods of control.

Fiona Wilson (2003) proposes that “[t]he cultural association between masculinity and technology is hard to exaggerate” (p. 128). Her study, which focuses mainly in the United Kingdom (UK), attempts to tackle the issue of women’s manifest underrepresentation in CS despite a contemporary classroom emphasis on computing skills and a highly paid workforce in technology sectors of business (p. 127). She maintains that socio-cultural constructions have delineated the boundaries of IT education and work—boundaries which effectively keep women out of the silicon sandbox. One of the factors contributing to the gender division is how women are rarely involved in technical design and analysis; women are relegated to lower echelon work—assigned to positions more akin to clerical occupations (Roan and Whitehouse, 2007, p. 23). What this means is that computers and computing is evolving in masculine terms. As Wilson says, “[s]oftware is written primarily by and for men” (p. 129). She sees this as a mechanism for the “production and reproduction” of gender-stereotypes.

On the subject of gendered stereotypes, she illustrates that computer scientists are perceived to embody masculine traits (e.g., “hard headedness, single-mindedness, ambition, toughness;” Wilson, p. 128). As a result, women feel that CS, and technology in general, threatens their feminine image. Furthermore, ‘hackers’—a term used to describe people who use their intricate computing skills to engage in illegal activities—are associated with rebellious “bad boy” behavior, something prized by overtly masculine cultures. Hackers are perceived to be “incapable of human intimacy” (Wilson, p. 129; Varma 2007) and thereby deemed anti-feminine.

Further flaunting the gender divide are perceptions that women have ‘lesser’ technical skills than men. However, Wilson also argues that “skill is not some objectively identifiable quality but rather is an ideological category, one over which women continue to be denied the rights of contestation” (p. 128). In spite of her concession, she sees this pigeonhole propagating itself to the point where women inherently lack confidence in their technological skills and exhibit greater negativity towards computing (p. 129). She cites Turkle...
Wilson’s final argument on the culturally constructed gender-stereotyping of CS involves the perception that working on computers for a living is incompatible with raising a family. The highly dynamic nature of technology and expectation for long working hours raises feminine concern. The fear is that taking time off for family commitments will hinder their ability to keep up with changing technology and ably compete with the male dominated field (p. 136).

Roli Varma (2007) initially cites similar notions of gendered-stereotyping witnessed in CS, but refers to it as “Geek Culture.” She defines the term ‘geek’ as “slang for a person who has encyclopaedic [sic] knowledge of computing and is obsessively fascinated by it, but is socially inept” (p. 360). This is a definition closely aligned to Wilson’s view of hackers. Varma asserts that the typical geek identifies with a masculine fascination of working with ‘things’ rather than the feminine ideal of working with people. The highly intelligent yet socially clumsy geek is supposed to value connections to inanimate technology while devaluing human relationships. The technosavvy male also “exudes rationality and empirical knowledge, two central tenets of positivist philosophy that has underwritten scientific and patriarchal Western civilization for the past 150 years” (p. 360). It is this kind of long-standing patriarchal control of scientific fields of study that is working to promote a westernized rebellious loner machismo subtext sometimes associated with CS today. Today’s geek is rich like Bill Gates and today’s hacker is supposed to look like Keann Reeves in The Matrix trilogy.

The automobile, according to Varma, in US culture is emblematic of male “[m]achine or gadget fetishism” (p. 363). She claims that this is a perfect example of a person’s self-identity tied to machinery—a predominantly and universally male endeavor, or a boys club. Conversely, women, who are culturally believed to value human relationships and sensuality over inanimate machinery, are excluded from membership. These so-called feminine traits, also according to Varma, are why women have been able to break into the higher echelons of the legal and medical professions—occupations that require socialization skills and are seen as ‘cultured’—

(1988), who proposes that women reject computers as a method of ‘doing femininity.’ Media, Wilson contends, has also played a significant role in highlighting masculine imagery of technology (p. 136). The endless barrage of media’s portrayal of technology steeped in masculinity enhances women’s anxiety toward computing. It cements the view that men are supposed to be good with computers and women are not.

and not CS or IT. The perception battle revolves around a “centuries old division between emotion and reason in Western thought” (p. 363). Turkle (1984) maintains that there is a socially inherent need to sever any connection between “science and sensuality, between people who are good at dealing with things and people who are good at dealing with people’” (cited in Varma, p. 363). In this way, gender division in computing, or so it seems, is not a new issue, but rather a reinvention of archaic, culturally constructed dynamics of the male-female relationship.

Jay Vegso (2005) highlights the disproportional number of women studying computer science in higher education in the United States. Incoming freshmen interest in computer science majors, which peaked in 1999 and 2000, fell by 70 percent in the following five years—by 2005. “Alarmingly, the proportion of women who thought that they might major in CS [fell] to levels unseen since the early 1980s; from 4.1% in 1982 to 1.5% in 1999 and 0.3% in 2005” (cited in Varma, p. 364). Ogan & Robinson (2008) propose that one of the reasons for such disparity is a lack of mentoring. They suggest that the recruitment and retention of women in non-traditional fields is strengthened through mentoring practices (p. 275). Joanne Cahoon (2006) adds her own evidence when she cites how female undergraduates, during her study, were more likely to graduate from programs that included diversity mentoring than women in other programs that did not (cited in Ogan and Robinson, p. 261). Research suggests that mentoring is necessary to introduce women to disciplines in information technology and to keep them motivated through graduation and into the working world; mentoring is an important component for combating the challenges presented by an overtly masculine industry (p. 257). Margolis, Fisher, and Miller (2000) propose that students—especially those in underrepresented social groups—require “sources of praise, encouragement, and reassurance” in order to reduce the effects suffered by marginalization and to increase their chances for success (cited in Ogan & Robinson, p. 259).

Of particular interest to the subject of Western women’s underrepresentation in CS education is the discovery of divergent mentoring perceptions between faculty and students. An overwhelming majority of the faculty surveyed by Ogan and Robinson think of themselves as attentive mentors readily available to their students. Their students, however, do not agree (p. 271). An ironic twist to the study is that there were too few women in ‘tenure-track positions’ to effectively cover the issue of female faculty mentors for female CS students. As a result, it must be noted that mentoring for
Oxford Summer Study Abroad 2010

PHOTOS AND TEXT:
STEPHANIE REIGHART
JOSEPH SHAFER
The Exeter College Chapel is a classic example of the Victorian Gothic revival, designed by George Gilbert Scott and consecrated in 1859. Its striking presence within the towering walls of Exeter cannot be missed. The interior, as shown below, has a reputation at Oxford as “the most beautiful chapel at the university”. I heard this from Luke O’Leary, a current Exeter student whose proud bias did not seem unreasonable to me.

Below is a view of the Fellows’ Garden which sits behind the main halls of the campus, away from busy Oxford streets. While at Oxford, students have the opportunity to use the Garden for purposes social, academic, or contemplative.

On the preceding page:
A view of Radcliffe Camera (also known as RamCam) from the Fellows’ Garden. It was finished in 1749 to house the Radcliffe Science Library.
Like many locations around Oxford University, Exeter College was used as a film location for the Harry Potter movies. We ate every day in the dining used to model Hogwarts.

From the Junior Common Room you could gaze through the ivy laced windows out onto the main quad. Tradition forbids anyone other than a college fellow to walk on the sacred lawn.

Taking advantage of calm, summer weather, many hours were spent lounging in the Fellows’ Garden.
Relaxing at a local pub was an excellent cap to the day (everyday). Luckily for Oxford University students, every college has at least one campus pub. And luckily for their wallets, the college bars are significantly cheaper than Oxford city pubs. Exeter’s pub is called The Undercroft and is in the basement of the dining hall.

Just a few minutes’ stroll from Exeter is the Oxford Botanic Garden. The 7000 species grown in the Garden are for research by the University, however, guests are welcome to roam the property and enjoy the beauty... and diversity. The Botanic Garden has plants from across the globe that can thrive in the United Kingdom’s temperate climate.
Accepting the position that women are underrepresented in the technological sectors of western education and business, Roan and Whitehouse set their sights on what they call a “particular ‘wave of optimism’” within Australia’s IT market (2007, p. 22). This is because Australia is an extreme example of IT male dominance; there is only one woman IT professional for every nine men (Othman and Latih, 2006, p. 111). The so-called optimism hypothesizes that new IT jobs are emerging which requires a combination of technical skills and interpersonal and/or artistic skills (e.g., multimedia and web application positions). Lagesen refers to this type of framework as cyberfeminism (2008, p. 7). “Multimedia is of interest not only because it brings together technical and creative/artistic skills, but also in view of its links with emerging internet and digital technologies, which are seen as potentially empowering in the cyberfeminist literature” (Roan and Whitehouse, p. 22). In effect, these new areas of IT are supposed to provide more opportunities for western women who are culturally viewed as possessing more of the ‘softer’ skills for employment. Roan and Whitehouse explore these new ‘hybrid’ areas of the industry to see if women are gaining ground, or equally excluded. They want to see if there is a reason to be optimistic, or if it is just more of the same patriarchal control.

Video game design is one of the many emerging jobs in IT that requires artistic talent and storytelling ability along with technical skills. What they discovered, however, is that the gaming industry is equally as masculine in aim, construction, and delivery as the rest of CS study and IT work. They refer to Cassell and Jenkins’ (1998) who point out that men traditionally run the computer gaming industry and produce and market the games solely for male consumption; taking this a step further, they point out that popular games are frequently saturated with violence and sexually suggestive, helpless, or passive women (cited in Roan and Whitehouse, p. 23). Not only is the gaming industry providing no room for feminist optimism with women’s employment in IT, it is actually counterproductive to their goals.

Similarly, Roan and Whitehouse found little room for feminist confidence in the other emerging IT areas (e.g., web design and multimedia firms)—even though they were not as saturated with testosterone as gaming. Their conclusion illustrates the reproduction of male dominance in the new fields:

Our research revealed that IT jobs are part of a complex network of organisational [sic] and professional hierarchies, within which the ‘usual’ patterns of vertical sex segregation were evident. Whilst the possession of communication and ‘business’ skills was seen as very important, it did not appear that women were consistently making progress in career paths in these areas (p. 30-1).

The problem is that the women who are represented in newer areas of IT work tend to hold positions that are little more than clerical in nature—and certainly far removed from management positions or positions of power (p. 31). Roan and Whitehouse’s overall summary is that the technology industry in Australia is still very much a study of male-dominance. The positions women hold in emerging technology sectors fall well short of the highly-valued positions and are virtually non-existent in the top tiers of management—hardly a case for cheerful applause.

Given the overwhelming body of evidence that women interested in IT or CS fields of study and employment within the western world is in a state of steady decline since the 1980’s (Othman & Latih 2006; Lagesen 2008; Mellström 2009) and the IT industry is overtly patriarchal, one has to wonder how it came to be that IT and CS in Malaysia enjoy more feminine equality, if not predominance (Lagesen 2008; Othman and Latih, 2006; Mellström, 2009). Othman and Latih, from their research, claim that the data show there is often more female students and faculty [in Malaysian universities] than male counterparts studying in computer related fields (p. 111); this includes female tenured professors, department heads, and the dean of the computing program at the University of Malaya (UM). In 2001, women represented 52 percent of undergraduate CS students and 65 percent of undergraduate IT students at UM (Lagesen, 2008, p. 9). Women in Malaysia are enjoying a freedom of access and mobility in IT/CS that is not shared in the west.

From their analysis, Othman and Latih conclude that there is no significant difference in gendered perceptions of computing or technology. Although, men spend more time playing video games and working with computers prior to beginning the university programs, they are not outperforming their female counterparts once in the programs (p. 114). They also contend that Malaysian women have significantly greater appreciation and confidence in mathematics compared to women of the west (p. 113). The lack of mentorship experienced by female students in western countries is
also not a problem shared by Malaysian women, given the number of female faculty and department heads (p. 114). Othman and Latih conclude with a bold, if not arrogant, recommendation, “If steps are taken to remedy [childhood perceptions that CS is too technical or difficult for women], it is possible to overcome the shortage of women in CS and IT programs that ultimately lead to the shortage of women pursuing a career in this field” (p. 114).

While on the surface, it may seem evident that Malaysia has—to coin a phrase used by Vivian Lagesen (2008)—a kind of cyberfeminist utopia. Unfortunately for Othman and Latih’s study, it remains on the surface; it fails to examine deeper causation or wider scope for Malaysian women’s acceptance and comfort with studies and careers in IT/CS. Lagesen and Ulf Mellström, however, perform more thorough investigations, address the inherent complexity of such study, and warn of the dangers of overgeneralization.

Lagesen agrees that education has played an important role for women in CS, but further explains that the Malaysian government was also instrumental in two significant ways. The first is governmental campaigns aimed at promoting information technology among its youth as a means of future national economic growth (p. 9). In the name of ‘national unity,’ state-sponsored programs specifically targeted women to encourage their participation in higher education on a large scale (p. 10). They recognized the underrepresentation of women in professional fields of business and wanted to capitalize on an unused resource. State programs also “dictated a series of tasks for women, for instance, to raise children with values such as efficiency and self-reliance” (p. 10). Their goal was to mold the culture, in the name of patriotism, into one that employed “good daughters” who worked to support their families financially while also providing a more progressive system of values for their children. A conflict arose from the “Islamic revivalism” of the 1970’s and 1980’s though. Islamic discourse advocated a male priority for work, and suggested that women should not compete for jobs against men. In effect, this conflict of ideology created more of a social ambivalence toward women seeking professional careers than it did to suppress the idea (p. 10).

Interest and enthusiasm for computers and technical careers experienced by young Malaysian girls is rooted in the prospects of good paying jobs (p. 14). Driven by their parents’ desire—and usually from their fathers’ advice—many women choose to study and work in CS/IT. Of course, this is not to say that gender-assigned divisions of labor do not exist in Malaysia as Othman and Latih’s paper might suggest. Rather, it is quite the opposite. Parents (i.e., fathers) recommend that their daughters seek careers in IT because this type of work is categorized as culturally acceptable for women. The informants in Lagesen’s study confirm that work which is portrayed as being performed “outdoors” or involving more physical activity are still assigned to men (p. 17). Many informants cited engineering positions as typically male-dominated because the position requires work outside, or dealing with laborers who do not take orders willingly from women (Lagesen, p. 18; Mellström, p. 894). Gender assignment is further witnessed under the supposedly gender-neutral umbrella of CS or IT; men dominate more hardware or network-centric areas of study and work. The physicality and mobility outside of the office discourage female participation. In this regard, work categorized as existing within the confines of an office, or lacking physicality is deemed socially acceptable for women.

Malaysian female IT workers, like their western counterparts, also feel the burden of blending career with family responsibilities (Lagesen, p. 21). According to Lagesen, her informants often “admitted that with complete freedom, they would have elected something [other than CS]” (p. 16). Many choose to take their fathers’ advice in pursuing CS study rather than going into less lucrative fields like psychology or the arts (p. 15). Malaysian women are essentially coerced into the industry out of familial loyalty and financial responsibility. Their sense of familial duty is also witnessed in the widespread desire of female CS students who want to become professors or lecturers. They believe there is a flexibility of time and resources that comes with these positions and that these types of jobs will align better with their informal domestic and care-giving duties (p. 21). The successful combination of family and career is a key tenet for women who choose CS/IT.

One area that Othman and Latih’s research fails to address altogether is the diversity of ethnicity, class, and religion found in Malaysia. Perhaps they should heed Lagesen’s warning that because of such diversity, “one should be careful about making general claims” (p. 10). Where Lagesen only touches on the importance of ethnic and class diversity, however, Mellström offers greater insight. There are three core ethnic groups represented in Malaysian culture. They are: Indians (7% of the population), Chinese (27%), and Malays comprising the majority (58%), (Mellström, 2008, p. 889). Mellström proposes that ethnic and class differentials are vital components for studying gender divisions of education and employment (p. 891).

With its roots in twentieth-century British colonial rule, Ma-
The racial impact on gender divisions in CS and IT is not exclusive to Malaysian students. Bringing the topic back to U.S. soil, Varma’s study also notes key differences in perception of computer education between minority women and Caucasian women. The few white—typically middle-class—women who choose to pursue CS education do so because of its “intrinsic” appeal. Conversely, minority—typically lower socioeconomic—women who choose to pursue the same study do so because they believe it will afford them greater employment, and thereby economic, opportunities for their future (Varma, p. 369). In the midst of westernized “geek culture” inherent to technology disciplines of work and school, women of minority social associations are more willing to cross the stereotypical boundaries in order to secure the better pay and social prestige that often accompanies IT professionals (p. 373).

There is more than sufficient evidence to show a gender-gap—which is to say overt patriarchal control—of computer oriented education and employment endeavors in the western world. On the one hand, scholars like Wilson and Varma see an issue of culturally constructed imagery and self-propelling stereotypes. On the other hand, scholars like Roan and Whitehouse, and Othman and Latih investigate, or offer, areas of hope and optimism through research focused on so-called feminist-friendly new technologies, or Malaysia’s seemingly IT gender-neutrality. The problem with many of these studies is overgeneralization and a lack of inclusion for greater diversity (i.e., including more social categories in the studies). Lagesen and Mellström show the complexities involved and even warn others about making overgeneralizations. Malaysia’s success in this area is due to state-sponsored programs, but comes at the price of racial segregation. One might also say that Malaysia’s success is not as much of a victory as it is a slight shift of age-old socially acceptable gender-assignments. As it stands, gender-bias in the division of labor is still very prevalent in Malaysia. What is apparent—as highlighted by Lagesen, Mellström, and Varma—is that there is an intrinsic need for the inclusion of other social categories when studying gender disparity. “Marxism and feminism are theories of power and its distribution: inequality. They provide accounts of how social arrangements of patterned disparity can be internally rational yet unjust” (MacKinnon, p. 183). Therefore, we might conclude that power and distribution must not be reapplied vertically elsewhere, or studied in singular silos, but rather diffused linearly in order to meet the needs of the many and not the few.

References


Silhouettes

JENNIFER CURRIER

The saltwater parted, sliced from below
by falcated fins that rose toward the sky,
and bodies arched against the sun’s dim glow
to create silhouettes that mystified.
They choreographed dances seamlessly
with juvenile exuberance and speed,
crossing between two worlds: the air and sea,
contained by neither—inherently free.
From a distant shore, a girl watched them dance
to melodies obscured by human ears
until the sun’s departure broke her trance,
and the dolphins, like her dreams, disappeared.
That night she slept on rough blankets of sand,
shackled by self as a prisoner on land.
The Resurrection Of Uncle Reggie

DANIEL MUKSIAN
Dad sometimes covered Reggie’s paws with my old baseball and soccer socks he had saved to wear jogging. The socks were held in place by elastic bands, but they slowly sagged down and stretched out at the toe so it looked like Reggie had small feet. The socks made it harder for him to walk, but this was of no concern to me and Mom considering the alternative: Reggie with a stained paw in his mouth, head tilted to the side, gnawing on it like a chicken bone, draining the puss from the sores wedged between his toes like tiny prunes.

When his lipstick involuntarily played peek-a-boo, Mom gagged while Dad said the old guy was happy. I called him five-legged Reggie. If he were plopped down on the beach and rose to pursue a small child – small children and other dogs were the only things he could bring himself to sort of gallop after, his ass to the ground, his bark, though just a muffled woof, more threatening than anything our other English yellow labs Hugo and Higgins had to say – then he would have left a line in the sand with his prick. It was huge. And red. And limp. And sticky to the touch, I’m sure. Uncle Billy, on the popularity of Reggie’s fifth leg, offered to snip off the pink push-pop (pointy like a witch’s hat, curved like a Bugle chip) with some lopping shears. “Don’t be cruel,” Mom said of Reggie’s enhanced package, “if only all men could be so lucky.” This was funny, Mom’s compassion, because she was the one to place a bounty on Reggie’s head after he stuck around for longer than the few weeks he supposedly had left to live. The equation for such longevity: an affectionate owner (Dad) + exercise (with Dad) + lots of money spent on lots of medication (thanks, Dad) = roughly 800 days of extra life for a decrepit ghost dog (sorry, Mom).

Little diabetic Abby from the other side of the stone wall was the first to call him Uncle Reggie. Abby tended to follow her older brother and their cousins into the yard to play soccer with me and Higgins, who kept his own deflated soccer ball clenched in his jaw, taking shots off the side of the face and tripping me up when I dribbled. Hugo would just fall to the ground when the kids came through the trees to play. He just wanted his just wanted his belly rubbed, and Abby was happy to do this in between fetching soggy tennis balls for him to drop once shoved into his mouth. Abby now, however, instead of playing fetch with herself, preferred Reggie – roughly thirty pounds, ribs countable after struggling to get up out of the pool, fur sticking to his bones like warm candle wax on a fingertip – over the two young studs because the old dog required more delicate care. She was like his nurse, frequently discussing his health with Dad while he videotaped us from the deck. She inquired about his medicine, wondering if her friend was going to die any time soon. If her mother had allowed it, Abby would have led Reggie through the brush and dragged him by the collar with two hands over the stone wall so they could sip tea in her playhouse and chat about how much her brother didn’t understand her.

At first Reggie barked at Abby in a way that got him a hard slap to the face; he had to learn to accept the presence of children, especially since my sister’s kids were always at the house. If he had lunged at or nipped Tatum or Cooper,
Mom would have whacked him with something unpleasant – a garden ornament, a frying pan – and buried him alive. But over time Reggie lost his mean streak and allowed Abby to get close. The family agreed he must have been tormented by kids in the past or been beaten by his prior owner because of the way he flinched when a stranger bent over to pet him. She was a rare individual, little Abby, and that she was concerned and found beauty in an old dog everyone except Dad wanted to see disappear was both sad and beautiful.

One afternoon Dad snapped a photo of Abby and Reggie. The photo is a close-up of the two friends, Abby’s arms wrapped around Reggie’s neck, her soft pink cheek rubbing up against his sandpaper snout. This contact is just gross on so many levels, especially because Abby probably allowed Reggie to give her a lick on the face with a speckled tongue that loved the taste of day-old dog shit. In the photo Reggie’s eyes, perhaps because of the flash, are two different colors: one black, one white. And I really can’t tell if Reggie’s tongue is hanging out because he is being choked or because he is, perhaps, smiling.

The photograph was taken inside, which meant Dad had Abby come up on the deck and into the house. Hey, kid, want to go for a ride? I got some candy. The old 80s commercial warning children to avoid strangers came to mind, wanting to see disappear was both sad and beautiful.

Dad never showed us the developed photo – I found it one afternoon while snooping through his study – which meant Mom never saw it, and this meant he dreaded what her reaction would have been to a six year old girl alone in a house. Want to come take a picture with it? Dad never showed us the developed photo – I found it one afternoon while snooping through his study – which meant Mom never saw it, and this meant he dreaded what her reaction would have been to a six year old girl alone in a house. Keep that in his car. You should be shot.” Mom wasn’t shy about expressing her opinion over Dad’s car hygiene. The bed sheets Reggie and the other dogs sat on in the back of Dad’s silver Subaru wagon – windows tattooed with stinky licks over heavy panting – were cleaned sparingly, as were the ones in the garage covering the couch Hugo and Higgins slept on and a space on the cold cement floor Reggie usually occupied. The dank odor engulfed the house, sweeping inside whenever the kitchen door opened and closed and then hovering over Hugo and Higgins while they slept in the corner of the kitchen in the evening. Only during winter and when Mom was away for a weekend was Reggie allowed to sleep inside with the rest of the family. I’ve never told Mom that one time when she was away Hugo and Higgins took her place in bed when Dad stayed out a tad late after squash and had an extra martini, claiming when he woke up hung over that he was food poisoned. I snuck a picture of him in the morning, before he awoke, stretched out like DaVinci’s Vitruvian Man. His limbs extended out as if he just finished making a snow angel. His head hidden beneath three flat pillows. Hugo and Higgins sprawled out on either side of his bare chest. And Reggie on the floor underneath his left hand draped over the edge of the mattress, his fingertips tickling the top of Reggie’s head.

“I’ll cook some chicken if someone could go out in the garage and fetch it.” We had another freezer in the garage that stored meat and fish and scrappy popsicle sticks from summers past, but the dogs were also stored in the garage when they weren’t outside exploring or hadn’t come in for the night, and at times Mom wouldn’t step out there because the squalid smells seeping off the dogs were so pungent. I felt bad for Hugo and Higgins, who were now implicated in complaints that were mainly directed towards Reggie. Not that they didn’t stink from time to time, but now it was the dogs who smelled horrific or the dogs who needed a bath instead of simply saying it was Reggie who needed to do everyone a favor and swallow his tongue. Everyone, that is, except Dad.

Mom liked to entertain the idea that she was being punished even though it had been she who brought Reggie into our house to begin with: this, the curse placed upon her, she’d announce while sipping a Cosmo next to Dad, who’d be eating with his eyes half open, a smile stretched across his face. Wearing an oversized t-shirt and a pair of my sister’s old threadbare pajama pants, he’d have Higgins’s head resting on his right thigh and Hugo’s snout in the palm of his left hand. Mom wouldn’t allow Reggie to get so close, and it was probably hard for Dad to get close to her later in the evening unless he showered again and still, I’m sure, she’d clip a clothespin to her nose and force him to wear mittens inside a pair of gloves.

Aram: Uncle Billy said he’d hit him on the head with a shovel.
Mom: No! Your father will have an autopsy. Tie a trash bag over his head.

“It’s absolutely disgusting that I sleep with a man who keeps that in his car. You should be shot.” Mom wasn’t shy about expressing her opinion over Dad’s car hygiene. The bed sheets Reggie and the other dogs sat on in the back of
Mom: How dare you complain about the smell of my nail polish with those dogs in the kitchen.
Dad: It’s very strong, Peg.
Mom: Then go eat in the fucking garage.

Dad got upset when someone was too honest, too mean, and talked about putting Reggie down to sleep, permanently. At least once a week at dinner I’d tell him that if the day came when Reggie was unable to pee standing up – and this day did come – he should be put out of his misery. “Absolutely not,” Dad would say, shaking his head, eyes on his plate, flustered with everyone’s lack of affection. “He’s fine, he’s fine. He’s not in pain. Get out of here. We’re not doing that. Are you kidding me? Are you crazy? He’s a member of the family. No way…no way…no way.”

Reggie’s toenails were thick and long and curved like a sickle sword, like the five inch toenails of the Velociraptors in the Jurassic Park films. Or imagine your fingernails darkening and tripling in length, curling over at the tips – perhaps you’re squatted on top of your roof under a full moon. Then lightly scratch the side of your face or spread your fingers out like a Japanese folding fan and trace a musical bar across a chalk board. Reggie’s toenails clicked and clacked when he was on the move in the house, frequently scraping sideways against the floor when a leg or two or three or four slid out from beneath him. Many times I’d come into the kitchen and he’d be stranded in the middle of the room, his legs bent this way and that as if he had no bones to break, as if he could be folded up and packed snug into a suitcase, his stance resembling that of a frog flattened by a tire, a bear turned into a rug – a dirty doormat to flap outside before company arrived.

One day Reggie’s incessant woofing lured me from my room upstairs down into the sun room. Outside he had wrapped himself around a tree a few times, the blue run taut in the air. Whenever he opened his mouth to woof for help, his front paws left the ground and then his upper body slowly lowered back down. He was strangling himself. Many times I’d come into the kitchen and he’d be stranded in the middle of the room, his legs bent this way and that as if he had no bones to break, as if he could be folded up and packed snug into a suitcase, his stance resembling that of a frog flattened by a tire, a bear turned into a rug – a dirty doormat to flap outside before company arrived.

For Reggie, the power of sound was as potent as the power of smell. Mom gagged whenever Reggie gagged, which
was constant and punctuated with her theatrical “I’m going to throw up,” the sound of such crude phlegm excavation causing a chain reaction in the one female of the house, the queen. Depending on a cocktail or two at dinner, Mom gagged, sort of shook all over — pure embellishment — when Reggie attempted to disgorge his insides, his raccoon mug making me shift my chair so when I looked up from my plate I could no longer see him. But he could have been staring at all of us, just one big glob of chewers and utensil scrapers, and not just Mom. Or perhaps he was eyeing Hugo and Higgins, who could sneak close to the table undetected and then, before Mom raised her voice (“go lay down, dogs”), plop themselves down on either side of Dad — a safe zone, most of the time, from Mom’s wrath. Reggie just wanted to make sure he wasn’t missing any free hand-outs. At least he wasn’t spitting anything up on the floor, I assured Mom, like Hugo and Higgins did when they ate too fast or sucked up too much saliva water from their silver bowls after a jog, sneezing and shaking their heads back and forth like they did when stung by a bee. Reggie just dry-heaved a few times then licked around his mouth as if a trail of gravy had oozed out that he wanted to store for safe keeping.

It was when he coughed and gagged and dry-heaved for ten, twenty, thirty straight minutes that things turned ugly, when Mom complained she couldn’t sleep. Reggie’s spitting up, his struggle to fall asleep, his battle with a continuous last breath, could be heard from thirty feet away through two closed doors. Some nights I could even hear him from upstairs, so I’d turn on my nephew’s sound device and attempt to block out the wheezing and the panting and the spewing with ocean waves or insects of the Amazon. Dinner conversation would turn bitter because of the rough background music interrupting Eric in the Evening, when either Mom or Dad or both had too much or too little to drink and one or the other or both acted overdramatic or inconsiderate or insane. I felt sorry for Dad when Mom turned up the volume on the television (American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance) full blast to drown out Reggie’s gagging, for she wasn’t concerned with PBS specials on the Civil Rights Movement or catching the end of a Red Sox game. While Mom would yell at me upstairs for my cell phone so she could text in more votes for her favorite Idol contestant, Dad would refill his wine glass and shake his head, looking down at the dogs for some sympathy.

Even after Aram bought Dad a nice pooper scooper for Christmas, Dad still enjoyed picking up Reggie’s poop with an old fireplace shovel. It was black and heavy and had a gold handle at the end. I avoided this shovel because my hand came closer to the poop pile than it did when I used a regular size shovel. Plus the shovel part was so small that one had to stack the poop just right — roll the poop back, quickly jam the lip of the shovel into the ground, shimmy the shit around to make extra space for another helping — so the whole stinky ordeal of stacking shit turned into a game of patience and balance. It was simply too time consuming. Had I had been plucking tomatoes off the vine from Mom’s vegetable garden I would have been okay with prolonging such an annoying chore, but shoveling shit was something that deserved as little attention as possible. If it didn’t gross me out so much I would have just let Reggie gobble it all up, for he enjoyed munching on his own excrement. Taking dumps wherever he pleased and discovering them hard and shrunken days later, fuzzy tootsie rolls that he would scarf down the same way I worked a forkful of burning chicken pot pie — sort of smacking my lips together, jerking my face about — was my pet peeve with Reggie.

When Reggie pooped his legs tended to shake as he tried giving himself at least an inch of space between his anus and the ground. If his tail were able to lift itself up it may have revealed the dirtiest anus in the animal kingdom, because it seemed as if he was sitting down when he pooped. Imagine filling up an ice-cream cone at one of those soft-serve ice-cream machines. You have to slowly lower the cone the longer you hold the lever so the ice-cream doesn’t build up and expand out, spilling over your hand. Now imagine you don’t lower the cone. You just hold it there, the chocolate brown swirls having no where to go. That’s the way it appeared when Reggie pooped, when his legs quaked — that these dark chocolate nuggets never experienced the art of free fall. That I’d occasionally have to hold him steady while he pooped is something I loathe to remember.

Higgins snagged food left on the coffee table, crept up onto the deck to nibble broken pieces of stale bread left on the railings for the birds, and twice escaped from the yard (he’d have himself a great adventure while I frantically jogged around the neighborhood and Dad sped home early from work downtown). Hugo took care of the koi fish in the pond and one Easter devoured a bunch of baby bunnies (Mom broke two ski poles on his back and said something about never being able to eat animals with eyes again). And Reggie also liked to misbehave.

Reggie did not care for boundaries. When he snuck out of the yard I had to run over and hook a finger under his collar and walk him back, a miserably slow walk compared to his quick desertion. Sometimes he’d look at me from a couple hundred feet away after I’d scream his name at the
top of my lungs, my arms motioning for him to return like an air traffic controller directing in an incoming plane, then he’d look in the other direction. I’d absolutely lose it, cursing aloud while sprinting over to him, scaring him half to death if I grabbed his collar before he sensed the stomping of my feet or spied my shadow.

One time a dog sitter chased Reggie for a quarter of a mile when he took off after a deer with antlers that was rummaging on the dogs’ bathroom turf, where Dad led them each morning in his scuffy blue bathrobe to “tinkle.” Reggie bolted across the yard, down the driveway, up the street, across River Road, and onto Bay View Farm. It’s not what the poor woman had in mind at six in the morning. And my grandfather certainly didn’t think Reggie would take off on his watch. The old man tripped and fell while chasing after the old dog and ended up having shoulder surgery. The real question was why anyone was chasing Reggie to begin with. Didn’t dogs take off on their own when they were ready to leave this life? Were we continuously dragging Reggie out of limbo?

Around Christmas Dad made sure to involve Reggie in the decorations. Whereas Hugo and Higgins sported their typical holiday scarves that made them look extra gay while they paraded around the room sucking up people’s scraps off the floor, a pair of fuzzy reindeer antlers growing out of Reggie’s head confirmed the suspicion that a dog, too, could look retarded.

A green headband stamped on Reggie’s head, clinging to the sides of his face, reinforced the antlers that resembled a couple broken sticks that, like a fine coat of frost on the lawn in the morning, were laced with dust. And after Dad – tie undone, chest hair sprouting out the top of a v-neck undershirt, a sure sign of a good buzz – had snapped a few more photos of “Hugo and Higadoo,” Mom would tell him to start taking pictures of the people. When Dad wasn’t looking Mom would dig her nails into my elbow, smile, eyes opened extra wide, and whisper through clenched teeth for me to “put down my drink and get the fucking dogs out of the house before I kill either them or your father, okay sweetie.”

When it was winter and too cold to be kept in the garage, Reggie was allowed to remain inside with Hugo and Higgins. These nights were like the Oscars, except it was grey carpet, not red, that was rolled out on Reggie’s behalf. Each night Dad laid out the carpet, cut in long rectangular pieces, and each morning he rolled them up before he went into the living room to do his daily set of sit-ups and pushups, Hugo and Higgins close by, still curious after all these years of his ground exercises. The carpet was laid out so Reggie wouldn’t slip on the tile floor of the kitchen or the surrounding wooden floor of the dining room and sun room, the three categorized sections of the house that looked out on Mom’s expansive garden where the dogs were allowed only when she wasn’t home. Around Reggie’s second winter with us, Dad was carrying him everywhere: into the garage for breakfast, out onto the other side of a small hill where the dogs had a large wooded area to decorate with their droppings, and then back into the garage or house. Reggie could handle jogging each Saturday morning at the industrial park, but he couldn’t walk on his own when he was home.

The carpets were forever put away when Dad left for a weekend of skiing. Mom told him there was no way she was carrying Reggie, so when Dad was gone and Reggie had no one to protect him, Mom dragged him like a heavy sack of stones across the floor, down the garage steps, and outside. Reggie soon found his footing with the help of Mom’s foot, and we learned, to the amusement of everyone except Dad, that Reggie could walk/limp just fine, that he had been taking advantage of Dad. “It’s pathetic,” Mom said. “The two of them.”

I hate cats, so for my high school students who adored them I brought in a picture of Mr. Mittens, the one cat that didn’t make my eyes bleed, a cat I was introduced to when I visited some friends in Montana. Larry discovered Mr. Mittens underneath his deck during the winter, and when I arrived we brought him inside. We placed him on the mantle above the fireplace that sported a large framed poster of Michael Jackson in a white suit and a small cactus in a clay pot. Mr. Mittens could stand up on his own and remained still during pictures; no one had to snap their fingers above the photographer’s head or shout “mouse” to get him to look into the lens. That Mr. Mittens was frozen to death, his skeletal remains perfectly preserved, got me high-fives from some of the male students and looks of shock and disgust from the female students.

To prove I wasn’t picking on cats or cat lovers, I also brought in a picture of Reggie, whom my students utilized as a springboard to get me off topic, to entertain them by comparing Reggie to other icky things; for example, Reggie was so scrawny you could see his food digest immediately after consumption, like a rabbit slowly sucked down the inside of a snake. But my students thought, after Reggie’s photo was passed around the room and I was called insensitive and cruel that he wasn’t as grotesque as I made him out to be – a dog who could be dragged from the leash by any of the
kids in Charlie Brown’s crew and not just Pig-Pen, the boy always consumed by a cloud of dust. I’d guess that hundreds of people – if indeed my students went home and told their parents what they learned in school today – have heard about the resurrection of Reggie, how flies, once they had taken off after sucking his blood, sputtered about drunkenly and, upon emitting a soft cough, dropped to the ground.

It was unfair that I was the one to discover Reggie dead. I say this not because we lacked a relationship between man and dog, but because of the way our relationship developed – out of pure shock and disgust.

I had probably just stepped out onto the deck to check on my dogs. It was late spring, early summer. Reggie had been tied to a long leash that allowed him to decompose both inside and outside of the garage. Just a couple hours earlier he had been in the same spot outside the back door, gagging away, scratching his face against the ground like he was always doing. Now he was dead, on his side, the left half of his face imprinted on the grass, his tongue hanging out the right side of his mouth. All four paws visible. Back legs resting on a purple flagstone. Black flies circling his jaw. The grass around his white body was so green. I stared at his chest for some time; I needed to make sure. I bit my bottom lip so it wouldn’t start quivering. His life, expected to end within weeks of his arrival towards the end of 2004, was finally over, two years and many days later.

I came back inside. Mom and Dad were in the kitchen. I stated my discovery matter-of-factly: “Reggie’s dead,” Dad’s face went cold. “Really?” He looked like he was in pain. “Really?” Mom asked, her lips concealing a subterranean smirk. I sort of guffawed: “Yeah.” Mom simply couldn’t believe it. After all she had been through – the torment of the senses – it was now over. “Shit,” Dad hissed, “dammit!” Mom tried lightening the mood, putting a positive spin on things, “Well he had a great life, living as long as he did, all the extra time. No need to make a big thing out of it.”

I can’t recall who else could have been in the room, but I know later that day when my sister came over she cried when she heard the news, her gaze falling upon Dad. She knew he must have been hurting. This was why I cried later. Not because of the dog that never really belonged to me, but because of the loyalty Dad had shown him, rejuvenating him, giving him a great couple years compared to what was in store for it – execution. Here was a dog whose name was constantly changed in the books because the women at the animal shelter didn’t want to drug him and fry him up. Here was a dog who came from a mansion in Newport, from afternoon joy rides sitting shotgun in his owners’ Bentley.

Here was a dog who was kicked to the curb because his owners had new carpet installed and didn’t want to deal with the loose fur, let alone a dog that could make their property value decline. Here was a dog who got lucky, whose sad story made its way into Twin City Electric and Alarm in Fall River, Massachusetts, where a former restaurant owner and chef took pity on such a creature. Mom offered to save Reggie, to give him a pleasant place to die. It was the first and last time Reggie occupied her car.

An hour later Reggie was, like our very first dog, wrapped up in a blanket and buried. But unlike Billie’s burial, I helped out. Billie, a female German Sheppard who tore every other dog to pieces, has her own tombstone in the backyard. A now dirty gold frame borders an oval photo of Billie, a head shot of her in a pile of leaves, at the top of a granite slab, and I glance down at this picture whenever I pass by. Years later my grandfather’s Irish Setter was buried next to Billie, an Irish Setter statue, its tail spiked up and today green in the face, placed over Peppi’s plot.

Both memorials were behind a rusted swing set that had one operational swing – a pale rubber seat like an inverted hockey helmet with two oval cut-outs for two tiny legs to poke through. Dad took pictures of Higgins in this swing as a puppy, crossing his back legs and placing his front legs up on either side of the seat. The photo received a Pawsome Award from some dog catalog, and a black and white copy of the photo accompanied me throughout my four years in college.

We had nothing for Reggie, though, no statue or R-shaped stone, so after Dad covered him up with dirt he grabbed some softball-sized rocks and made a little pile, a miniature version of those pyramids people contribute a rock to when the reach the top of a mountain. Hugo and Higgins remained in the garage; they must have known something was up. It was that summer the swing set was removed from the yard and Mom planted some Bridal Veil shrubs in front of the pet cemetery to block it from those “trying to enjoy themselves in the backyard.”

Hugo and Higgins, ten and eleven respectively, replaced me and my brother when we left for college in 2000 and 2001. Reggie replaced no one. He was an addition, the sick grandparent I never had to live with. And I guess he wasn’t that bad considering his ghoulish mug and skunky smell. He never rolled around in deer shit like Hugo and Higgins – he just ate his own. He didn’t crash face-first into people’s crotches like Hugo, and he didn’t jump off of the floor expecting food or play the instant you adjusted yourself in your chair like Higgins. His tail wagged like an inverted windshield wiper as if his tailbone lacked the muscles necessary to lift it to
avoid farting on himself, so he never, like Higgins, knocked Christmas ornaments off the tree, whacked my nieces and nephews in the face, or turned the radiator around the dinner table into his own personal drum set. Reggie didn’t bark for you to come outside and remove a stick from his line of sight like Hugo (whom Mom labeled the Armenian dog), and he didn’t sit on your feet like Higgins. He never ate the deformed-looking apples that fell from the fruit trees that sent Higgins into a frenzy, and he never leaned his head back and gobbled up dead birds or empty turtle shells like Hugo. He didn’t have any fatty tumors on his legs like Higgins, who’s too sensitive to get his Reggie-like toenails cut, and he didn’t constantly pass gas like Hugo, who’s losing his hearing. Some of his hair was no doubt salvaged after a day of jogging, when Dad raked the loose fur off his boys and shoved it into a pillow case. He ate a variety of vegetables like Hugo and Higgins — carrots for snacks and green beans accompanying dry dog food for dinner—and did his best to follow them “up up up” to go to the bathroom.

The three dogs had their own car — a beat up 86’ Escort wagon that shook at thirty miles an hour, turned off if running idle too long at a red light, and was adorned with a fuzzy steering wheel and a faded bumper sticker under the back license plate that read school’s in session. Mom made Dad buy the car, which I had to drive to work in the morning during a summer home from college, because she was unable to breathe in his. Friends loved asking me how I felt that my dogs had a car before me. A picture of Dad with all three dogs and their car was included in a webpage for his fortieth high school reunion: the hatch is open and Dad sits on the bumper, Hugo on his left, Higgins on his right, and Reggie in the middle, Dad’s arm wrapped around Reggie’s neck in a playful headlock. I told Dad I was sorry I hadn’t gotten him a picture of the entire family in time for the publication, but his smile in this photo with the dogs could never be replicated amongst the human kind.

Mom: You can tell a lot about a man, how he’ll treat his wife when she gets old and silly, by the way he treats his dog.

Reggie had black circles wound around black eyes embedded deep within a white face that haunted my dreams after our first encounter. It was one of the most traumatic experiences of my life — our first meeting — a moment Mom likes to retell when it’s brought up so she can place herself in a position where she can’t be blamed for scarring me. My family should all be fearful of the day I take my revenge.

It was supposed to be a joke. A Christmas joke. A great way to jumpstart the 2004 holiday season. Everyone was in on it: my parents, my sister, my brother. Courtney had recently moved back home from San Francisco and was living at home with her fiancé while their home was being built. Aram was home early from college because he had been student teaching that semester. Usually we made the seven hour trip home from St. Lawrence University in upstate New York together, but this time I caught a ride with someone passing through Rhode Island, and as usual I thought about the dogs the entire way home, my forehead stuck against the glass like a suction cup, my body sweating out energy drinks and study drugs bummed off boarding school buddies for the previous all-nighter.

Exhaling upon exiting the car, I dropped my bags in the driveway and barged through the garage, bumping into the garbage cans and pushing a bike that hung from the ceiling out of the way. Nothing was better than a trip home from college. The homecooked meals. The bed. The toilet. Everything was simply better, slower, fresher. I opened the kitchen door and there was Dad, across the room, videotaping me from the dining room table. Mom and Courtney stood on the other side of the island, between the oven and the sink, with big grins plastered on their faces. Aram was sitting on the couch in the sunroom off to the right, also smiling. Dad recording my arrival wasn’t that bizarre because he had always recorded random moments such as this. They were all smiling. They were all so glad to see me. But where were the dogs?

I don’t recall who opened the hallway door, but out came Higgins. He scrambled over to me, his tail wild. And Hugo? Had he not followed his step-brother? Naturally I inquired about this. I was told by Dad that Hugo got old while I was away, that he got old real quick, which sometimes happened to their breed. The expression on my face remained perky if somewhat perplexed, and I nodded my head quickly — yeah, sure, I get it, he’s old, okay — and waited for Hugo to show himself.

And then he came to me, following the same route Higgins had taken. And he was different. He was frail. He was bleach white. His paws were long and narrow and black and his head hung low to the ground as if lifting it were out of the question. It sort of swung back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. He was panting as if he were trekking across a desert. He was all skin and bones, this thing before me, with a thin black border around his mouth like the red outline on a clown’s face, like that unfortunate kid in elementary school who can’t wipe off that rusty chocolate mustache.

“What the fuck is this?” I said, mouth agape. I stepped out of the doorway and back into the garage, one foot in the kitchen and one foot out. I clenched the door-
knob and closed the door to a crack when the thing got too close. Someone said it was Hugo, that he got old, to not be afraid. I shut the door, cutting myself off from what had to be a gross lie. Dad wanted to tape this? I stared at the shelf full of shoes behind me, some of which I hadn’t worn in years, and then at the wall to my right, at the lines that depicted friends and relatives’ heights at various years, including, at the very bottom, the outlines of Hugo and Higgins as young pups, a horizontal, elongated ten and twelve inches off the brown carpet respectively. I descended the stairs and stood on the other side of the shelf that held canned vegetables and cases of soda, boxes of pasta and popcorn. Mom came outside. She apologized, said she was sorry, but that was life — people, animals, we all got old. This, Mom’s warm speech — she called me sweetie — expunged any chance of that hideous beast not being Hugo. I pushed through the screen door and headed back out into the driveway, where I started crying, and then went into the side yard, on the other side of the pine trees, where I started dry heaving. If I had been atop a cliff I may have closed my eyes and stepped off. It’s a Christmas miracle that I didn’t wander down to River Road and walk into traffic. Hugo. Poor Hugo. How could something so young and handsome turn into something so grotesque, within months?

And then the side light turned on. Courtney stepped outside, stared at me for a moment, then turned back inside and told the others to stop it, that I was crying (Aram may have started laughing at this point). Then I heard barking, and two dogs jumped out of the back door and ran towards me. Hugo and Higgins. And the third dog, that creature, slowly scampered out a second later, his toenails filing themselves against the cement step, barking at something that it probably couldn’t see. I brushed away the tears and tried to control my breathing. My sister hugged me and said she didn’t want to do it. I still couldn’t go inside and show my face. When Mom tried to grab me I shook free. She kept saying she didn’t want to do it either, that she was sorry. She, of all people, had betrayed me, and she knew it.

For that entire holiday season I was unable to look at Reggie. Come summertime I could manage some quick eye contact, but it took weeks before I could scratch his head, and even then it was more of a firm flat pat, fingers together, the way a child fortifies the top of the cork-like structure made from slamming down a pail of wet sand. I was afraid to use my fingernails, to leave faint lines going across the top of his scalp, possibly drawing blood. Would his scent cling beneath my fingernails for days? My fingers never ventured beneath his ears, where all dogs loved getting scratched. Higgins’s ears smelled like Smartfood popcorn, and I worked them the way one felt the texture of a jacket they were about to buy: a couple fingers on the inside, a couple on the outside, a quick rub. But I was not going to find out what the interior of Reggie’s ears smelled like. Black licorice, probably, or vomit.

I felt bad about this, my inability to show Reggie affection. I wasn’t proud over Christmas, with Santa watching, when my hand skipped over Reggie’s head. But I couldn’t help it. Only because it was not Reggie’s fault — he had not willingly subjected himself to the joke — did I eventually develop the ability to show him some affection, or at least acknowledge that he existed. And he must have rubbed off on me to some extent because here I am, years later, missing him.

Five Legged Reggie.
Uncle Reggie.
He was a good dog.

EPILOGUE
After a night out of boozing, some friends and I had some fun with Reggie in the garage. We all gathered around him after barreling through the door. “Look at that bag of bones,” Bug said. “He’s a ghost,” Mick said. We giggled softly as we approached the blob of marshmellow fluff asleep on the blanket. I called him. “Reggie,” I called again, louder. “Reggie.” My friends laughed, told me my dog was dead. I told them to shut up, that he wasn’t my dog and that I already checked to see if his chest was moving — a habitual eye exam I performed on my dogs whenever they appeared asleep. I hissed loudly as to not wake up anyone inside with a full fledge yell. “REGGIE.” He didn’t budge. I believe I had a disposable camera in my pocket — that or I went inside to retrieve one — so we took pictures of our time spent with Reggie: Mick pretending to bash his head in with a purple and gold baseball bat; Bug straddling him with a Bud Light bottle in one hand, a garden trowel in the other, about to perform some sort of brain surgery; a huge cardboard box covering his entire body minus the tip of one paw. This last little goof woke him up, and the heavy panting began. Before retreating into the house I gently rubbed the top of Reggie’s head and told him it was okay.

At some point while the three of us raided the fridge for scraps of food, Hugo and Higgins between our legs, I stepped back outside. I was unable to dismiss our actions from earlier. I had woken up Reggie, and now he was alone, in the dark. I turned on the garage light. Reggie lifted his head and turned from side to side, confused. It wasn’t until I descended the three steps with a thud at the bottom that he spotted me, when he felt the impact of my slam underneath his belly. I squatted down and began combing his head with my palm, apologizing softly and making that tsk tsk
sound people make when they try luring chipmunks to their fingertips. Reggie lowered his chin on the cement floor with a little clink from his collar and shut his eyes. I caressed him for a few more minutes, shifting to my knees and then, minutes later, to my bum. Such warmth I had never shown him, and it wasn’t simply because I had a solid buzz on. I wanted to make sure he was asleep before I went back inside. I knew he didn’t like to be alone.

It seemed like twenty minutes before I got to my feet and tip-toed back to and up the steps. Before flicking off the lights I glanced back at Reggie, sound asleep. At the time I didn’t wonder what I wonder now: what could he have been dreaming? Was he still riding shotgun in that Bentley? Was Dad in the driver’s seat, the two friends cruising down Thames Street barking at tourists or chasing some tail? Or even better, a simple afternoon on C Street: Mom in the garden, me in the field playing with Hugo and Higgins and the kids, Dad reading the paper on the deck, and Reggie sprawled out in the shade under one of the giant Maple trees, enjoying his second chance at life.

Reggie was never allowed in my bed like Hugo and Higgins, whom I both named and have since been unable to leave the northeast because of. But if I could have one more night with him I’d allow it. I’d cradle him in my arms (long sleeve shirt on), carry him upstairs (eyes directed at the ceiling), and sprawl out on the bed with him (our bodies separated by a heavy blanket). We’d race to see who could fall asleep first, to see who would wake up the other with a swift kick from a fanciful dream. •