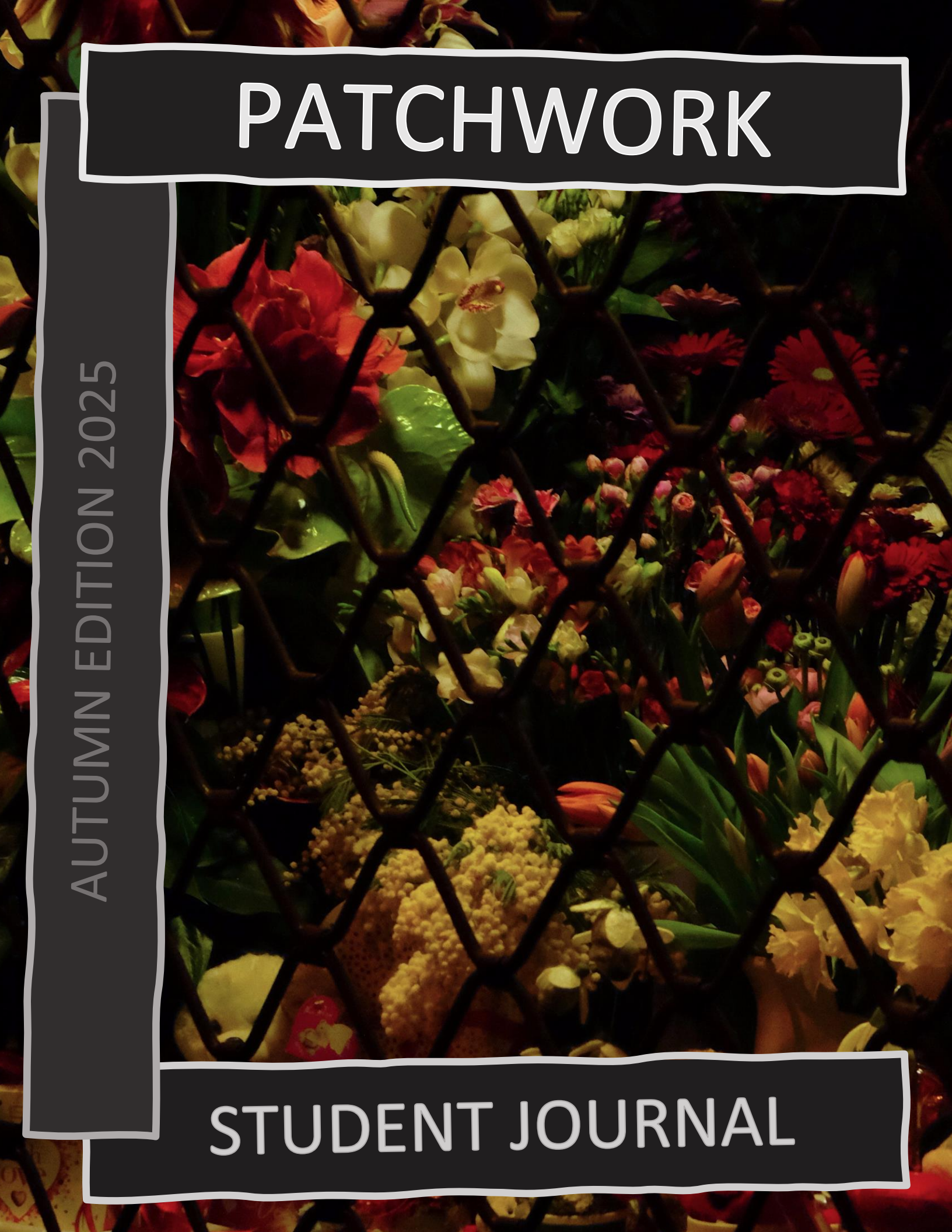

# PATCHWORK

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01

DORA LEŠNJAK

# From Contraband to Robert Dane: The Language of Personhood in Louisa May Alcott's "My Contraband"

Black male characters occupy a uniquely complex place in the literature of the American Civil War period. Louisa May Alcott's short story "My Contraband" offers an excellent insight into the complexity of Black male identity in this historical context. This essay discusses how the identity and masculinity of Black men were constructed through the language used in Civil War literature, focusing in particular on "My Contraband." It examines this topic through two interrelated lenses: first, the words and adjectives used to describe the story's principal Black character; and second, the significance of the various names he assumes over the course of the narrative. "My Contraband" thus uses shifting descriptors and names to underscore the unstable racial identity and contested masculinity of Black men during the Civil War.

The story primarily revolves around two characters. Faith Dane, the narrator and focalizer of the story, is a recurring character in Alcott's collection of short stories *Hospital Sketches*. Her companion, however, is arguably the person the plot itself revolves around. While the reader experiences the events through the eyes of Faith Dane, it is Bob that drives those events in equal or even greater measure. Bob, later Robert, and finally Robert Dane, is the titular contraband, a formerly enslaved man in pursuit of justice. His experiences are undeniably shaped by his identity as a mixed-race man, as he finds himself not belonging to any predetermined racial group (Alcott 173). His identity is undetermined, defined by a lack of certainty and belonging, and this is

reflected in the way he is presented to the reader by Faith, who struggles to place him within her culturally marked mental framework of race relations. Throughout this essay Bob/Robert/Robert Dane will be referred to as "Robert" to reflect the narrative's movement toward recognizing his personhood, while remaining attentive to the imposed and shifting nature of his identity.

To fully understand how Alcott frames Robert's identity, it is important to consider how the term *contraband* came about in the historical context of the Civil War. The aforementioned mental framework was, at the time when the story was both set and published, at the forefront of public discourse and was undergoing changes as emancipation and the abolition of slavery came closer to becoming a reality. As a result of the ongoing Civil War, African Americans were fleeing to Union-controlled areas of the so-called slave states, but their status remained uncertain. For example, as Kate Masur describes, when three enslaved men escaped to Fortress Monroe, held by Union General Benjamin F. Butler, Butler understood their potential value to the Union, but emancipation was not yet an option, and so they were categorized as "contraband of war." This decision was pivotal in shaping how escaped enslaved people were viewed by the wider public, and the word and concept spread quickly through all available means of communication (Masur 1050-1051). Masur explains that because *contraband* was originally used to refer to confiscated material goods, its application to fugitive

slaves both justified their retention in the Union territory and implicitly reinforced the view of them as property, denying their full humanity.

By 1863, Alcott's characters used the term without any preamble, as it was self-explanatory, and the author herself titled the story after it. The term reflected the precarious and transitional position of the people it described, especially in the eyes of Northerners wrestling with the implications of abolition. Faith Dane may be counted among these Northerners, as she, a self-proclaimed staunch abolitionist, shapes a mental image of "her" contraband, Robert, through her personal attachment to and affection for him. Yet, rather than being a simple practical descriptor born out of necessity, the word *contraband* would instead become a key marker of racial discourse in the era.

However, this linguistic representation of racial discourse does not remain confined to one term. To further understand how Alcott explores the racial and gendered identity of Black men during the Civil War, one must examine the language used to describe them, particularly the recurring use of the word *boy* to refer to adult Black men. This issue is addressed explicitly in the text, with Faith saying: "All colored men are called 'boys,' even if their heads are white; this boy was five-and-twenty at least, strong-limbed and manly, and had the look of one who never had been cowed by abuse or worn with oppressive labor" (Alcott 171). This passage reflects Robert's role in

infantilization by the system, but the description that follows makes his masculinity clear. As Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the commander of a Black regiment, noted, "Till the blacks were armed, there was no guaranty of their freedom. It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men" (qtd. in Patterson 148), highlighting the deep cultural link between visible masculine strength and social recognition during the war.

It is also important to note that Faith herself refers to all the wounded as *boys*, a gesture resembling motherly affection for the injured soldiers. There is, nevertheless, a clear shift from referring to Robert as a *boy* to a *man*, exemplified most clearly by Faith's proclamation that "the captain was a gentleman in the world's eye, but the contraband was the gentleman in mine" (Alcott 176). The use of the term *gentleman* in particular demonstrates that he has metaphorically moved up in the ranks of her mental hierarchy, owing to his passionate love for his late wife and Faith's sympathetic attitude toward his plight. In this way, Robert's "manhood" becomes visible not only through his actions but also through the evolving lens of Faith's narration. However, his masculinity is confirmed in the eyes of the world only at the end of the story, through his sacrifice in the Battle of Fort Wagner. As Robert himself is not a narrator or focalizer, his agency and his experiences are expressed through the more overt action of joining the Union army in the moments of his grand sacrifice for the Union cause, his lack of

narrative voice is emphasized in text: "He knew me, yet gave no greeting; was glad to see a woman's face, yet had no smile wherewith to welcome it; felt that he was dying, yet uttered no farewell" (Alcott 11). In exchange for his voice, Robert "gets" to be an example of racial sacrifice – in the words of his brother in arms, "If our people's free, we can afford to die" (Alcott 193). The story concludes by portraying Robert as gaining eternal liberty in death, which is furthered by the fact that Robert dies in battle with his former master. This narrative is part of a common trend in literature of the era, and this fixation on racial sacrifice may not have directly brought about the passing of the 15th Amendment, which led to the enfranchisement of Black men, but it certainly led to a shift in public perception that helped the idea gain traction (Patterson 162).

The evolution of Robert's name throughout the story, from "Bob" to "Robert" and finally to "Robert Dane," signifies a gradual transformation in how he is perceived by others and how he perceives himself. Notably, both changes in his name are closely connected to his relationship with Faith Dane. The first change, from "Bob" to "Robert," is initiated by Faith in an attempt to use a more formal mode of address, thereby both differentiating him and, in her mind, granting him a degree of dignity. This intention is evident in the following exchange:

> "What is your other name?" I asked. "I like to call my attendants by their last names rather than by their first."

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> "I'se got no other, Missis; we has our masters' names, or do without. Mine's dead, and I won't have anything of his 'bout me."
>
> "Well, I'll call you Robert, then, and you may fill this pitcher for me, if you will be so kind." (Alcott 4)

Faith thus attempts to equalize Robert with her other patients to the best of her ability, but in doing so, she also imposes a new name upon him, one he does not choose for himself. Robert's final transformation appears to culminate in an act of symbolic gratitude, as he adopts Nurse Dane's surname. While on the surface this may seem like a gesture of mutual respect or personal empowerment, the underlying implications complicate that reading. As Bleu-Schwenninger observes, "Even though the avowed motive for Robert's adoption of Nurse Dane's family name is gratitude, the fact remains that his gesture is strongly reminiscent of the slaveowners' practice of calling their slaves by their own name. In any case, it testifies to Nurse Dane's absolute control over Robert" (11). Although she is a woman, Nurse Dane finds herself in a position of power over Robert due to her race as well as his role as her assistant. Robert taking on Faith's name also mirrors the tradition of a woman adopting her husband's surname in marriage. While Faith's implied attraction to him might suggest a romantic dimension to this act, it is also emblematic of deeper societal power structures. As sociologist Anne Lise Ellingsæter notes, "At the institutional level the patrilineal naming tradition in

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which women take their husband's surname upon marriage is a patriarchal institution indicating that women (and children) belong to men in a hierarchical order" (46). Therefore, even this subversion of gendered naming conventions simultaneously reinforces ideas of racial hierarchy and echoes structures of possession and domination, raising the question of whether Robert's transformation constitutes true liberation, or rather a reinstating of dependency under a more benevolent guise. This mirrors the double-edged nature of the term "contraband," as Robert's personal names were derived from, and in part imposed by, a white Northern representative of the Union cause, but, to a degree, they continue the hierarchical relationship in a new format.

In fact, arguably the only choice Robert makes entirely on his own is to discard his former master's surname. As Nurse Dane observes, "the look and gesture with which he repudiated his master's name were a more effective declaration of independence than any Fourth-of-July orator could have prepared" (Alcott 4). This choice is Robert's rejection of not only his legal enslavement, but also the symbolic legacy of it. This renunciation gains further complexity with the revelation that the injured Confederate officer, Ned Fairfax, Robert's former master, is also his half-brother, a relationship that directly reveals Robert's mixed-race parentage and highlights the violations of intimate relationships that the system of slavery produced. His relationship to the surname is, to a degree, also familial. The familial connection

illustrates how the institution of slavery distorts and undermines traditional ideas of family. As historian Brenda E. Stevenson argues, "slavery corrupted the family by denying legal recognition to enslaved unions and by producing biological relationships between white owners and the people they enslaved, while refusing to acknowledge them as such" (95). Robert's rejection of the Fairfax name, then, is more than a mere result of circumstance, as it also signifies his removing himself from a family structure built on coercion and inequality.

In summary, Louisa May Alcott's "My Contraband" is a short story with choices of names and descriptors that carry a great deal of cultural significance and complexity. Alcott uses names and descriptors to portray the instability of the identity and masculinity of Black men in the Civil War period. The story reveals how even moments of apparent progress, such as Robert's symbolic adoption of a new name, remain embedded within larger systems of control and hierarchy. Both the titular term *contraband* and Robert's progressive name changes signify the paradoxical position of partial freedom, as Black characters are separated from their enslavers, but their portrayal retains the implications of oppression. The only moment of agency that fully belongs to Robert, his rejection of his former master's, as well as his biological father's name, functions as an act of self-definition in a system that has destabilized even traditional notions of kinship. Robert dies in battle with his half-brother, his former

master, finally attaining his full personhood and masculinity only in death, where, according to the narration, he finally finds "eternal liberty" (Alcott 197), exemplifying the sacrifice of a generation of Black men for the liberty of those who would follow them.

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02

KARLO STANKO

# Pre-Raphaelite Visuality in Christina Rossetti's "When I am Dead, My Dearest"

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It is difficult to discuss Christina Rossetti and her work without acknowledging her connection, and indeed her intimate relationship with the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Rossetti's life and work is fundamentally intertwined with the brotherhood as she was a frequent sitter for the likes of Millais or her brother Dante Gabriel. She was also engaged to James Collinson, which had a significant effect on her life after the engagement's annulment, and impacted the themes of her work, notably those of engagement and lost love in poems such as 'Three Nuns' (Leighton 373). Further influences can be found in relation to her complex relationship with her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which crossed the boundaries of the artistic, familial and even romantic, alluded to in "The Convent Threshold" with lines such as "There's blood between us, love, my love" ("Threshold," line 1) and "My lily feet are soiled with mud, / With scarlet mud which tells a tale" ("Threshold," lines 7-8), their relationship having a major influence on her as an artist as well as many prevalent themes of her works.

Rossetti shared a particular affinity with her brother Dante Gabriel; the two of them were affectionately known as "the storms" (Macneal vi) and shared a reverence for Dante Alighieri (Curran 294), most clearly exemplified by what Walter Pater refers to as "particularisation" or "the poetic way of seeing and presenting things" (319). Indeed, the delicacy and precision of her language (Macneal vii), the deceptive simplicity of her diction (Curran 291) coupled with the unconventional, even musical, rhyming schemes (Macneal vii) are the hallmarks of her style. Stuart Curran wrote, "[h]er most consistently remarkable poetic attribute is her facility in rhyming and fitting thought into form

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without a trace of awkwardness" (293). Rossetti was a natural and possessed a fluidity in style; hers was "a poetry guided by ear rather than static scheme or form" (Macneal vii).

While her style and aesthetics shared some resemblance with the poetry written by her brother, as well as their mutual literary influences Keats and Tennyson (Curran 292), her visuality was formulated precisely through these personal relationships and experiences with the brotherhood. Though the concept of brotherhood by definition excludes sisterhood, another strong theme for Rossetti, it is not a stretch to say that her life in proximity to, and entanglement with the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood has given her poetry a kind of pre-Raphaelite visuality that demonstrates many of the elements one might find in the paintings of Millais, Hunt or Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Pre-Raphaelite visuality in this context means a connection, or rather a metonymic relationship of proximity between the image and the spoken word, typical of pre-Raphaelite philosophy and artistic endeavours, both painterly and poetic. Many of the pre-Raphaelites engaged in artistic portrayals of literary works, with Shakespeare in particular being a proving ground for the young pre-Raphaelites – double asterisked in their list of immortals (Hunt 51). They connected their work by proximity to the literary canon with none more prolific than John Everett Millais, in the words of Tatjana Jukić, "it is impossible not to notice Millais's obsession with the literary canon, and his need to insert his own paintings as a pictorial commentary on the powerful, important impact of the written Word" (*Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 40[1]). Dante Gabriel Rossetti went

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as far as writing poetry to accompany his paintings, such is the case with his painting *Proserpine*. In short, pre-Raphaelite visuality is series of metonymic relationship connecting the visual and literary elements, both painted and spoken, included and omitted, inferred and implied. Christina Rossetti, who is very much a part of the pre-Raphaelite circle, borrows these visual practices and applies them to her literary work.

It must be noted that, even though Rossetti was very involved with the brotherhood, she was not and could not be a member. As Jukić points out "[t]he very notion of brotherhood, that is, was allowed symbolic grafts and a space of redefinition only at the expense of reinforcing the exclusion that produced it in the first place – only at the expense of defining itself against sisterhood" ("Dangers of Gendering" 25). Though the two Rossetti brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, were full members of the brotherhood, the two sisters, Christina and Maria, were barred membership. Jukić goes on to say that

> [t]he exclusion of the sisters has in turn structured the paradox fundamental for any analysis of the poetry of Christina Rossetti: her poetry cannot be analytically approached without taking into account the logic of this and other subsequent exclusions, because it was produced within yet outside Pre-Raphaelitism – within yet outside a male regime of representation, or else within yet outside a social practice of structuring maleness. ("Dangers of Gendering" 25)

This puts Christina in her own metonymic relationship with the brotherhood itself and goes a long way to explain her use of pre-Raphaelite imagery but also the very strong themes of denial permeating her work.

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Having established the context behind Rossetti and her work, it is the further aim of this essay to analyse one of her poems precisely in these visual, and personal, terms. The poem analysed was chosen for the prevalence of themes favoured by Rossetti: dead or dying love and engagement, likely referring to her then fiancé James Collinson, as well as the theme of death which occupied much of her work, partly due to her belief that she was going to die young (Leighton 375), all of which engage a pre-Raphaelite visuality in the form of foregrounding, metonymy, attention to detail and panopticism. The poem in question is one of her most famous, "When I am Dead, My Dearest."

"When I am Dead" is divided equally into two halves, each comprising 8 lines. The first half of the poem, much like the poetry of Dante Gabriel, addresses the beloved, a silent interlocutor, as can be seen in the very title and opening line of the poem ("When I am Dead," line 1). Rossetti is giving instructions on how she should be mourned, saying "Sing no sad songs for me; / Plant thou no roses at my head, / Nor shady cypress tree" ("When I am Dead," lines 2-4). The language employed is that of denial, the denial of conventional mourning mechanisms: no mourning songs, no roses, symbolic either of faith or love, no cypress trees, or rather the conventional mourning mechanisms are invoked but only to be rejected by the lyrical subject.

The rejection, and therefore absence, of such symbolically charged elements is as powerful as their presence in painted works - the attention to absence in the poem achieves the same effect as explicit representation in a painting. The employment of pre-Raphaelite tools of detail and metonymy in detailing the natural world within which

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she is decomposing only to deny the presence of said elements exemplifies the painterly and poetic technique of detailing employed by the pre-Raphaelites as well as provides a window into her life on the outskirts of the brotherhood. Decomposition itself being a very natural ugly process, the idea of veining beauty being another prominent theme for Rossetti in poems such as "Passing and Glassing".

By the end of the first stanza, the lyrical subject instructs her beloved that to mourn her he must disintegrate into the preexisting natural elements that sprout out of her grave, to be the green grass above her, coated "With showers and dewdrops wet" ("When I am Dead," lines 5-6). It is precisely in this visual element that we are presented with the truest example of metonymy, meaning an intimate relationship between objects, subjects and themes that allows for the creation of close associations between the various elements in the form of intense attention to natural life that lies around the subject, described with such simplistic, yet picturesque precision. The line "With showers and dewdrops wet" ("When I am Dead," line 6) expresses a meaningful relationship to the world around the subject that sacrifices the innate narcissism of the human perspective. The mourning is forgone; it is forbidden by the language of denial it insists on the disintegration of the body as well as the mind, expressed in the final lines "And if thou wilt, remember, / And if thou wilt, forget" ("When I am Dead," lines 7-8). The first half of the poem establishes the visuality of the poem; it sets a scene, paints a picture of the elements and the world outside the grave – the green grass, the showers,

the dewdrops, the songs, the roses the shade and trees and the implied soil in which she rests.

The second half of the poem deals with the internal matters of the lyrical subject referring to the subject itself and not a silent "you." Once again, it begins with the language of denial:

> I shall not see the shadows,
> I shall not feel the rain;
> I shall not hear the nightingale;
> Sing on, as if in pain. ("When I am Dead," lines 9-12)

While the first instance of denial is the denial of mourning, here we have a denial of the senses. The lyrical subject is suspended in a dream-like state, a state between life and death, "And dreaming through the twilight; / That doth not rise nor set" ("When I am Dead," lines 13-14). This is characteristic of Rossetti's approach to death, as Leighton writes, "it is not heaven, but entombment, which fascinates Rossetti; it is not 'Soul Sleep' which characterizes the state of death for her, but a disturbing sleeplessness of the mind and an accompanying corruption of the body" (375). The body was disintegrated in the first half of the poem; this second half deals with the deconstruction of the self, of the senses and of the conscious. Leighton goes on to write, "[t]he time of being dead, for

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Rossetti, is very often the in-between-time of twilight – a time of ambiguity, dream, delay. Such a time is liberated from both life and afterlife, from both regret and expectation" (380). This liberation of regret and of expectation is seen most clearly in the final lines, echoing the final lines of the first stanza: "Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget" ("When I am Dead," lines 15-16).

The theme of twilight enables us to further the pre-Raphaelite reading of the poem. The fascination with twilight for Rossetti is precisely in its balance, a lingering state between the acts, in allegorical terms between life and death, between light and dark, a suspension between the call of the heart and the call of heaven (Leighton 380). For the purpose of this paper, however, it is precisely this motif of twilight that helps frame the lyrical subject as a panoptic subject. Nearly all pre-Raphaelite subjects are in fact panoptic subjects, but to properly explain the panoptic subject we must first explain panopticism. The Panopticon was a 1791 study "in which [Jeremy] Bentham attempted to revolutionize the institutions of surveillance by introducing light as an agent of control. The effect of such control is panopticism: one who sees but is not seen watches over all figures in a given field of vision" (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 212[2]). However, "[t]he Panopticon is not a prison. It is a general principle of construction, the polyvalent apparatus of surveillance" (Miller and Miller 3). Architecturally, Foucault, whose seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* laid the groundwork for the theory of panopticism, describes it as such:

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> [A]t the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the periphery building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. (5)

The result is a subject that is seen but cannot see (Foucault 5) as well as an observer that sees but cannot be seen (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 212), inducing in the inmate "a state of conscious and permanent visibility" (Foucault 5), as well as blindness, that "assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 5) and the development of remarkable forms of self-discipline (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 212). Therefore, the panoptic subject is a subject flattened between two sources of light and petrified by the gaze of the beholder. The subject is laid bare, it is a person trapped under the oppressive gaze of its observer. This is reinforced in lines 9 through 11, with the denial of the senses "I shall not see… I shall not feel… I shall not hear"**.**

The subject is buried with no light in sight. However, it is the decomposition of the subject and its "dreaming through the twilight" ("When I am Dead," line 13) that frames it against two light sources. One interpretation is earthly – between yesterday's

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sun and tomorrow's – but the allegorical reading is the earthly light and a heavenly one, the subject being suspended in an in-between space. The elements of obsessive control are evident in the obsession with detail, the roses, the shady cypress tree, the wet dewdrops on the green grass, etc., as well as the commanding, yet delicate language all of which is employed in the first 8 lines.

In the final 8 lines of the poem, the lyrical subject is trapped in between two light sources, suspended in the in between state of life and death, under the unrelenting gaze and scrutiny of the reader with the only way out being the death of the poet and letting go, reflected in the final lines "Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget" ("When I am Dead," lines 15-16), implying that the end of things is the only happy outcome. The final lines of the poem invoke a connection with another tragic lover figure, that of Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or better yet the pre-Raphaelite figure *Ophelia* – John Everett Millais' famous 1851-52 painting. Millais' Ophelia and Rossetti's lyrical subject share a connection through the employment of the same pre-Raphaelite imagery, namely through the use of metonymy and detail, particularly in describing nature ("When I am Dead," lines 3-6). Ophelia decomposes in nature, is swallowed up by it, decomposing in the abundance of natural detail – just like lyrical subject in the poem. The subject is in a petrified state, not quite dead and not quite alive, like the lyrical subject in the final 8 lines of the poem. One could attach Rossetti's poem to the painting, and it could reflect the visual and emotional elements of one of the finest examples of pre-Raphaelite principles. The symbolic connection is even more interesting

when taking into consideration that Millais' sitter for the painting was Christina Rossetti's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, the former wife of her brother Dante Gabriel (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 41) demonstrating just how interconnected the pre-Raphaelite circle was.

A final matter of pre-Raphaelite visuality this paper addresses, and a further similarity between the poem and Millais' Ophelia, is that of foregrounding. The elements in the poem layer on top of each other in the vertical field. The visual elements in the first half start from the grave and build up: the grave, the grass, the dewdrops, the roses and trees –invoked through apophasis. The second half consists of three elements: the heart symbolized by the world left behind, the suspended twilight zone in which the subject resides, and the promise of heaven. In short, the visual elements stack on top of each other and translate from the material in the first half to the spiritual in the second. The elements of visuality, meaning and motif layer on top of each other, but ultimately flatten together by their conformity to the central theme of death, or rather a dream-like state.

The theme of death in the poem is both literal and allegorical. The way out for Christina Rossetti, much like Ophelia, is through that final veil of death which captured her fascination so much. Christina's escape from the gaze of the observer, the remarkable levels of self-discipline imposed upon herself and most importantly her complicated existence as a part of and apart from the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood is through the death of the poet. This is alluded to in her semi-autobiographical novella

"Maude" where the moral of the story is "that the Maude in Christina Rossetti-the ambitious, competitive, self-absorbed and self-assertive poet-must die, and be replaced by either the wife, the nun, or, most likely, the kindly useful spinster" (Gilbert and Gubar 552). She must abandon her life in the shadow of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in order to reassert a grasp on her own life, free of the influences of the people that have shaped her as an artist, or rather she "…should not loiter in the glen of imagination, which is the haunt of goblin men like Keats and Tennyson-or like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his compatriots of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood" (Gilbert and Gubar 573).

In conclusion, "When I am Dead, My Dearest" presents two clear worlds, the visualised world painted in the first half of the poem, before narrowing into internal matters of the lyrical subject and its deconstruction. The poem's themes, visuality and artistic apparatus give glimpses into Rossetti's complicated existence on the periphery of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. The first 8 lines establish a kind of pre-Raphaelite visuality through the use of detail, nature and a fundamental expression of metonymy that is translated and internalised in the final 8 lines, establishing a panoptic subject that is, by the end of the poem, deconstructed and disintegrated body and soul.

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## Notes

[1] Author's translation

[2] Author's translation

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03

**LARA BRAUN**

# The Evolution of Multilingualism in Movies: From Portraying Exclusion from Society through Negative Stereotyping in *GoldenEye* (1995) to Code/Switching in *The Hate U Give* (2018)

## INTRODUCTION

"Every Black American is bilingual. All of us. We speak street vernacular, and we speak job interview." (Chapelle)

The Black comedian Dave Chappelle said these powerful words during an interview in 2008, aiming to turn his audience's attention to the fact that people of color are forced to code-switch in specific settings in order to avoid linguistic discrimination. Negative stereotyping on the basis of language, a practice called linguicism, has a long history. Believing in the superiority of one language or dialect over another has impacted people in the past and continues to do so today. Solely due to a different first language or a dialect that is not spoken by the majority, a myriad of speakers are excluded from certain basic needs on a daily basis. While this happens almost everywhere, the focus of this essay will be on the English-speaking world. As negative stereotyping is an important societal issue, code-switching and multilingualism are not missing in movies and TV shows. However, film presentation of this phenomenon has changed significantly over the decades. This will be further analyzed with the help of two examples: *Goldeneye* and the 2018 coming-of-age drama *The Hate U Give*.

*GoldenEye* is a classic James Bond movie from 1995. While the movie has reached an indisputable cult status among fans of the action genre, the depiction of multilingual speakers can certainly be criticized from a linguistic point of view. It supports several obsolete elements, with the most prominent one being the negative characterizations

of multilingual speakers. These linguistic tendencies are further explained by Lukas Bleichenbacher in his essay "Linguicism in Hollywood Movies? Representations of, and audience reactions to multilingualism in mainstream movie dialogues". Language can be used as a tool to discriminate against certain characters and in this specific case, those characters do not speak English as their first language.

This negative depiction of multilingual speakers differs immensely from the 2018 coming-of-age drama *The Hate U Give*. This movie is narrated by the African American protagonist Starr, who explains how the racial discourse in modern America affects her daily life. Constantly torn between her poor Black neighborhood and her predominantly white school surroundings, she also struggles with speaking different language varieties, always adjusting her way of speaking depending on the people by whom she is surrounded. This phenomenon is called code-switching and will be examined more closely in this essay. However, code-switching is not portrayed as something inherently negative. The movie rather highlights the necessity of code-switching for some people to be taken seriously by their surroundings. While the ability to speak several dialects or languages is something that should be praised instead of condemned, this stands in contrast to portrayals of multilingualism in older action movies. However, *The Hate U Give* (referred to as *THUG* hereafter) portrays how social exclusion can result from failing to meet dominant expectations around when and where code-switching is deemed appropriate, revealing the societal pressures placed on linguistic behavior. Hence, for

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some, it is not just a way to enrich your knowledge but a necessary means to manage life.

The depiction of societal exclusion through language in movies started with negative stereotypes shaping multilingual speakers. Their multilingualism was, at least partly, the cause of their exclusion. The movie industry evolved so far as to show code-switching as a method to minimize this exclusion. This can be regarded as a mirror of society's attitude towards linguicism. In order to properly represent this evolution, the concepts of linguicism and code-switching need to be explained briefly. After this general overview, it is possible to look at the influence of these practices on movies and TV shows. This enables a close analysis of *GoldenEye* and *THUG.* The comparison shows the shift in movies from multilingualism as the main tool for exclusion to multilingualism as a method to decrease said exclusion from society.

## MULTILINGUALISM, CODE-SWITCHING AND LINGUICISM

Prior to any analysis, some relevant terms used in this field of study should be examined briefly. Firstly, it is crucial to mention that definitions can change over time. One example of such change is society's idea of multilingualism. For a long time, only speakers of two or more languages at a native level were considered multilingual. More recently, however, researchers have broadened the term. People speaking one language fluently and another on a different level are included as well. Today diversity regarding proficiency and literacy is also encompassed by the term (Grosjean 21).

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Globalization has led to an increasing number of multilingual speakers in recent decades. As a consequence, a sociolinguistic phenomenon called code-switching has manifested itself in the English language. Based on their environment, multilingual speakers are able to adapt the way they speak. This change can refer to the alteration of languages, dialects or simply language varieties (Cheng and Butler 294). There is certainly more than one form of code-switching. Speakers may change back and forth between two languages within a sentence. Often, they have a dominant language, the matrix language, into which elements from the embedded language are inserted. In other cases, speakers use different languages or dialects in particular situations. There will be various examples of the latter use when *THUG* is analyzed more closely. Changing environments can mean using different dialects at work or home, in the classroom or during a rendezvous, when talking to a client or a sibling. Also, society's perception of code-switching has changed immensely. Formerly seen as a sign of language incompetence, it is now considered an enriching opportunity for multilingual speakers to make use of several language resources. Code-switching "taps into the reservoirs of semantic/pragmatic fields, and social and psychological associations of words and phrases in not just one language, but in two (or more)" (Myers-Scotton, 2005).

Despite multilingualism becoming more significant on a global scale, not everybody fully values second language (L2) speakers who have not reached full proficiency or first language (L1) speakers of a dialect that is not spoken by the country's

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majority. Especially in mainly monolingual countries, there is often an attitude of superiority towards one language. This form of language-based discrimination is referred to as linguicism. Just as with multilingualism in general, there are institutional and individual effects of linguicism. For instance, stigmatization of certain dialects in the educational system exists. This can be explained by the English language's long history of linguicism, in particular in a post-colonial context. It barely comes as a surprise that linguicism has not disappeared from the United States. Whether code-switching is condemned in classrooms or immigrants are judged for their grammar mistakes, linguicism is still prevalent today. Since the issue has also re-emerged in America's racial discourse, it is a natural consequence that there is filmic representation of multilingualism, code-switching and linguicism.

## LINGUICISM IN MOVIES

Multilingualism has affected multiculturalism heavily. Naturally, culture mirrors recent developments in society, including recent debates on linguicism. Code-switching has certainly found its way into different forms of media, especially social media. English has become so predominant that even national newspapers of non-English speaking countries adopt English words. The language is also widely used in documentaries, TV shows and popular music. Although this is not news in multilingual countries like Singapore or India, there has also been progress in countries that were once considered

monolingual, such as the United States. It seems that Hollywood has started mirroring Bollywood in terms of diverse multilingual representation.

Yet it has not always been this way. TV shows and movies are an effective way to make a distinction within society, more specifically between insiders and outsiders. Through language, identity is created. In addition to that, language heavily determines the character's connection to the audience. Especially code-switching is a significant tool when it comes to marking identity and relationships. Usually, there is a matrix language of a film's dialogue and situational changes are highlighted by code-switching. The function of code-switching in films as a differentiation between the norm and the "Other" is further highlighted in Lukas Bleichenbacher's 2012 essay.

According to the Swiss linguist, who has conducted extensive research on mono- and multilingualism in movies, movie dialogues are the result of a language planning process by producers, directors and screenwriters and therefore count as a characterization of monolingual or multilingual individuals for the audience. Additionally, movie dialogues always reflect prevailing ideologies existing in a society, including linguistic ones. Furthermore, movies and TV shows are among the most discussed and reinterpreted cultural texts thanks to their easy access and enormous audience (Bleichenbacher 156). This is exactly the reason for their considerable impact on society.

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A character's linguistic abilities certainly shape basic aspects of their characterization, or in other words "whether somebody is a 'good' or 'bad guy'" (Bleichenbacher 157). Movies dominated by linguicist attitudes can be expected to portray non-English speakers as more negative than English L1 speakers. In a closer analysis of 28 popular Hollywood movies, among them multiple action movies, Bleichenbacher discovers that there is an interrelation between a character with a different L1 than English and being portrayed in a negative manner. Moreover, his results show that there is an interrelation between knowing a further language and positive characterization. However, this is only true for characters with English as a first language. The same does not apply to multilingual speakers with a different L1 than English (Bleichenbacher 159).

Apart from a correlation between characterization and language, there also seems to be a connection between language choices and the general mood of a movie. Firstly, it is important to highlight that most movie scenes in Hollywood movies are in English even if English could not possibly be spoken. But in the rare case that another language is spoken, more often than not, the mood is dark and the activity portrayed is a criminal one instead of a character's everyday life. Also, the setting plays a role, with non-English scenes often taking place outside. On top of that, the dialogue is often about political contexts and seldom about love or friendship (Bleichenbacher 160).

Nevertheless, not all movies make use of these obsolete tools. Particularly recent ones try, more or less successfully, to include multilingualism. An increasing number of

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protagonists are shown as multilingual speakers, accents are not used to mark villains and non-English conversations can certainly be about other topics than crime. Aside from simply representing multilinguals, some movies even raise awareness of the hardships that the multilingual community has to endure.

While Bleichenbacher provides a foundational perspective on code-switching in movies, additional scholarship can expand the theoretical base of this essay. For example, Michael L. Ross argues in *Words in Collision: Multilingualism in English-Language Fiction* that multilingual characters in Anglophone fiction often embody narrative conflict, where language becomes a marker of cultural tension and potential resistance (128). This insight helps frame *The Hate U Give*'s portrayal of code-switching not merely as a survival strategy but as part of a broader struggle over linguistic legitimacy. In her book *The Power of Language*, Viorica Marian deepens this concept by showing that multilingualism is not merely a communicative tool but an intrinsic part of identity construction. Her research demonstrates that characters like Starr are not switching between separate selves, but rather embodying a fluid, integrated linguistic identity. Together, these views challenge a purely functional reading of code-switching. By integrating these perspectives, this essay moves beyond an essentialist view of (im-)proper code-switching and toward a new understanding of how linguistic practices reflect and resist systems of power.

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## *GOLDENEYE*'S USAGE OF LINGUICISM

The James Bond movie *GoldenEye* from 1995 follows the spy James Bond on his mission to stop an ex-colleague attempting theft with the help of a nuclear space weapon called *Goldeneye*. The movie can certainly be considered a classic among all action movies. Moreover, it was one of the highest-grossing films in 1995 and thus counts as mainstream cinema.

Since the genre of spy movies is typically male-dominated, regarding its audience, producers and characters, it comes as no surprise that most of the female characters are hypersexualized and the camera adopts a typically male view. In addition to that, discrimination based on language can also be found in *GoldenEye.* It is not uncommon for James Bond movies to feature villains with a strong Russian or German accent. In fact, there are very few villains with an American or let alone a British accent. On the one hand, since *GoldenEye* has to be put into its historical context, perhaps criticism should be limited. On the other hand, however, the main villains of the most recent three James Bond movies*, Skyfall, Spectre* and *No Time to Die,* are all multilingual speakers with heavy accents. Lyutsifer Safin is Russian-born, Ernst Blofeld is from Austria and Raoul Silva is either Brazilian or Portuguese. Despite these villains spending most of their lives in foreign countries, they never lose their L1 accent. The same is true for General Arkady Grigorovich Ourumov and the Georgian pilot Xenia Onatopp in *GoldenEye*.

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The movie starts with James Bond on a mission in the USSR. The Soviet Union had very few English speakers since travelling was restricted and acquiring English as a foreign language was not encouraged. Unsurprisingly, the first words uttered by Bond are in English, even though the Soviet soldier reading a newspaper article in Russian obviously cannot understand him (*GoldenEye* 03:08-11). Additionally, the order "Fire" (GoldenEye 05:53) by the Soviet officer to his troops is given in English. The scene is not logical this way, as Russian should be spoken. Already being the epitome of a womanizer and an excellent agent, it is not condemnable that James Bond is not fluent in multiple languages. However, short utterances such as orders could easily be given in the original language and be translated into English via subtitles.

In the next scene, the Soviet officer talks to James in fluent English (*GoldenEye* 07:10-37). Again, he is a rather negatively portrayed character, and his Russian accent is strong. One minute later, Bond is running away from an army of soldiers shooting at him. Again, orders like "Move" (*GoldenEye* 08:38) are given in English, even though it would not have been necessary to translate them from Russian into English at all since they are not relevant to the plot. Also, subtitles would have been an easy option.

As Bleichenbacher already stated, languages other than English are only shown in specific contexts. Russian or German are often used when villains talk about criminal activity in James Bond films. This is also the case in *GoldenEye,* for instance inside illegal military bases (*GoldenEye* 1:57:01) or the casino (*GoldenEye* 18:00).

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In another scene, Bond arrives at a hotel in Monaco. When greeted by the hotel's valet driver in French, he replies with: "Bon soir, Pierre. Ça va bien?" (*GoldenEye* 17:25-30). This statement is spoken with a British accent and does not seem natural. In addition, Bond nods and leaves Pierre without waiting for an answer. While moving away and thereby ending the conversation, Bond puts his fingers together as if to say: "Good". Because he does not answer Pierre's follow-up question about how he is, it is obvious that Bond does not know more than one or two basic phrases of French. Of course, this is not negative as Bond simply tries to be nice by saying a few words in Pierre's L1. However, it does underline Bleichenbacher's argument about English L1 speakers knowing words in another language being praised more than non-English speakers with similar or better abilities.

The movie *GoldenEye* uses a myriad of clichés about multilingual speakers. This use of linguicism is reflected in certain elements like portraying villains with heavy non-English accents, the general lack of multilinguals despite the international setting of the film, as well as non-English conversations revolving around nothing but criminal activity. The key element of James Bond films is not verbal communication but rather action. However, the representation of multilingualism should not be underestimated. Even if only indirectly, it has an impact on its audience. Linguicist characterization can shape a people's or even a nation's idea of other places and communities.

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James Bond can be viewed as a British hero, idolized by boys and men alike. *The Cultural Life of James Bond: Specters of 007* provides a valuable framework for understanding how Bond films project a specific form of British linguistic and cultural dominance. As the essays in the collection argue, Bond "remains identifiably British—and indeed English" (106). Yet, he travels to multiple countries per movie and can be seen as an "imperialist adventurer", combining exoticism with the upholding of British supremacy (106). His Britishness functions as a marker of cultural superiority, which adds to Bleichenbacher's arguments about linguistic dominance within the franchise. Framing the analysis through such cultural critiques situates the film within broader discussions of post-colonial identity and linguistic politics in global cinema.

Throughout the years, however, national pride in Bond has toned down considerably. While national pride was most present in the early Bond movies, recently the secret agent even drove German or Italian cars. Furthermore, sexism, once a fundamental part of the franchise, has also decreased immensely. Solely in the field of linguicism, there is little to no improvement throughout the James Bond films. *GoldenEye* represents obsolete views on multilingualism, especially on non-L1 speakers of English.

## *THE HATE U GIVE* AS AN EXAMPLE OF NEW MULTILINGUAL REPRESENTATION

*The Hate U Give* is an American coming-of-age drama from 2018. It is a representative movie of recent discourses around race and language in the United

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States. The movie tells the story of 16-year-old Starr who witnesses the shooting of her unarmed Black friend by a police officer. Apart from being traumatized by the incident, she struggles with the social contrasts of her poor Black neighborhood Garden Heights and her predominantly white preparatory school. Throughout the movie, she is confronted with police brutality, performative protests and her personal identity struggle. However, this is not the only way that discrimination is portrayed in the movie. Code-switching also plays a crucial role.

Starr code-switches frequently, in an effort to fit in. She feels like she belongs to neither Williamson Prep school nor Garden Heights. She is leading a double life where she avoids the slang and manners of one environment in the other. Both places make her feel like she has to hide her true self, highlighting Marian's argument on the crucial role of language in identity construction. Her way of adjusting is code-switching. At the beginning of the movie, Starr says: "Slang makes them look cool; it makes me look hood" (*THUG* 07:23-27). She does not want to give white people any reason to call her "ghetto" in order to prove them wrong about their prejudices. Code-switching is not her only way to achieve this, she also avoids certain manners that could manifest stereotypes about African American women. Starr does not wish to be perceived as aggressive, angry or dangerous. This attitude controls her looks, manner and language.

Code-switching can happen unintentionally and on purpose. Especially young people tend to code-switch to fit in with a certain social group. Starr's friend Hailey is

portrayed as a white girl using African American slang. One example is a conversation between the two girls about Starr's boyfriend: "If someone tries to do some shit to my girl, I have to get'em" (*THUG* 08:01-07). Starr would always avoid this kind of slang in school, but Hailey does not have to. In another scene, a white classmate tells Starr that her "kicks are lit" (*THUG* 07:28). Often young people of all colors imitate Black rappers' ways of talking since those have fans among all ethnic groups. While Hailey does not have to fear any kind of repercussions for her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Starr would have to. Her statement about slang stresses Dave Chappelle's message about necessary bilingualism. It is not always a choice to speak two languages or dialects, it can also be a necessity.

This can be connected to Bleichenbacher's results concerning linguicism in movies. More often than not, appreciation of multilingualism only works one way. Hailey is almost praised for her use of AAVE, or at least considered cool by other classmates. Starr, in contrast, is expected to be able to change the way she talks to her parents and the way she talks at school. Similarly, Starr's Black friends mock her for hanging out with white teenagers (THUG 15:45-53). Adjustment is key for code-switchers. Errors can have serious consequences, a fact that becomes even clearer throughout the rest of the movie.

In another scene, Starr's family is interviewed by the National News (*THUG* 1:08:05-1:09:10). In order to be taken seriously by the interviewer and audience, they

dress up nicely and the children are told to be more polite than usual. Just like Starr, all of them seem to live a different life for a while. This includes a change in appearance, body language and, of course, dialect. Not just teenagers in high school but all Black people are forced to conform to society's standards, predominantly white standards.

Even the very first scene of the movie shows the differences between the socialization of Black and white children. There is a necessity for Black parents to talk with their children about the safest reactions to police encounters. This does not only involve behavior, such as slow movements and having one's hands visible at all times, but also the way they talk to police officers (*THUG* 00:36-50). Starr is only 9 years old when her father explains this to her, clearly illustrating an enormous strain on the child. It becomes increasingly comprehensible why some people code-switch. They feel that changing their dialect is needed for safety during something as simple as being pulled over by a police officer.

Another crucial scene in the movie concerning code-switching is Hailey being called out on her use of slang without understanding the impacts of discrimination on African Americans. Angry at Hailey's hypocritical protesting, Starr shouts: "It's all 'our' and 'us' and 'Black Lives Matter, girl' until you clench your purse when you're in an elevator with a Black person" (*THUG* 1:39:42-52). Starr is tired of white people speaking their own form of AAVE without realizing what effects the dialect has on Black people. This scene demonstrates the concept of language as a marker of cultural, in particular

racial, tension, introduced by Ross. He describes language itself as a "zone of contention" (Ross 128). AAVE functions as one form of resistance and unity for Black Americans, while white people like Hailey appropriate it by not understanding the struggle over its legitimacy This is why Starr's behavior changes and she acts aggressively towards Hailey. This breaking of the character she plays at school signifies her frustration about having to code-switch in the first place.

There are hundreds of examples of movies portraying code-switching, particularly recent ones. A critically acclaimed horror movie is *Get Out* directed by Jordan Peele. A Black man visiting his white girlfriend's family realizes that something is off when the other Black guests at a dinner party behave strangely. They do not reciprocate certain gestures like fist bumps and none of them use AAVE. This is how he slowly figures out that the people in front of him are actually elderly white people who have transplanted their brains into Black peoples' bodies, granting them immortality. Frequently, code-switching is portrayed as a way of unionizing and creating identity, as described by Ross and Marian.

Through showing Starr's African American perspective on code-switching, it becomes clear that it is not depicted as something inherently negative in *THUG* but rather an essential tool to navigate through life. Different manners and ways of speaking create her two opposite personas, which still make up one integrated language identity. Starr is able to change back and forth between them based on her two daily

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environments. Failing to switch according to social expectations is not always welcomed by the respective groups and can have severe consequences, as can be seen in the movie.

## CONCLUSION

The representation of multilingual speakers in movies has changed a lot. While the majority of films used to depict characters with non-English L1s as bad people, nowadays a wide variety of multilingualism is shown. Code-switching is becoming more frequent and some movies like *THUG* even explain the reasons for adapting one's language or dialect in given contexts. Both *THUG* and *GoldenEye* have been watched by millions of people and therefore have a comparably broad audience. Supported by their major impact on society, their portrayal of multilingual speakers is thus worth discussing. Language is constantly changing. Hence, ideas of multilingualism and film representation of it transform over time. The two movies make this transformation visible.

*GoldenEye* is a useful example of linguicism in movies. It features villains that are fluent in English and yet all have a strong foreign accent. All major scenes are in English, even if logic would require another language. Those stereotypes can have a tremendous influence on the movie's audience.

*The Hate U Give* shows a radical contrast. It is not easy to compare these two films since they were produced in different decades and belong to different genres. Still,

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important linguistic developments can be seen. Multilingual speakers are not portrayed as bad people anymore, unlike in the movies examined by Bleichenbacher. Instead, *THUG* shows the struggles of code-switchers who are forced to adapt their language. This also stresses Chappelle's message of African Americans struggling with separating dialects every single day. Starr and her family do not get praised for their ability to speak AAVE and General American. This is expected of them and the misuse of one variety in the wrong context can have severe consequences.

*THUG,* unlike the majority of older movies featuring multilingualism, thus functions as an inclusive space for a myriad of code-switchers and multilinguals. It fights the outdated views of movies like *GoldenEye*. The comparison highlights the shift in film representation from that of multilingualism as a tool for exclusion to multilingualism as a method to decrease exclusion from society. Ultimately, this essay's analysis gains depth when situated within broader theoretical discussions of multilingualism. By drawing on scholars like Marian and Ross, it becomes evident that the evolution in film portrayals—from linguicism and monolingual supremacy to an embrace of code-switching and linguistic hybridity—reflects ongoing societal tensions around language, identity, and power. *THUG*'s worldwide success leaves hope for more depictions of language diversity in movies including and even primarily dealing with multilingualism.

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