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Critical Dystopian Resilience in *Swastika Night*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Keywords: dystopian, resistance, education, masculinity, African American literature.

Abstract: This article compares and scrutinizes three novels—*Swastika Night*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*—to better understand their employment of critical dystopian elements to represent resistance, solidarity, and resilience amidst institutionalized discrimination. The study takes into consideration themes such as masculinity, memory, and education, developed in these narratives to critique systemic oppression and generate a sense of hope. Burdekin, Baldwin, and Atwood all depict protagonists in defiance. These three writers lived in different historical eras, but each perceived the conditions of their time as threatening to people's freedom, and their novels are a reactionary and emancipatory instrument by which readers might understand reality better and work toward a more just world.

Introduction: Resistance, Solidarity, and Resilience

Forms of resistance and solidarity as factors of resilience are often represented in narratives belonging to particular genres, such as dystopian novels, memoir, and protest fiction. This analysis is centered on stories with a set of characters that bond together and find ways to fight against systemic oppression: Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*, James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although *If Beale Street Could Talk* does not fit neatly into the dystopian fiction genre, as do the other two novels, all are nonetheless employed as a distinctly reflexive medium, illustrating the power of literary

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texts in “not well-defined and stable classes” (29) to comment meaningfully on social problems. The study examines the representation of resistance and solidarity in these novels, taking into consideration themes such as masculinity, memory, and education to understand how each work generates a subtle but strong sense of hope. Burdekin, Baldwin, and Atwood portray protagonists in search of ways to manifest their defiance, in social contexts characterized by systemic oppression. Indeed, they published their literary works in different, but crucial historical conditions that they perceived as threatening to people’s freedom, with a possible loss of human rights, or a deadlock in the progression of civil rights.

With defiance as their primary mode, these three novels incorporate elements of the dystopia genre. Writing in 1937, Katharine Burdekin foresaw the outbreak of the Second World War and presents her social critique and her concerns through a distinctly dystopian narrative. Although *If Beale Street Could Talk* does not at first appear to fit the dystopian genre, Baldwin represents the frightening reality of African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ In this largely autobiographical novel, the conditions of Baldwin’s everyday life such as institutional discrimination, systemic racism, and hopelessness, are rendered as topoi belonging to dystopian stories as a “strategic response” (Frow 29) to his situation. In relief against these anxiety-inducing conditions, the writer focuses on the resilience and the sense of solidarity that the African American community holds on to in order to survive. Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985, during the Cold War, and her novel, along with the subsequent TV adaptation, have influenced pop culture. In this dystopian story, Atwood deciphers the hidden problems of a society riddled with oppression, misogyny, and environmental havoc. Although these novels explore different time periods and cultures, they are all resilient counter-narratives, employing themes such as masculinity, memory, and education, to reveal how resistance and solidarity function to promote human survival under great duress.

Literature has long been recognized an instrument of resistance. The importance of narratives with a sociopolitical dimension is clarified by Tess Lewis in a 2008 article in which

she asserts that literature “can provide resistance to the deadening forces of society whether they come in the form of political ideologies, social pressures or rampant consumerism” (10). The *fil rouge* that connects all these stories is not only their portrayal of solidarity as an act of defiance, but also how their fictional discourses of defiance correspond to real-life sociopolitical conflicts. Indeed, fiction becomes an instrument for raising awareness of hidden forms of control and discrimination. The protagonists of the narratives, *Swastika Night*’s Alfred, *If Beale Street Could Talk*’s Tish, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s June experience a drastic changes to their ordinary lives and are subject to social pressure and psychological trauma, as a result.

In response to their newly restricted conditions, each feels a need to seek solidarity, an impulse which itself indicates hope. In *The Civil Sphere*, Jeffrey Alexander explains that the successful development of solidarity must start with the acknowledgment of the commitments to the “ideal, to the transcendent, to what hope will be everlasting” (3). The American sociologist envisions a civil society that has at its center “a cultural structure,” whose components are “communicative institutions” (4-5), such as literature and the mass media. Not only do the protagonists in question initiate resistance through relationships with other like-minded characters, but the authors themselves contribute toward their own society’s resistance by generating solidarity with and among readers. With their dystopias, Burdekin, Baldwin, and Atwood contribute to the resilience of their societies by communicating their warning messages.

This emphasis on the importance of solidarity links the novels to the critical dystopia genre,² which departs from that of the classic dystopia in its protagonists’ ability to revolt against the regime. In these three examples, the characters search for a way out of their oppressed status quo and pursue “hope by resisting closure” (7) as Baccolini explains. In contrast with classic dystopian fiction, in critical dystopian fiction, the process of subverting the oppressive system is initiated and developed throughout the story. As Tom Moylan argues in *Scraps of The Untainted Sky*, critical dystopias “try to move toward creating a social reality

that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by the narrow and destructive logic of a system intent only on enhancing competition in order to gain more profit for a select few” (189).

Critical dystopian fiction can be considered a self-reflection about the present system which also explores spaces of opposition and possibilities from which “the next round of political activism can derive inspiration” (10). It creates a dimension in which expressions of resistance and dissent emerge. Indeed, it is a form of fiction rooted in current problems of society and characterized by a belief that these problems can be overcome. In *Swastika Night*, the protagonist Alfred defies the system by teaching how life was before Hitler. In historic circumstances that Baldwin renders as distinctly dystopian, *If Beale Street Could Talk*'s Tish and her family also struggle against the gloomy reality in which they are living, evaluating all the possible strategies to prevent Fonny from being incarcerated. And in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist, June, lives in the time of Gilead, a government guided by Christian fanatics, and in her refusal to surrender to the system, she joins the resistance. *Swastika Night*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, are stories in which resilience emerges as an impulse against contingent conditions of oppression.

Swastika Night's Critique of Masculinity

Swastika Night, which was published in 1937, traces through a futuristic story the tense years in which Burdekin was living. Against the dystopian setting, Burdekin presents the story of a subtle but reactionary response³ by Alfred, who commits to doing whatever it takes to save his son's future. The conditions Alfred faces certainly seem hopeless. In this apocalyptic world, the Nazis and the Empire of Japan have won World War II, and society has adapted to a new brutal regime. In this sexist system, women are treated like animals, and they are forced to live

in women's quarters. Their only purpose is reproduction. The situation is bleak, as this passage illustrates:

They wanted *all* women to be at their will like the women of a conquered nation. (...) Rapes were extraordinarily common compared with what they had been even fifty years before, and the sentences for rape were getting lighter and lighter. (...) They must dress all in one color, a dirty brown (as they do now), and must be, after the age of sixteen, completely submissive, not only to the father of their children, but to any and every man, for such was the will of the Lord Hitler. (81)

Interestingly, rather than critiquing her own culture's misogyny through a female protagonist, Burdekin examines these horrific and atrocious conditions through Alfred. While this strategy sacrifices the effect of tracing a female agent from oppression to liberation, it achieves something that could not be done through a female protagonist: Alfred himself discovers patriarchy's inevitable damage not only to women, but to men as well. With the choice of a male voice, the writer defies conventions of utopian and dystopian discourse:⁴ She keeps misogyny at the core of the narration, developing her reflections about 1937 British society, yet avoiding the dismissal of her critique as one focused only on "women's issues." With this cogent and dreadful depiction of the effects of totalitarianism, the writer reveals the consequences of any system in which one group oppresses another. Within this narrative, Alfred's role is also crucial for its symbolism: he is the savior, a resilient civilian that fights against oppressive laws. As the scholar Daphne Patai points out in her introduction to the novel:

The novel's protagonist, the Englishman Alfred, is a figure destined, like his historical namesake, to contribute to his country's freedom. But Alfred is emphatically not a warrior. [...] in *Swastika Night* she continues the attack on militarism through Alfred's opposition to the ideology of Nazism. He realizes that violence, brutality and physical courage can never make 'a man', but only ageless

boys. To be a man, in his view, requires a soul. Therefore, liberation from Hitlerism, in *Swastika Night*, cannot come through violence and brutality, the ‘soldierly virtues.’

(8)

Alfred is destined to alter the status quo not with violence and brutality, but with intellectual liberation. By exploring the ways in which male characters live their power status in a male-dominated culture, Burdekin exposes the consequences of this system, which Pagetti defines as imposing “elements of cult masculinity” (361) on the rest of society. Seeking a way to defy the system, Alfred forms an alliance with Hermann. Alfred and Hermann are both dangerous variables, the former a dissident, and the latter a homosexual misogynist, and their bond goes against the norm. In this world, women do not have the right of choice, control, or power to reject men, but rather than align themselves with the masculine power of the regime, the two men form an alliance, determined to preserve the book from the Knights. Their escape, their intimate relationship, and their mission leads to Hermann’s ultimate sacrifice to save Alfred, and subsequently, to Alfred’s death to preserve memory and human heritage. Alfred asks Hermann, “‘Then if you can love and trust an Englishman, can you grasp the idea that there might be something important, some knowledge, some wisdom, that’s for *all* for us, for all men alike’” ‘Yes, I think I see’” (Burdekin 63).

With Alfred and Hermann, Burdekin explores gay desire because, as Thomas Horan argues, “[it] causes the reader to confront the damaging effects of homophobia, as well as misogyny, on contemporary society” (94), and the writer also exposes how Hermann’s lust for Alfred helps him to transcend the institutionalized racism and nationalism of their society. Hermann’s commitment to Alfred’s cause is rooted into a strong sense of solidarity and resilience. Alfred’s defiance is manifest in his decision to become an unlawful teacher of history. The government controls and limits access to information, or knowledge. Moreover, any trace of his culture’s history has been destroyed through censorship. As Glyn Morgan states, in long-

established totalitarian systems, control is maintained by “limiting the knowledge and education of the general population, [in] Burdekin’s by destroying all the records” (49). Yet, the process of change is in control of the protagonist and his son through reclamation of education, through a mysterious book Alfred has discovered. Alfred’s awakening and his decision to pursue the teaching of the real history of the German Empire initiates the dismantling of the government’s power structure. The “book of truth” becomes the instrument of salvation, a source of hope, and a symbol of rebellion. The alliance between Alfred and Hermann reveals the necessity of overcoming institutionalized social prejudices, including misogyny, to reclaim knowledge and subvert totalitarianism.

To further develop revolutionary solidarity, Alfred tells his son of the mysterious book, to be used as a weapon against this regime: “the book is in a safe place, much better than the dug-out. It’s with Joseph Black. Joseph knows the book is something precious to you and to me” (Burdekin 195). Knowledge is a weapon against an oppressive system, and its importance leads Alfred to an extreme decision, he dies to allow “the reader to hope – that knowledge will somehow survive, that the secret book will be passed on, that a girl child will be raised with a smattering pride” (Patai 88). In *Swastika Night*, resistance is thus intellectual freedom. It is the same belief that emerges in Burdekin’s 1940 note, analyzed by Claeys, stating that “Nazism was too bad to be permanent” and that from this horrible period “would emerge a higher state of humanity” (Claeys 350). Building on her critique of totalitarian masculinity, Burdekin offers a way forward through education. Readers get to perceive the complexity and danger of Alfred’s world through Burdekin’s deconstruction of it, transforming dystopian anxiety into hope in Alfred’s vision of a more equitable and healthy society.

Dystopian Anxiety, Resilience, and Love in *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Although Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* is set in the 1970's U.S. and focuses more on racism than gender-based oppression, Baldwin, like Burdekin, employs elements of critical dystopian fiction to analyze problems of his own society and to offer hope for a better existence. Starting with his collection of essays, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin clarifies his primary objective of representing the struggles of Blacks, and the goals of Black freedom affirmation. Baldwin was a prominent figure in the public sphere, and with his writing and his cultural resonance, he changed the general discussion around these themes; many scholars have highlighted his strong influence on the generation of intellectuals that followed him. For instance, the historian Peniel E. Joseph recognizes the African American writer as the literary voice of the Civil Rights Movement. As such, with *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin conveyed and promoted a message of love. In *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement*, Carol Polsgrove points out that at a time when only a few intellectuals and journalists were advocating for true social equality for African Americans, Baldwin's vision challenged the dominant vision of race relations based on institutional racism and white supremacy. His vision of America is formed in hope that the country will transform its racist thinking in order to avoid a destructive ending. His prophetic words define what would become the trajectory in African-American's resistance to white hegemony: "the price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks - the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind." (97) Baldwin is asking for total liberation in line with the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Through its use of critical dystopian elements, *If Beale Street Could Talk* asserts that in 1970's America, Black people can resist power inequality by coming together in solidarity, and holding large-scale public protests, and while waiting for the desired change, find solace in love and empathy. Establishing the novel's dystopian, even if real-world, setting, the writer exposes the consequences of police brutality, portraying the fear and terror that the characters

experience after a series of problematic encounters with a police officer. The story is focused on Fonny, Tish, and their families and how they are following unwritten rules of restraint in every interaction with whites. In one passage, Daniel, one of Fonny's friends, exposes this situation, telling of his experience with police: "I want to shit, and I want to die, but I know I can't do neither. I figure they'll let me shit when they get ready, in the meantime, I just got to hold it best I can, and it is just pure foolishness for me to think of wanting to die because they can kill me any time they want to and maybe I'll die today" (108). Baldwin allows the reader to perceive the character's sense of helplessness and lack of choice regarding his own life. As Lisa Beard points out, "In Baldwin's account, white violence is not only monstrous but also denied, hidden behind national stories of civic virtue and myths of Black criminality" (337). By depicting this violence as hidden and unpredictable, *If Beale Street Could Talk* reveals the subtle way society strips basic human rights from Black families: there is no trail, no evidence and no testimony that can protect them. False accusations, discrimination, and unjust policies prevail. By using the narrative to generate dystopian anxiety in the reader, Baldwin reflects real-life oppressions and defines collective racial identity in a multilayered context. Indeed, the writer exposes the consequences of police brutality on his characters' lives, and how their lives, like those of many African American citizens, are always vulnerable and restricted because of institutionalized racism.

The notion of racial identity as a "matrix" (Coates, Ferber, and Brunnsma 50) emphasizes the complex forces that determine the experience of people like Fonny and Tish. In *The Matrix of Race*, Coates, Ferber, and Brunnsma illustrate the intersection of different dimensions of identity - social, historical, and cultural - that can contribute to a person's oppressed status. At the core of discrimination, there is a set of myths, prejudices, and stereotypes that are aligned with power to oppress specific groups, often which overlap with one another. Baldwin portrays these conditions as dystopian, a monstrous system engaged in "devaluing, undermining,

marginalizing, and disadvantaging of certain social identity groups in contrast to a privileged norm” (Coates, Ferber, and Brunσμα 67). The devastating social injustice that Fonny and Tish are experiencing creates a powerful sense not only of helplessness, but also of the resistance impulse. As is common in critical dystopian fiction, the role of resilience is central to this story. The protagonists, along with their families, are victims of white supremacy, but they do not surrender to racist treatment. Instead, they attempt to transform their status quo within hostile circumstances. Tish continues to keep Fonny informed of what is happening in her life, while he does not give in to the desperation of his condition in jail. The couple is supported by their families, who try their best to find Fonny’s accuser to ask her to tell the truth during the trial in court. Even Tish’s sister, Ernestine is an active participant in the group’s resilience as she constantly protects Tish and encourages the family not to surrender.

Following Fonny’s incarceration, the characters find strength in memory: memories of a loving relationship, of a respectful son-in-law, of a devoted son. Like the Nazi regime that threatens the future in Burdekin’s novel, the racist US culture of Baldwin’s novel attempts to rob its Black characters of their history in order to control them. Officer Bell is only one representative of a system of authorities, namely the police and criminal justice system, attempting to erase Fonny. But as a tool of resistance, Fonny, Tish, and their families preserve particular memories which block efforts to dehumanize Fonny and, by extension, themselves. Not only does Fonny’s family devote their time to remember him and clear his name, but also Tish, Ernestine, and Sharon strive to save him, guided by memory. Baldwin develops memory in the novel as a catalyst of love and family bonding, a source of solidarity. In general, the importance of love between Tish and Fonny is at the core of all the family’s endeavors to survive their circumstances. As Christopher Lebron points out: “Baldwin’s career was consumed with affirming the worth, the sanctity of black life - he saw it as his vocation to make

Americans aware that black life mattered and that racism was destroying that life in the deepest sense” (112-113).

Like Burdekin, Baldwin deconstructs masculinity as a necessary step toward resistance, solidarity, and resilience. Baldwin explores this theme through the characters of Frank and Fonny. Patriarchal violence is presented through Fonny's father, Frank, whose authority and masculinity is patterned after that of the racist society that dominates him, and who, hence, struggles with his lack of power in conjunction with Fonny's arrest. In “Romancing Beale Street,” Robert J. Corber notes that, conversely, “Fonny never questions his own masculinity. He has avoided the fate of the other neighborhood boys, who end up robbing stores and on drugs, because unlike them he ‘had found his center, his own center, inside him: and it showed’” (184). In the clash between two generations, in the differences between father and son, the novel introduces and develops Fonny’s resilience. With his constant hope, nourished by the love of his family, the protagonist finds his own center. Fonny is on a different interior journey than Frank and demonstrates no need to assert power over his partner or to question aspects of his personality.

If Beale Street Could Talk’s rendering of Black lives generates anxiety for the reader, who feels the suffocating effect of their situation, but these characters’ solidarity and resistance, in context of a social system that does not guarantee basic human rights, divides families, and incarcerates innocent people, offers a glimpse at the human resilience that, even today, fuels African-Americans’ fight for equal treatment.

Preserving Memory and Reclaiming Education in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Published in 1987, Atwood’s critical dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* can also be considered a narrative of resilience. June, renamed Offred by the regime that has overthrown the U.S. government, does not want to surrender to her circumstances. She fights for her life,

and actively resists forgetting, and letting the world ignore, her previous, relatively free existence. As Linda Kauffman argues, Offred “neither forgives nor forgets; she rebels by keeping the past alive, first in her memory, then on tape” (237). Indeed, with the novel’s epilogue, readers learn that Offred’s tapes were discovered and, unexpectedly, a trace of her past was preserved through them.

The novel’s lack of resolution and complex narrative structure are characteristic of critical dystopian fiction. Indeed, unlike the majority of the story, which is narrated by June herself, the segment that reveals the finding of the tapes is told through the point of view of professors who take part in a conference in a distant future. Atwood presents a clear contrast between the unreliable academics who are discussing “objectively” Offred’s story and her “subjective” point of view. The academic conference of 2195, where the professors are gathered, is characterized by sarcasm and arrogance. As Peter G. Stillman argues in “Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” their scholarly vision “adheres to a conventional (and traditionally masculine) vision” (83). Even so, June’s story of her experience and the society she is living in “eschews a political interpretation of her life” (83). The metafictional conference discussion about the tapes serves as a device through which Atwood can distinguish between “re-education” as a tool of the state and education as a human right.

In the same vein as Burdekin, Atwood wants her readers to perceive the consequences of a religious totalitarian system and transforms Offred into a martyr. In Gilead, the Bible becomes a text of the law, and academics are murdered and displayed hanging from walls to set an example. With a congress dominated by men, women need to be “taken care of” and are re-educated to become surrogates. Yet, real knowledge is power, and this totalitarian system is aware of the dangers of literacy. Here, women only have access to the information the authorities want them to have. Because she is deprived of access to print texts, Offred reacts uncontrollably in moments when she is presented with an unexpected chance to read, usually

secretly: “On these occasions I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation” (120). This quote clarifies the crucial role of education deprivation within the story. Gilead’s power relies on its control of every aspect of the life of its population and the act of denying access to any literary text reflects the government’s fear of any disruption to their masterplan. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (and the dystopian genre itself), as Alison Happel-Parkins points out in “Education’s Handmaids?”, is “useful in relation to educational policy because it can be used to explore the structural and individual ways in which gender regimes are potentially oppressive and often unjust” (231). The novel illustrates how the perception of women as “defective,” and in “need of policing and re-education” (230) is fostered as a tool of the dominant system.

Atwood’s critical dystopia sheds light on contemporary sociopolitical conditions. Atwood creates a sense of anxiety that has its roots in the reality we live in. Indeed, her complex treatment of education and knowledge highlight the dangers of using the education system as an ideological training ground. Discussing the similarities between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the current political situation in the U.S., Lyndsay Denniger states, “The truth is that American education is in trouble because education is treated as something to fear rather than something to embrace.” Denniger’s warning implies the need to differentiate between education and reeducation, and emphasizes that the former must be protected the former in order to sustain the possibility of freedom.

Notably, in her desire to resist the system, June builds solidarity with the other handmaids and with Nick and it is through the efforts of her comrades and her lover that her tapes survive censorship. June is forced to feel isolated and powerless, as a pariah, against a structured and controlling system, but as a result of her new-formed relationship with Nick, she becomes determined to fight. By seeking and finding a community of resistance and, hence, protecting her story from totalitarian authorities, June subverts her oppressors and exhibits

resilience. Atwood's story addresses the potential consequences of the change of the "free" system towards a more theocratic and elitist ideology, heightening readers' awareness of their own society's tendencies toward totalitarianism. Yet, this work of critical dystopian fiction also leaves readers with a sense of hope that oppression can be subverted through solidarity and resistance, the novel itself modeling and fostering resilience.

Conclusion

Solidarity, resistance, and hope emerge as powerful forces in these three novels. Although cult masculinity, erasure of history and denial of education are effective tools of oppression, these novels employ critical dystopian elements to emphasize possibilities for a better future. By tracing the experiences of characters who refuse to succumb to authoritarian systems, as well as by generating solidarity through the very writing of these works, Burdekin, Baldwin, and Atwood resist systemic oppression and bring contemporary society to account, reminding readers that such resilience can lead us toward a more just world.

1 In *From Utopia to Nightmare*, the scholar Chad Walsh proposes one of the first definitions of the term "Dystopia": "an imaginary society presented as 'inferior to any civilized society that actually existed'" (25-28).

2 In *Genre and Gender in Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler*, Raffaella Baccolini differentiates between classic and critical dystopia. She explains that classic dystopia is a bleak and "depressing genre with no space for hope within the story" (17) and any hope or possibility of utopia is "maintained only outside of the story" (18). Dystopia has to be considered as a warning. Critical dystopia is different because it does not include closure: "open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work" (18).

3 In the case of dystopian stories, the term "reactionary" can allude to the characters' desire to return to a previous status quo in which society possessed positive characteristics.

4 In the article "In the Year of Our Lord Hitler 720: Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*," Carlo Pagetti argues that Burdekin's original approach to female characters is evident when compared to other classics of the genre, such as *Herland* and *Brave New World*, in which female characters are "ambiguous instruments of rebellion" (361) or "docile interpreters of the system" (361).

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