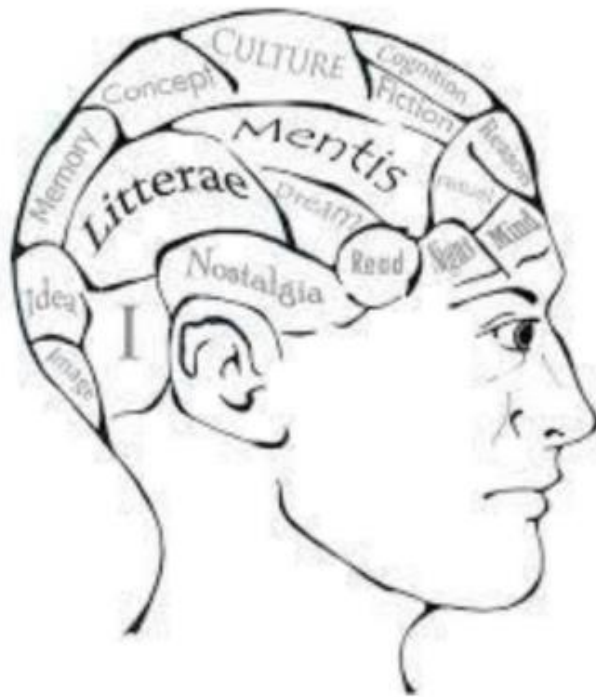


# Litterae Mentis



Presents  
Volume 8



**LITTERAE MENTIS**  
A JOURNAL OF LITERARY STUDIES

Volume 8: Myth

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## ***Editorial***

Welcome to the eighth issue of *Litterae Mentis: A Journal of Literary Studies*, the University of Kent's postgraduate journal of literary criticism. Compiled and edited by postgraduate students from the School of English, *Litterae Mentis* provides a platform for both MA and PhD students from the Division of Arts and Humanities to publish papers about the areas of literature and culture they have a passion for. The journal aims to encourage unique research from new voices that echo the varied interdisciplinary interests of the academic community at the University of Kent.

We selected the theme of *Myth* for this issue as myths are at the core of what it means to be human, of storytelling, and oral tradition. They provide a window into historical traditions, beliefs, and natural and social phenomenon, whilst also representing widely held beliefs that give insight into society, past and present. All our editors have thoroughly enjoyed putting this journal together. We have been lucky to work with diligent and enthusiastic contributors who have produced engaging academic research and thought-provoking creative pieces.

We would like to thank the School of English for their guidance throughout the process. In particular, we are extremely grateful to Dr Clare Wright for her advice and support. We would also like to thank Dr Katharine Peddie for her astute introduction to this issue. Additionally, we wish to extend our gratitude to Dr Sam Edwards, Dr Claire Hurley, Dr Pádraig Kirwan, Dr Ada Nifosi and Dr John Wills for their insightful and constructive peer reviews. Finally, we would like to thank all the contributors, without whom this issue could not have come to life.

*The Litterae Mentis Editorial Team 2022*

## ***About the Editorial Team***

### **Rachel Anderson - *Editor***

Rachel (she/her) is a Tomorrow's World Excellence Scholar studying American Literature and Culture MA. Her main research interests are contemporary 20th century literature, with a focus on black feminism, intersectionality and critical race theory.

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### **Aysha Jefcut - *Editor***

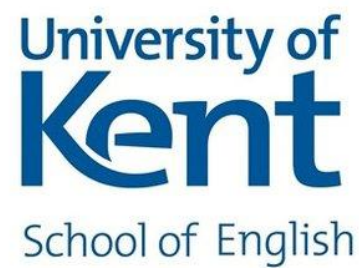
Aysha (she/her) is an MA student in American Literature and Culture at the University of Kent. Her work is grounded in critical race theory and black studies, with a particular interest in representations of whiteness and identity mapping in contemporary African American literature and art.

### **Heather Smith – *Editor***

Heather (she/her) is a PhD Creative Writing student with a background in American literature and English Literature. Her main research interests are rooted in feminism; the gothic; the uncanny; confessional narratives; and semiotics. Her current research focusses on female monstrosity.

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Lily (she/her) is an MA English and American Literature student with a background in Comparative Literature and Data Analytics. Her main research involves the study of disability in American culture with a focus on politics of the body in relation to post-war hypermasculinity, second-wave feminism and sexuality.



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## Introduction

### Dr Katharine Peddie

Myth is foundational, providing means to explain, express, justify and shape the world. It often explains how things are the way they are. It is also fundamentally fictitious – and several articles in this issue focus particularly on this fictitious nature: and that, although we traditionally see a myth as a traditional story involving supernatural entities, it is also any ‘widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception’, or a ‘misrepresentation of the truth’.<sup>1</sup> Nathan Ilett’s article ‘Operation Goodwood: Myths and Historical Misconceptions of British Armoured Forces in the Normandy Campaign June-July 1944’ challenges a number of misconceptions, which have taken shape into more widely-held and disseminated myths, about the British Army and its use of armoured forces during the Normandy Campaign of WWII. As Ilett says, the ‘popular perception being that the British Army had bad tank designs, did not understand armoured warfare, and as such they poorly utilised their armoured forces. Using Operation Goodwood, one of a number of operations to try to capture Caen after the D Day landings, Ilett carefully challenges and unpicks these popular false beliefs, building instead a more complex and factual picture involving terrain, morale, manpower and leadership which, importantly, takes proper account of what the operations own terms for success actually were.

Traditional myth and successful fake news have their relation. They both seek to make people think and believe in a certain way. This mix of the fictitious and the ability

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<sup>1</sup> “Myth.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124670?rskey=IFSmAg&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. 29 June 2022.

to shape, or rather the fictitious' ability to shape, is what makes myth, and storytelling, so potent. This is why we worry about fake news. The shaping of beliefs is ideological. It can be used to advance and justify the shape of a culture according to the desired shape of the mythmakers.

As contributor Tom Wood puts it:

Mythology is a conversation between the past and present, engaging our understanding of the world around us through fantastical moral stories of the past.

Mythology not only informs our present but can construct our ambitions or despair for the future.

So, for example, Nandia Dedeletaki's article 'Un/Fixing Aphrodite: Reading Aphrodite as the Foundations for Cyprus as a Territory that Sustains and Disturbs Fixity', historically maps a number of different incarnations and versions of Aphrodite that have been used to different political ends, identifying Antique, Colonial, Postcolonial, Capitalist and Decolonial Aphrodites. The figure of Aphrodite has been utilised both for asserting colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy on the people of Cyprus, and then, precisely because she then became a pressure point, or symbol, by which these ideologies asserted power, as a detouring device against them. This offers an excellent example of how myth has been used both to maintain and disrupt a status-quo, depending on the hands shaping the version of the myth. Aphrodite then, as Dedeletaki says 'produces a narrative of Cyprus that disregards the notions of closed, fixed borders and turns our attention towards the unpredictable mechanisms of identification and the possibilities of transformation that they hold.' This pushes attention onto not just what ideological symbolism is produced, but the mechanisms by which production and therefore transformation occur. Dedeletaki,



reading with, or, as she puts it, calling for ‘a counter-reading between Deleuzoguattarian schizo-analysis’, ends with a reading of the poet Alev Adil’s *Venus Infers* (2004) as voicing a Decolonial Aphrodite which not only articulates the violence, trauma and fragmentation of her colonial history, but also rejects the terms and fixing gaze of that history and builds new potentialities. Adil’s Aphrodite provides a space where, in the words of Dedeletaki, ‘the female body exceeds the private sphere of the Despot – the postcolonial, nationalist, and capitalist male gaze that only reads her in relation to *him* and within the boundaries of the political narrative that he wants to produce. [...] The poet deterritorializes myth from its historical and social background and truly sets it free, reterritorializing it into a space of flows, where there are multiple possibilities of becoming’.

Sophie Kay Harris’s “‘A Tribute to the Potentiality of Sadness’: Sex and Desire in Billy-Ray Belcourt’s *This Wound is a World*” similarly unpicks myth in order to open up territory for marginalised and oppressed identities. Though working on the Canadian Indigenous queer subject specifically, Harris also argues that ‘though victims of trauma at the hands of settler colonialism, Indigiqueer individuals also aim to visualise futures free from the bounds of settler colonialism, and in turn, free from despair and traumatisation’. Harris’ article ‘deconstruct[s] myths surrounding the intergenerational and identity-related traumas that queer and Indigenous people face, focusing on the inciting of decolonisation and collectivity through queer sex and desire to achieve this deconstruction’. Harris argues that ‘Belcourt’s presentation of sex with other Indigiqueer people opposes the myth that the only reality of sex for them is related to that of sexual assault, fetishisation, and the pathologisation of gay sex, to manifest a reality where Indigiqueer people are seen as proponents of joy in the face of their traumas; not defined

by them'. Harris' article thus maps an empowering and connective queer erotics of Indigenous intersubjectivity and community in Belcourt's work.

Tom Wood's 'Atomic Alchemy: Negotiating the Relationship Between the United States, Mythology, and Nuclear Science (1895-1940)' offers a fascinating account of atomic energy and radiation as *the* utopian and dystopian narrative of the C20th, particularly in the United States. Nuclear energy's enormous power was harnessed into various myths: on one hand a century that generated innumerable utopian imaginings and movements, utopian myths of Arcadia and Eden informed ideas of atomic utopian living where, as Wood says, '[m]achines do all labour, atomic energy produce everything humanity could ever need, and people live lives of leisure, happiness, and pursue creative endeavours in a finely manicured city styled after Ancient Greece'. If nuclear energy was in some places imagined to have the power to revolutionise the socio-economic, the fundamental system of the prevailing socio-economic also saw its uses and used myth as a persuasive tool to narrativize and popularise radiation as a product. Nuclear energy was incorporated by capitalism and marketed in ways that fed into concepts of what radiation could do not for society but for the individual, capitalism's lynchpin unit of desire. A narrativizing around the nuclear as tied to the sun, and its life-giving properties, and defined by transmutation, allowed a development of narratives of the alchemical and, that ultimate mythical product of the alchemical, the elixir of life, tying radiation to long held and powerful narratives of the miraculous. From experimental radiation medicine to hand cleaner, as Wood says '[t]he phenomenon of radium offered possible explanations for a range of folktale phenomena and mythology which corporate America, tying into ongoing narratives of natural healing and alternative therapy, used to captivate affluent

Americans' using powerful and well-rehearsed myths of 'a miracle product that could restore life and lead to wealth'.

On the other hand, and extreme, in a century defined also, and relatedly, by war on a scale never before imaginable, the power of nuclear energy became tied to the converse – with many emergent Christian groups consolidating influence and congregations around myths of the apocalypse – building the nuclear as the C20th apocalyptic event in the cultural imagination. Wood's article offers a reading of how atomic energy and radiation have been narrativized by extending much older mythical structures and understandings that emerge not from the scientific, but the realms of the mystic and religious imagination: the alchemical, the miracle, the apocalypse, the Edenic. Behind this it maps what role the cultural forces of C20th America played in this and how these narrativizations consolidated and extended those powers to build a sense of the importance and interconnectedness of the nuclear, consumer capitalism and the growth of advertising, and the particular constitution of Christian interest groups in C20th American society.

In a time when one popular narrative, or myth, is of the utility of 'hard' science over the supposed non-utility of the arts, humanities, and cultural studies it is timely I think to see how absolutely fundamental the ability to draw upon and repurpose myth-making and narrativization was in how one of the most important scientific breakthroughs of the modern world was packaged, marketed and given place in the culture, shaping how it was used. This serves not only to help us think through the role of studies of culture, but also the capaciousness of studies of the scientific for examining its own role in culture – how it shapes culture and how culture shapes science and what it is used for. All the articles in this issue seek to understanding why we understand something as a particular

shape, and what ideological purposes that serves, and to draw attention to the shaped-ness of the shapes we take for granted. This suggests, implicitly or explicitly, the potential for re-shaping's. Through their different specific case studies, these articles persuasively make a case for the continued importance and relevance of examining, creating and detouring the myths by and with which we live and see the world.

## **Un/Fixing Aphrodite: Reading Aphrodite as the Foundation for Cyprus as a Territory that Sustains and Disturbs Fixity**

**Nandia Dedeletaki**

### **Key words**

Aphrodite, Cyprus, migration, colonialism, postcolonialism, decolonization, postcolonialism, fixity, development

### **Abstract**

Exploring Aphrodite's relationship with Cyprus throughout time, this piece reads the goddess as the embodiment of narratives that sustain political ideology and justify respective action. While Colonial and Postcolonial depictions of Aphrodite exist only to evaluate heteronormativity and to establish the political ideology of the male authoritative figure, Decolonial Aphrodite, as well as the contemporary political status of Cyprus blur the boundaries that separate center and periphery in the contemporary world development, setting the stones for a foundational narrative of displacement as a positive and promising force of transition and transformation. Decolonial Aphrodite reveals that the Cypriot borders are both transitory and zones of transit; they are the meeting point of overlapping histories, blurring the boundaries between center and periphery, providing us with a new discourse for understanding displacement in the center and periphery system. Drawing on the concept of Deleuzoguattarian schizo-analysis, I argue that Decolonial Aphrodite is a Schizo Aphrodite; she produces a narrative of Cyprus that disregards the notions of closed, fixed borders and turns our attention towards the unpredictable mechanisms of identification and the possibilities of transformation that they hold.

Aphrodite has always captured the zeitgeist of her time, now revealing a Mediterranean Cypriot plateau made of multiplicities.

### **Introduction**

Cyprus has been subject to several major powers, including Mycenaean Greeks, Persians, Assyrians Ptolemaic Egypt, the Classical and Eastern Roman Empire, Arab caliphates, the French Lusignan dynasty, Venetians, Ottoman rule, British Empire until its independence in 1960, which was followed by multiple postcolonial failures and partition. Aphrodite has been present throughout these turbulent political times for Cyprus and evolved into a divinity with multiple characteristics, with her complexity becoming one of her trademarks' (Serwint, 2002, p. 325). She had always been the production of an everchanging society, while always remaining relevant to the experiences of her people and their struggle with identification. This piece hopes to bring light to the ways Aphrodite has been stretched, suppressed, clothed, unveiled throughout history, in order to embody political ideology and justify respective political action.

### **Situating Cyprus in the Combined and Uneven Development**

Cyprus is in the middle of center and periphery in the combined and uneven development – the Marxian political economy that describes the way in which one country is integrated into the capitalist world system, determining how economic development takes place. In *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (2004) Immanuel Wallerstein breaks down combined and uneven development into three sections, core, periphery and semi periphery. The core is the dominant section that experiences high levels of industrialization and urbanization. It is capital intensive with high wages and technology production, low amounts of coercion and exploitation. Periphery on the other hand, is dependent on the core for capital. It is less industrialized and urbanized, has little access

to the internet and low literacy rates. Examples of peripheral countries are mostly African and South American countries of low income. Wallerstein puts a hyphen between center and periphery to emphasize on their relationship of interdependency. This is an authority exchanged structured relationship, with the wealthy core benefiting from the exploitation of periphery and the latter enjoying minimal benefits. The hyphen describes this relationship as a ‘spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units’; it emphasizes that this relationship is an ‘integrated zone of activity and institutions’ (Wallerstein, 2004, p. 17). Between core and periphery, Wallerstein situates what he calls a semi-periphery; the weaker members of advanced regions, or the leading members of former colonies. Semi-periphery exploits periphery and is, itself, exploited by core.

According to Warwick’s *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), the asymmetry of power in the combined and uneven development, must be studied not as a West/East dynamic, but as a product of unevenness between nations in a capitalist world system. Modernity – and the combined and uneven development – must be understood as the way capitalism is “‘lived’ - *wherever* in the world-system it is lived” and “‘however a society develops’, its modernity is coeval with other modernities” (WReC, 2015, p. 14). Therefore, one must imagine combined and uneven modernity as a singular machine that functions with a symptom of arrhythmia. Therefore, combined and uneven development studies spatiality and positionality *beyond* East and West, and focuses on the geographical articulations of center and periphery, studying spatiality and positionality within the capitalist system.

In this world system, Cyprus belongs to the semi-periphery: the ‘threshold’ zone between central and peripheral countries. Geographically located between the Middle

East and Europe and the rest of the ‘central’ world, Cyprus is a Mediterranean ‘threshold’ base that plays a major role in mediating economic, social, and political activities in a global context. In *Writing Cyprus: Colonial and Partitioned Literatures of Place and Space*, Bahriye Kemal notes on the peculiarity of Cyprus’ geographical position. Being once a site of transit between East and West, Cyprus has been

‘...an essential passageway towards conquest for western and non-western imperial regimes, more recently an overdetermined tangential area of the Arab uprising, of Islamic state action, and mass migration.’

(Kemal, p.2, 2019)

One must imagine Cyprus as a skin that separates inside from the outside - centre from periphery. Both as a geographical territory and a nation, Cyprus has always had the role to sustain fixed identification but also struggled to legitimize itself in the combined and uneven development.

### **Colonialism**

Questions about Aphrodite as well as Cyprus’ legitimacy climaxed during the time of British colonization. Colonial Aphrodite was developed both into the emblem of utmost Western beauty and Oriental scandal –the goddess of pleasure and desire and at the same time, the goddess of illicitness and shame. Colonial Aphrodite as well as colonial Cyprus, were the vehicles for two great forces that drove British colonialism and its treatment towards the colonized – colonial desire, and colonial fear. To become a symbol of the idealized Western beauty, Aphrodite had to obtain a Hellenized form, and the 1<sup>st</sup> century statue from Soloi, became her principal form, as well as the logo of Cyprus. Aphrodite was completely appropriated when a British woman became a model for a photograph depicting a Cypriot girl in a national dress (Given, 2002, p. 5). Standards of beauty



became a reflection of oneself, and this colonial Aphrodite was put into juxtaposition with the female local population of Cyprus. Cypriot women were considered to be ugly, in contrast to the mythical inhabitants of Aphrodite's island. In *Cyprus, As I saw It in 1879* (1879) Samuel Baker solves the riddle of Cypriot 'ugliness', suggesting that it is due to a curse for the goddess's immoral nature.

All the grandeur of ancient days was now represented by the heaps of stones and the rock caverns which mark the site of Paphos. What became of Venus after her appearance upon this shore may be left to the imagination; why she is represented by the exceedingly plain women of modern Cyprus surpasses the imagination. Perhaps the immorality connected with the ancient worship of the goddess of beauty and of love invoked a curse upon the descendants in the shape of "baggy trousers, high boots, and ugliness:" to which dirt has been a painful addition.

(Baker, 1879)

As Aphrodite became detached from the Cypriot people, colonialism was depicted to be Aphrodite's savior. In *Punch*; the British weekly magazine of humor and satire, British military officer Sir Garnet Wolseley was depicted kissing the hand a British flag-dressed Aphrodite (Given, 2002, p. 7). Aphrodite, at once distanced from Cyprus but also its embodiment, was depicted as a sexualized victim who *wanted* to be rescued from savagery. The following statement by Sir Richard Palmer, the British colonial governor of Cyprus, during a meeting of the Royal Asian Society in London in 1939 is graphic:

Several thousand years ago a lady called Aphrodite landed in Cyprus, and the island has never quite recovered. The people of Cyprus make a luxury of discontent and always pretend that they do not like being ruled, and yet, like the lady I have mentioned as a prototype, they expect to be ruled, and, in fact, prefer it. (Given. 2002, p. 8)

The symbolism, which alludes to rape culture – is clear: Cyprus – the promiscuous goddess of sex, actively *wants* to be dominated by the colonial man of reason. Thus, British colonialism is legitimized and even encouraged. For the West, Aphrodite, as well as Cyprus were a symbol of desire – an escape from the repressive morality of Late Victorian Britain, into the mysterious Orient, where everything was permitted. While colonial Aphrodite was being the ultimate symbol of marvel, she was, at the same time, the symbol of repulsion – the embodiment of colonial fear (Given, 2002, p. 9). Aphrodite’s sexual permeability as well as her Eastern past were threatening for the values of upper Victorian class. Through Aphrodite, the boundaries between West and non-West appeared permeable, blurry and insignificant. In the Victorian society, sex, promiscuity, homosexuality, polygamy were all considered as taboos, but the most threatening of all, was the hybridity: the deliberate effort to cross between colonized and colonizer. Aphrodite then became the symbol of ugliness and immorality and was seen to be a major contribution to the production of an ‘inferior, degenerate race’ of Cyprus (Given, 2002, p. 10).

Aphrodite and Cyprus both evoke what Julia Kristeva calls abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1980). She defines abjection as the human reaction to the threat of a breakdown of meaning and the distinction between subject and object. Being neither object, nor subject, the abject draws us towards a place where meaning collapses. It is

situated outside the symbolic order – the subject's relation to its environment – and reminds us of our own materiality. Abjection is the moment when a border of separation was established between 'me' from 'not me'. Experiencing abjection is a threat to 'me'; it is a threat to the solidity of order and identity. It does not respect borders, rules and positions and reveals the fragility of the law and other social institutions. The abject is commonly associated with bodily fluids, waste products that come out of open wounds, or orifices such as the mouth, the anus and the vagina. To explain the term further, Kristeva uses the example of the corpse. Seeing a corpse can be a traumatic experience, despite the fact that one may already know about death in theory. The sight of the corpse reminds us of our own materiality, making us see beyond a socially constructed reality that we can understand, revealing the fragility of meaning. Cyprus and Aphrodite's hybridity, manifested in obscene ugliness, threaten the principles of authoritative society and bring out revulsion because of the uncertainty, the confusion that they cause. Aphrodite's sexual body is a reminder of a life beyond the rules of Victorian society. The Cypriot territory is where the border of acceptance is crossed and 'me'/civilization faces not-me/primitiveness.

The continuity of Aphroditic worship in the island – such as Kataklysmos; Aphrodite's supposed birthday – classified Cyprus as primitive, in the eyes of the British. Aphrodite was the primitive Other and therefore had to be suppressed. Colonial Aphrodite became the vehicle to engage in multiple issues during colonial times – she was a symbol of colonialism, a symbol of Cypriot land and a symbol of the untouchable beauty standards of the Cypriot women, and a reflection of Cypriot people and a symbol of the Orient. She was the object of desire and simultaneously, she reflected all colonial fears and prejudices that could only be satisfied by means of conquest and suppression.

Looking deeper into the absurdity of Baker's recollections, the disjunction between the beautiful goddess and the ugly locals is a reflection of the disjunction of the civilized colonizer and the savage colonized. The colonized are supposed to mimic the behaviour of their masters. The colonized are supposed to mimic the colonizer, but imperfectly so. The word 'mimicry' is very precisely used by Homi Bhabha. The author analyses this phenomenon in his 1994 book *Location of Culture* (1994). He introduces the reader to the chapter, borrowing Lacan's interpretation of a camouflage. Mimicry is not a question of being one with the background, but becoming mottled – actively and distinctively disguised. This is precisely what the colonial individual is supposed to do. Mimicry of the West must seem similar but, most importantly, it 'must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (Bhabha, 1997, p. 122). The colonized individual should be a 'subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite' (Bhabha, 1997 p. 122). In a similar manner, Cypriot women were not really expected to look like the colonial goddess – they were only expected to produce the difference between her and them in a way that strengthens colonial superiority and produces shame. The colonised individual must always aspire to become an Einstein, a Stravinsky, or a Gershwin but never be able to succeed. Bhabha describes the colonial mimicry as the 'desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is structured around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (Bhabha, p. 121, 1994). This strategy sustains the existence of a combined and uneven development – the normalization of a world made of superior Masters and submissive Servants.

## Postcolonialism

After independence from British colonization, Cyprus faced external and internal displacement due to bicomunal violence between 1964 to 1974, when Turkish Cypriot villages were assaulted by Greek paramilitaries and forced Turkish Cypriots to displacement. In the meantime, an overwhelming majority of the Greek Cypriot population from the North was displaced as a consequence of the Turkish military action in 1974. The island was partitioned between North and South in 1974, and a buffer zone area still separates the two territories, heavily guarded by the United Nations and Northern and Southern national armies. Northern Cyprus is officially named the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and is only recognized by Turkey, while Southern Cyprus is called the Republic of Cyprus and is a European Union state since 2004. In contrast to Northern Cyprus, Southern Cyprus is able to enjoy the economic benefits of being an internationally known, European state. Partitioned Aphrodite follows the same mechanism – where she could have been a hope for a truly decolonized Aphrodite, she still seems to follow the same tactics as Colonial and Postcolonial Aphrodite, now in the context of the 1974 partition of the island. Pantelis Michanikos' poem 'Aphrodite 1974' [ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΗ 1974] (1982) is a monologue addressing Aphrodite, situating her in the context of partitioned Cyprus. The poem promotes a narrative of hostility between Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities, presenting a victimized Greek Aphrodite who was battered by the coup d'état of 1974 and is still included in the anthology of secondary school curricula of Modern Greek. Michanikos' Aphrodite is a product of a general movement of the Republic of Cyprus called *Den Ksexno/Never Forget* [Δεν Ξεχνώ], referring to the coup d'état and the occupation of what is now the territory of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

## ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΗ 1974 [Aphrodite 1974]

Αναδύθηκες γυμνή [You emerged naked]  
κι όλου του κόσμου ο νους [and all the world's mind]  
πάει [goes]  
στην ωραία γύμνια σου. [to your beautiful nakedness]

Δρόσο [freshness]  
στάλα τη στάλα [drop to drop]  
πέφτει στην καρδιά μου [falls upon my heart]  
από το σώμα σου. [from your body]

Όμως τώρα βλέπω [But now I see]  
μες απ τα μάτια σου [through your eyes]  
ασίγαστο το γλυκό σου χαμόγελο [unrelentless your sweet smile]  
ριζωμένο στους αιώνες [rooted into the centuries]  
ριζωμένο στο μύθο πριν άπ' τους αιώνες [rooted in myth before  
centuries]  
γλυκό σαν λάδι [sweet as oil]  
σίγουρη παρηγόρηση [guaranteed comfort]  
άσβηστο το χαμόγελό σου. [unrelentless is your smile]

Χτες σε περιμαζέψαμε μες απ' τα ερείπια. [Yesterday we saved you  
 from the debris]  
 Όχι, δεν βγήκες τούτη τη φορά απ' τη θάλασσα. [No, you did not come  
 out the sea this time]  
 Μες απ' τα χαλάσματα σε περιμαζέψαμε. [We saved you from the  
 debris]  
 Στα μεριά σου ήτανε ακόμη, μαυρίλες από βόμβα [In your rib cage  
 there were still, blackness from explosion]

Similarly, to the Postcolonial, Michanikos' Partitioned Aphrodite is decolonized only to be reformed into a symbol that sustains political ideology and justifies action. The male gaze upon the Aphroditic body in the poem, diminishes her into a voiceless sexualized mannequin whose life narrative is manipulated by the male poetic voice. The poem opens with Aphrodite's appearance on the island – the first stanza suggests that she is only defined by her nakedness, as the whole world's mind is only fixated upon its beauty. The reference to Aphrodite's naked body suggests her objectification but also her vulnerability towards the masses that gaze upon her naked body, echoing Palmer and Wolseley's Aphrodite – as well as Cyprus – who longs to be saved by the atrocities of the savage. In this context, the savage are the Turkish military forces that occupied Cyprus.

The second stanza makes a direct connection between Aphrodite's body and the poet's heart – her body is the source of coolness, freshness for his soul, again being diminished into an object of pleasure that exists only in relation to him. In the third stanza, there is a glimpse of an epiphany; the poet claims to be able to see through the façade of beauty and kindness – he claims to have decoded the woman, creating a promising moment, a potential chance for the Aphroditic body to be disjoined from its attachment

to the phallus. However, in the final stanza, the poet interprets Aphrodite within the Greek-Cypriot ethno-nationalist narrative of identity. Postcolonial and Partitioned Aphrodite is transformed into the symbol of the atrocities of the Turkish invasion in 1974. The we-versus-you dynamic re-emerges; the masses, along with the poet saved Aphrodite from the debris, emphasizing again on Aphrodite's lack of agency. Her battered ribcage, again, suggests her victimization and lack of control that she has over her body. The poet deterritorializes postcolonial Aphrodite from her status as the Goddess of Tourism, only to reterritorialize her again into the context of a victimized partitioned Greek-Cypriot Cypriot identity. Michanikos' Postcolonial and Partitioned Aphrodite is a National Aphrodite, that is closed within the context of the bicomunal conflict. While she is the embodiment of the political turmoil of the partitioned Cyprus, she seems to lack agency to be an active contributor in the politics of Cyprus, suggesting (Greek Cypriot) Cyprus' lack of agency and blame in current political affairs and the country's victimization. Again, this Aphrodite is one-dimensional – she is the symbol of a battered Greek-Cypriot Cyprus, that excludes the multiplicity of other living experiences, and fails to take into consideration Cyprus' position in the Mediterranean, as well as the combined and uneven development into consideration.

### **Capitalism**

Currently, European Cyprus is involved in the Energy Triangle: an agreement with Egypt and Greece for the creation of a new undersea electricity cable that will link the three countries through Crete and will connect to other African, Middle Eastern and European countries. Aphrodite is once again present, with a gas field named after her. The grand economic gap between the statuses of Northern and Southern Cyprus reflects the conflicting narratives of Aphrodite – the one that wants her to be a feminine Greek



sculpture; the symbol of Western civilization, prosperity and capitalism and another, that reveals a suppressed, feared, silenced polymorphic body of Eastern roots.

Navigating her way through capitalism, Postcolonial, post-partitioned Cyprus used the same tactics as the colonialists, to create a Postcolonial Aphrodite out of which postcolonial Cyprus could make profit. It is evident that both Northern and Southern Cyprus' marketing campaigns use Aphrodite (or female figures alluding to Aphrodite) as a symbol of colonial desire and fear. According to Yiannis Papadakis in *Aphrodite Delights* (2006) Aphrodite's naked body became commercialized on the box of Cypriot sugar-coated sweets called loukkoumia, that can be found in any Cypriot souvenir shop. The sexy Aphrodite on the box of the loukkoumia alludes to the other sensual pleasures that the island advertises to offer. Aphrodite Delights are often marketed

in flavours such as chocolate, coconut, pineapple, passion fruit and other exotic fruits, all far from being 'a traditional taste of Cyprus' as the box claims. Yet nowadays Cypriots of both sides rarely consume these sweets. They are mostly found in souvenir shops for European tourists who are their real consumers and the target of the boxes' messages. The standard trays on which these are often served to tourists also have certain subtle differences.

(Papadakis, 2006, p. 238)

Meanwhile, while there are no direct references to Aphrodite, Cyprus Tourist Organization, distributes a narrative of Cyprus as a fusion of Mediterranean experiences, with a specific section on its website called 'Sun and Sea' – an alliteration that alludes to sensuality and sex. The website's logo features a bubbly 'LOVE' followed by a

significant smaller ‘Cyprus’ below. Like Colonial Aphrodite, Postcolonial Aphrodite continues to assist an image of Cyprus as an Oriental – but civilized - paradise. Being reduced to the Goddess of tourism, Postcolonial Aphrodite follows the same mechanism as Colonial Aphrodite – she reflects Cyprus’ image in the world as a tourist attraction – a sanctuary of escapism from Western life, where one could enjoy the tryptic of sun, sea and sex. Postcolonial Aphrodite assists the continuation of capitalism and to preserve a combined and uneven reality. While she is not under colonial rule, Postcolonial Aphrodite still seems to be affected by the colonial gaze. Postcolonial Aphrodite embodies what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as Oedipus: the personification of the enslaved desire within the capitalist and psychoanalytical discourse. Deleuze and Guattari argue that psychoanalysis deterritorializes myth and tragedy, only to re-animate them and promote them as a universalized representation of desire enchainned to the Oedipal complex – the holy family trinity (mother-father-child) and the desire to eliminate the same-sex parent, in order to pursue the parent of the opposite sex. They argue that:

It appears then that the interest psychoanalysis has in myth (or in tragedy) is an essentially critical interest, since the specificity of myth, understood objectively, must melt under the rays of the subjective libido: it is indeed the world of representation that crumbles, or tends to crumble

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p.  
344).

Deleuze and Guattari describe the world of capitalism as a plateau of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. To deterritorialize is to mutate, to destroy the social components

that hold a society together, and to reterritorialize is to re-create them, based upon completely new terms. Deleuze and Guattari argue that capitalism destroyed the despotic specter of monarchy, by deterritorializing the values that held it together and then created new values, that emerge as ‘images of capital’ (Deleuze, Guattari, 347), in order to sustain its existence. In capitalist societies, desire is enchained to these consumable images of capital, for they emerge as the desired, objective representations of happiness and satisfaction that are constantly just around the corner, but at the same time, achingly unreachable. Deleuze and Guattari argue that both capitalism and psychoanalysis decode only to reterritorialize new symbols of control, under the watchful eye of the Despot – the capital, or the couch of the psychoanalyst; the ‘little island with its commander ...[the] autonomous territoriality of the ultimate artifice’ (Deleuze, Guattari, 367). In a similar way, Aphrodite, as well as Cyprus are deterritorialized, detached from their colonial context, only to be confined within capitalism – an alternative authoritative figure that dictates and fixes their role in the combined and uneven development.

### **Migration**

Cyprus is currently going through a migration crisis; an incoming population that is not lured by the Aphroditic charm. Asylum seekers and refugees arriving mainly from Syria, Georgia, India, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Pakistan, Vietnam, Egypt, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, form a significant part of the migrant labor force in the country (Trimikliniotis, 2019 p. 2). According to the UN Refugee Agency, Cyprus is the leading asylum receiving country of all the European Member states. Currently, Cyprus has two overpopulated reception centers in Pournara and Kofinou, where mixed migration is hosted. This means that there are newly arrived economic migrants together with persons eligible for international protection, blurring the picture of protection that must be afforded to those in need

(Trimikliniotis, 2019, p. 4). Cyprus is lacking ‘the mechanisms to promptly identify applicants with special needs or vulnerabilities, such as victims of torture, trafficking or sexual violence’ and offers ‘no support services to these groups’ (Trimikliniotis, 2019, p. 6). According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, people populating the camps are living in horrid conditions. Residents within the confined areas are accommodated in prefabricated housing units, tents, and refugee house units, which were provided by UNHCR with the purpose to replace tents with more appropriate solutions. Refugee housing units are, however, still used in parallel with tents, due to the authorities’ incapacity to upgrade housing infrastructure of the Centre. In addition to the designated areas, approximately 200 persons are accommodated in tents out in the open, next to the Centre.

Immigration and asylum officers claim that the vast majority of migrants and asylum seekers enters via the Green Line, after having crossed Turkey. Since 2014, there are stricter controls of the Green Line, that do not permit crossing to asylum seekers. Yet, on February 2022, Cyprus-based newspapers reported a four-year-old girl of immigrant Pakistani parents was found wandering alone in the buffer zone around four in the morning, by members of a United Nations patrol. The family tried to cross the green dividing line and had lost the child in the dark (Cyprus-Mail, 2022). Additionally, two Cameroonian asylum seekers who had been denied access to asylum procedures and forced them to live in a tent at the back of a building, in a short distance from an official crossing point of the buffer zone for six months. During his 2021 visit in Cyprus, Pope Francis promised to relocate them, amongst other 50 asylum seekers, to Italy (Cyprus-Mail, 2021). These cases are only examples of how thousands of asylum seekers, refugees

and migrants from ‘peripheral’ countries breach the borders entering Cyprus’s borders, in search for safer living conditions.

Another interesting case is the threshold status quo of the migrants – most being Iraqi and Syrian Kurds – who were smuggled in a ferry from Lebanon to Italy in 1998 and have lived in Cyprus’ abandoned military base of Dhekelia ever since. The ferry’s engine broke down and the Lebanese crew fled in an inflatable dinghy. The migrants got on a fishing boat, arrived in the British military base of Dhekelia, hoping to continue their move to Europe, but have been stuck there ever since. The migrants were temporarily put up in Richmond village, originally built for British soldiers and their families at the Dhekelia base. Although many of them were granted refugee status and could potentially move to the UK, the British government forbade their entrance in fear of opening up a new migrant route. In the meantime, the people had settled in Richmond and built a permanent-temporary life. Emmanuel Bashir, a teenage migrant living in Richmond, told the Telegraph that he was not granted British citizenship, but British Overseas Territory status, which he says is akin to being stateless. As a result, Bashir cannot travel, because he neither belongs to the Republic of Cyprus, nor to the UK.

In the meantime, inclusion and participation of migrants in the Cypriot society seems to be possible in theory but extremely difficult in practise. The Cypriot government usually offers subsidiary protection status rather than full refugee status, which means that the asylum seekers have less rights and no permission for family reunification (Trimikliniotis, 2019, p. 4). Despite the fact that in 2019, the authorities announced an increase of sectors in which asylum seekers are allowed to work, there are still many administrative obstacles that produce the marginalization and ghettoization of the majority of migrants, rather than their inclusion to the Cypriot society. The offered sectors

still restrictive, being low-skilled and poorly paid, making it harder for highly skilled asylum seekers to find work (Trimikliniotis, 2019, p. 7). Additionally, no provisions are taken for asylum seekers who are vulnerable or do not speak Greek. At the same time, the right-wing extremist party ELAM – closely linked to the Greek Golden Dawn – is currently rising, having two seats in the parliament. The Cypriot media depict migration in a xenophobic manner, often presenting the issue as a ‘warlike issue or as a matter of national survival’, creating a climate of panic and hysteria (Trimikliniotis, 2019, p. 4).

In contrast to the tourists that withhold capital that they are willing to spend in Cyprus, migrants and asylum seekers are treated as a threat that could potentially destroy Cypriot identity. This fear of the migrants has a similar pattern to the British colonialists’ fear of the Orient. Migration is feared by both Cypriots and authoritative powers, because it reveals Cyprus’ Eastern roots. A Cyprus of migrants brings back the colonial concerns of identification, threatening the firm boundaries between center and periphery, by bringing them closer than ever but also by setting the boundaries for a hybrid world development. The feeling of abjection re-emerges: migration evokes abjection in the same way that Aphrodite and Cyprus did to the colonial powers in the Victorian times. The migrant is threatening to the Cypriot because it brings closer and closer Cyprus’ connection to the East, and thus, to the periphery. Turning Cyprus into a space of flows, migration threatens the firm separation between center and periphery, by bringing them closer.

This suppressed migrant Cyprus appears like a piece in the Mediterranean puzzle and alludes to Aphrodite the Eastern migrant and nomad. Miroslav Marcovich’s *From Ishtar to Aphrodite* (1996) describes Aphrodite as a polymorphic female mythic migrant from Lebanon and Syria, to Cyprus and the West. Aphrodite was influenced by

Phoenician Astarte, which in turn was influenced by Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, also known as Inanna to the Sumerians.

### **Decolonization**

Colonial, Postcolonial and Partitioned Aphrodite and the narratives of Cyprus that they produce, raise the necessity for a contemporary Migrant Aphrodite in Cyprus; a figure who is detached from the Despotic gaze and reflects Cyprus' current political position as the Mediterranean semi-periphery of the combined and uneven development. In the poetic collection *Venus Inferis* (2004) Alev Adil presents a counter-interpretation of colonial, postcolonial and partitioned narratives of the Aphroditic body; Adil's female is the embodiment of emancipated desire. Her perception of the female body exceeds the private sphere of the Despot – the postcolonial, nationalist, and capitalist male gaze that only reads her in relation to *him* and within the boundaries of the political narrative that he wants to produce. In the poem 'Forgotten Songs', desire emerges as rejection – the rejection of the definition of the ego given by the Despot - the psychoanalyst and his obsession to define the female ego in relation to the Despot. Adil's Decolonial Aphrodite voices the frustration of the voiceless, vulnerable mannequin in Michanikos' 'Aphrodite 1974' and becomes what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as schizo. The poet deterritorializes myth from its historical and social background and truly sets it free, reterritorializing it into a space of flows, where there are multiple possibilities of becoming.

I am not whole  
 but parts of me have been  
 torn up and left behind.

No, not my heart

much more – my tongue.

The rest? The rest I offer you.

Draw up your chair

devour me

at the dinner table of my betrayal.

The city walls of my memory

encircle coiled back streets

where stray boys sold garlands of jasmine

at my childhood's coronation.

And evening would reveal

the palm tree jeweled with stars.

Now I am deposed

and a shroud of heat has shrunk

those places, and its people too.

I cannot understand

how I am supposed to be.



I have lost even the idea

of my physiology.

Don't prod my wounds

don't peel away the skin of afternoon

that sleepy calm caresses me.

Your science reinvents me,

you make a woman out of

the monster I was proud to be.

It is all so much false history

our remembering has no eyes

or potato like grows them in the dark.

Forgotten songs suffuse us:

mimosa bleeding scent into the night air.

We are not whole

bits of us torn off

and left behind.

Heartless, gutless, soulless

Bastards all of us.

(Adil, 2003,  
p. 61)

The Aphroditic voice opens her soliloquy with the definite statement that she is not whole. The enjambment in the second line of the first stanza [but parts of me have been] betray an ironic tone, referring to the colonial, postcolonial and capitalist narratives that have portrayed her as whole in the past. Losing her ‘tongue’ is losing her agency – the ability to communicate herself and her past. What is left of her, is offered for consumption on the dinner table of ‘betrayal’; here she alludes to her sexualization and her exposure to the rape culture notions that justified conquest. Her apathy reflects her victimization in the colonial and postcolonial narratives, as well as her empty-headedness in the capitalist touristic narratives that casted her as the Goddess of sun sea and sex. In the second stanza, Aphrodite is reminiscent of her past of grandeur, the days when her sovereignty was celebrated. The reference to the palm tree – a symbol of warm weather, suggests her association with the East. The reference to her violent dethroning on the other hand and the covering of this experience with a shroud, alludes to the attempts of those who controlled history to suppress her Eastern past. The bluntness and honesty of the third stanza reveals Decolonized Aphrodite’s existential crisis; even the Greco-Roman body she was assigned feels foreign and elliptic. The repetition of ‘don’t’ in lines five and six, is her rejection of the Despot’s agency over her body. Through the antithesis between ‘woman’ and ‘monster’, Decolonial Aphrodite denounces the aesthetic of the Despot who comes forward as a legitimate and justifiable, almost scientific narrative. Decolonial Aphrodite laments her past pride for her Eastern appearance, alluding to a past pride for the ‘ugly’ Cypriot woman. Saying ‘was’, instead of ‘am’, suggests that Decolonial Aphrodite’s notion of aesthetics is still traumatized by the impositions of the Despot –

this is the trauma that she is now denouncing and wants to put an end to. The ‘forgotten songs’ – the identity fragments of the past that have been silenced, ‘suffuse us’ in the final stanza; they remind ‘us’ of our Eastern past and its overlapping histories. With the use of a colon, creating indirect anticipation for what is to follow, the forgotten songs also *spread* us; they encourage our own deviation from the impositions of the Despot. However, the mimosa – the tree of mimicry – ‘bleeding’ its scent into the night, serves as a reminder that it is impossible to undo the trauma that the Despot had caused and it is impossible to simply return to the past. Decolonial Aphrodite repeats the first line of the poem, this time, using ‘we’, instead of ‘I’ – the trauma is collective; Aphrodite and Cyprus had suffered in similar ways. This is Aphrodite’s final statement of what we ‘are’; the way she responds to her own existential crisis. She accepts our identity as a ‘heartless, gutless, soulless’ savage ‘Bastards’. We are hybrid beings, a product of nomadism from East to West. Bastard, being an offensive word in Western tradition, suggests that ‘our’ collective existence abuses the clear borders of classification, enticing Western fear for the disturbance of what is defined as center and what is defined as periphery.

This Bastard Aphrodite is the embodiment of liberated desire – it is the generating force of a collective attempt to break free from the gaze of the despot. For Deleuze and Guattari, liberated desire transforms the whole universe into a collective of machines; ‘celestial machines’ (1972, p. 12) that oscillate with man-made machines, that oscillate with body-machines. Liberated desire unsettles the private realm of the Oedipal complex, introducing the individual to a reality that seems like a vast space of flows. Thus, to liberate desire means to become a machine that generates resistance and change; it means to become schizoanalytic, to unsettle the values of society as we know it. Deleuze and Guattari see schizoanalysis as a model of how we could think more creatively.

Schizophrenia emerges as the unprocessed desire used as productive political process beyond the existence of social hierarchy and the Despot. Schizophrenia, synonymous to deterritorialization appears to be ‘inseparable from the stases that interrupt it, or aggravate it, or make it turn in circles, and reterritorialize it into neurosis, perversion, and psychosis’ (Deleuze, Guattari, p. 363, 1977). Whereas the psychoanalytical individual is transfixed to the couch of the psychoanalyst, in search for ways to resist to their impulses, the schizo individual, as well as Decolonial Aphrodite, are fully submerged into these impulses, running free and far away, until they reach new, unknown territories. Deleuze and Guattari argue that ‘one can never go far enough in the direction of deterritorialization’ (1977, p. 363); for there is always potential for ‘more perversion’, until the process is completely irreversible.

This Bastard, Schizo, Decolonial Aphrodite rejects all static symbolism that defines and pre-determines her intentions – she generates a conscious break from the gaze of the Despot, with the intention to reach a new plateau, which alone is created by our own work in progress. Decolonial Aphrodite encourages nomadism; the literal and metaphorical inhabitation of ‘new regions’, ‘where the connections are always partial and nonpersonal, the conjunctions nomadic and polyvocal’ (1972, p. 363). Adil retells the myth of Aphrodite, in such way that it creates active points of escape through the stories, ‘where the revolutionary machine, the artistic machine, the scientific machine and the (schizo)analytic machine become parts and pieces of another’ (Deleuze, Guattari, p. 367, 1977).

## **Conclusion**

With Decolonial Aphrodite, Cyprus becomes a Mediterranean plateau of nomadic experience – a territory of active points of escape. Decolonial Aphrodite, as well as

migration that takes place in Cyprus, blur the boundaries between center and periphery and undermine the influence of the Despotic figure who dictates the distribution of power in the world. Decolonial Aphrodite, as well as the current political status of Cyprus as the semi-periphery of the world, disregards the notions of closed, fixed borders and turns our attention towards the unpredictable mechanisms of identification and the possibilities of transformation that they hold. Kataklysmos - now a national bank holiday - was celebrated on June the 13<sup>th</sup>. Children threw water balloons at each other in the streets and I, a parodic simulacrum of Aphrodite, spent the whole day at the beach.

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## **“A Tribute to the Potentiality of Sadness”: Sex and Desire in Billy-Ray Belcourt’s *This Wound is a World***

**Sophie Kay Harris**

### **Key Words**

Indigiqueer, Indigenous, poetry, Settler Colonialism, Canada, sex, desire, decolonisation, collectivity, resurgence, fetishisation, pathologisation, sexual violence, intergenerational trauma

### **Abstract**

Despite writing scholarly work, two poetry collections and a memoir/autobiography, Driftpile Cree author Billy-Ray Belcourt is yet to feature widely in the academic work of others. Regardless of the success of his writing, no work has yet explored his poetry’s presentation of queer Indigenous identity in relation to trauma; two key aspects of his work.

This article examines selected poems from Belcourt’s debut poetry collection *This Wound is a World* (2017) and discusses settler colonialism’s impact on Indigiqueer (Indigenous queer) experience, and argues that, though victims of trauma at the hands of settler colonialism, Indigiqueer individuals also aim to visualise futures free from the bounds of settler colonialism, and in turn, free from despair and traumatisation.

This article will deconstruct certain tropes that tend to cloud more productive understandings of the kinds of intergenerational and identity-related traumas that queer and Indigenous people face, focusing on the inciting of decolonisation and collectivity through queer sex and desire to achieve this deconstruction. It will assess how Belcourt’s representation of sex with other Indigiqueer people opposes the myth that the only reality

of sex for them is related to that of sexual assault, fetishisation, and the pathologisation of gay sex, to manifest a reality where Indigiqueer people are seen as proponents of joy in the face of their traumas; not defined by them.

## Introduction

Billy-Ray Belcourt's 2017 debut poetry collection *This Wound is a World* transcends genre and presents the reader with a form of poetry that is both autobiographical and that engages with critical theory. This culminates in a collection that grapples with, what Belcourt considers to be, "the problem of loneliness as an estrangement from the present," as he traverses life as a queer Indigenous individual in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Belcourt uses this collection to comment on love, sex, politics, the contemporary realities of dating-apps, and the ongoing impingement of settler colonialism—"an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of Indigenous peoples and cultures," whilst evincing and sustaining distinctive sovereignty and occupation of the land—on lives such as his own.<sup>3</sup>

Published in a year that also featured the Canadian Government's Sixties Scoop reparations and the inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, Belcourt's poetry surfaced in a moment of increased Indigenous protest across North America—in the USA in response to the Trump administration and the Dakota Access pipeline, and in Canada in response to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Canadian state.<sup>4</sup> With

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<sup>2</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, (Canada: Frontenac House Ltd., 2017); Ann Cvetkovich and Billy Ray Belcourt, *Feminist Futures in a Time of Pandemic: Loneliness and the Affective Life of Settler Colonialism: A conversation with Billy-Ray Belcourt*, Webinar, Institute of Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University, February 11 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Alicia Cox, "Settler Colonialism", Oxford Bibliographies in "Literary and Critical Theory", 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Milman, "Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Says Trump Is Breaking Law With Dakota Access Order", *The Guardian*, 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/26/standing-rock-sioux-tribe-trump-breaking-law-dakota-access>> [Accessed 24 March 2021]; Lauren Malyk, "Indigenous Protesters in Ottawa Erect teepee on Parliament Hill to Counter Canada 150 Celebrations", *Ottawa Citizen*, 2017 <<https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/indigenous-protesters-in-ottawa-erect-teepee-on-parliament-hill-to-counter-canada-150-celebrations>> [Accessed 24 March 2021].



this considered, Belcourt's collection echoes the atmosphere of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism in 2017, and explores the importance of understanding settler colonialism's role in heightening trauma for Indigiqueer people, whilst illustrating how they seek to heal or remove themselves from trauma and to escape the bounds and myths imposed upon them by settler colonialism. These traumas in question stem from a range of experiences and realities imposed on Indigenous people inclusive of forced relocation, the "Christianizing project[s]" of residential schools, the imposition of homophobic, transphobic, and masculinist views on the reserve, and many intergenerational effects such as substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness.<sup>5</sup> Settler colonialism actively sought, as outlined by Patrick Wolfe, to eliminate the Indigenous people of North America, and consequently left Indigenous people in Canada separated from their cultures, languages, and communities.<sup>6</sup> Still experiencing the negative effects of settler colonialism in the present day, Belcourt addresses the traumas befallen Indigenous and Indigiqueer people in the form of intergenerational trauma—suffering as a consequence of "collective level" trauma, and the subsequent repetition of trauma passed down through generations—and identity-related trauma.<sup>7</sup> As a result of existing as a doubly marginalised individual, Belcourt's work shows how Indigeneity and queerness intersect, informing the traumas he, and others like him, experience in the face of settler

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Bombay, Kim Matheson and Hymie Anisman, "Intergenerational Trauma: Convergence of Multiple Processes among First Nations Peoples in Canada", *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 2009, 6-47, 6; *A History of My Brief Body* (London: HAMISH HAMILTON Penguin Random House Canada, 2020), 92; Julia Siepak, "Two-Spirit Identities in Canada: Mapping Sovereign Erotic in Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed*", *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, 55.2 (2020), 495-515; Michael J. Kral, "Postcolonial Suicide among Inuit in Arctic Canada", *Culture, Medicine, And Psychiatry*, 36.2 (2012), 311 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-012-9253-3>>.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8.4 (2006), 387-409 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>>.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Bombay, Kim Matheson and Hymie Anisman, "Intergenerational Trauma: Convergence of Multiple Processes among First Nations Peoples in Canada", *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 2009, 6-47, 6; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

colonialism, and resultingly, how he seeks to transcend this trauma through the means of sex and desire.

This article will home in on the presentation of sex and desire within *This Wound is a World*, focusing specifically on 'NATIVE TOO', 'OKCUPID', 'A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT', and 'SACRED', and will argue that the centring of queer sex and desire underscores the potential to decolonise through the evocation of a sense of collectivity that bolsters the relationship between sex, healing, and decolonisation. In conjunction with this, this article will consider the cultural backdrop of sexual assault and fetishisation present in the collection, contemplating how Belcourt shows sex as healing despite the pathologisation of gay sex and acts of sexual violence against Indigenous and queer Indigenous bodies.<sup>8</sup>

In order to consider the role of sex and desire as a means of transcending the conditions of settler colonialism and trauma, the system of settler colonialism will be approached as it is by Patrick Wolfe and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, as "A Structure, Not an Event."<sup>9</sup> In an essay which bears that phrase as the first part of its title, Kauanui eloquently suggests that "Understanding settler colonialism as a structure exposes the fact that colonialism cannot be relegated to the past."<sup>10</sup> Approaching settler colonialism as a prevailing structure in Canada and across Turtle Island is central to understanding Belcourt's work and its ongoing impacts on Indigenous and Indigiqueer lives. The structural nature of settler colonialism is integral to Belcourt's considerations of;

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<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Hollier, "Pathologizing Sexuality and Gender: A Brief History", *Visions Journal*, 6.2 (2009), 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfe; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "'A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity", *Lateral: Journal of The Cultural Studies Association*, 5.1 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.25158/15.1.7>>; Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8.4 (2006), 387-409 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>>.

<sup>10</sup> Kauanui; Wolfe.

intergenerational trauma and how its futurity provides space to work through trauma and to create modes for decolonisation; the intersections of queerness—used here as synonymous with homosexuality and other non-normative sexualities and genders—and Indigeneity; and the ability for queer desire and sex to allow for the visions of a decolonised future removed from settler colonialism and the myths of inescapable trauma. To conceive of a fully realised decolonised future, it is integral to, first, understand settler colonialism as a structure. For, “The notion that colonialism is something that ends,” bolsters “the myth that Indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended, when in actuality, “Indigenous peoples exist, resist, and persist,” into the present and the future, along with the consequences of settler colonialism and the longing to overcome its tribulations.<sup>11</sup> Decolonisation, as will be explored in the coming pages, must encompass “refusal”—of elimination, of the structure of the settler state, and of “dispossession”—and “resurgence.”<sup>12</sup> Refusal and resurgence—or “the renewal and revivification of Indigenous traditions, recognizing tradition as fluid and dynamic”—are bound up with Belcourt’s poetry collection through means of conveying ceremony and—therefore, Indigenous tradition in his writing, and Indigiqueer experience in spite of the attempts to eliminate Indigenous modes of gender and sexuality.<sup>13</sup>

With its engagement with the ramifications of life as an Indigiqueer person in a settler colonial society, Belcourt alerts us to the importance of placing queerness and Indigeneity in conversation, in order to achieve decolonisation and a rounded view of trauma in the lives of Indigiqueer individuals. Burford’s article uses Indigenous poets to

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<sup>11</sup> Kauanui.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine S J Park, "Settler Colonialism, Decolonization and Radicalizing Transitional Justice", *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 14.2 (2020), 260-279 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijaa006>>, 273-274.

<sup>13</sup> Park, 274; Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 31.

critique the lack of Indigiqueer visibility in academia, attending to the reality of queer Indigenous people as expected to “vanish” or “disappear.”<sup>14</sup> As well as bringing into view other Indigiqueer creative and academic writers, Driskill’s work, particularly ‘Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic’, raises ideas that assess the impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous experience of sexuality and gender, and the erotic as bound up with decolonising the trauma of sexual assault and other colonial affects.<sup>15</sup> This work has paved ground in the conversation on Indigiqueer identity, but little scholarship has considered the role of sex and desire within Belcourt’s debut collection specifically.<sup>16</sup>

### **Decolonisation**

Decolonisation, as both a theoretical model and in practice, demands further attention, negotiation and reconsideration than typical ideas surrounding the withdrawal of the state, and is contemplated in many ways across Indigenous literature and scholarship. Decolonisation is outlined by Driskill as the “ongoing, radical resistance against colonialism,” encompassing “struggles for land redress, self-determination, healing historical trauma, cultural continuance, and reconciliation.”<sup>17</sup> Indigenous scholars Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson also engage with decolonial practices in

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<sup>14</sup> Burford, 177; Burford, 170.

<sup>15</sup> Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic”; NB this article was completed prior to claims of ethnic fraud against Qwo-Li Driskill, any writing that references his work was done so under the allusion that his experience of Indigeneity and queerness were truthful.

<sup>16</sup> There has been a rise in scholarship that discusses Indigiqueer identity in Indigenous writing in recent years. Lisa Tattonetti’s ‘Weaving the Present, Writing the Future: Benaway, Belcourt, and Whitehead’s Queer Indigenous Imaginaries’, “‘Her Mouth Is Medicine’: Beth Brant And Paula Gunn Allen’s Decolonizing Queer Erotics’ by Arianne Burford, and a host of texts by Qwo-Li Driskill such as ‘Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic’, *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* and ‘DOUBLEWEAVING TWO-SPIRIT CRITIQUES: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies’, to name just a few.

<sup>17</sup> Driskill, “DOUBLEWEAVING TWO-SPIRIT CRITIQUES: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies”, 69.

their exploration of their ideas on “grounded normativity,” and “resurgence.”<sup>18</sup> These are theoretical concepts that stem from, and are concerned with, decolonisation. These suggest that, in order for decolonisation to be achieved, Indigenous people must be able to practise and uplift their own systems of pedagogy and politics, and be able to focus on learning about their relationship to land, sky and ancestors.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, decolonisation encompasses the enlivening of Indigenous ways of knowing and, in the words of Simpson, “Utilizing storytelling as a decolonizing process with the power to recall, envision, and create modes of resurgence.”<sup>20</sup> Further insight into decolonisation through the eyes of Indigenous studies and scholars is given when these aspects are coupled with Jeff Corntassel’s motioning towards decolonisation as being about “having the courage and imagination to envision life beyond the state,” and Qwo-Li Driskill’s suggestion that it involves “healing historical trauma.”<sup>21</sup> Belcourt’s poetry contends with decolonisation in these ways, using poetry as a storytelling vehicle, as an instrument for addressing the trauma imposed upon Indigenous and Indigiqueer people, and as a means to present queer desire and sex in order to envision life beyond the settler state.

To fully grapple with the role of the erotic in Belcourt’s work, it is important to note that other authors have explored the relationship between the erotic and healing in Indigenous literatures. Burford claims that the erotics of Indigenous writer’s Brant and Gunn Allen position “queer Indigenous desire as specifically strengthened by the land,”

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<sup>18</sup> Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity”, *American Quarterly*, 68.2 (2016), 249-255; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, ‘Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance’, *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 2, 19-34 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0019>>.

<sup>19</sup> Simpson.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 19; *Ibid.*; Driskill, “DOUBLEWEAVING TWO-SPIRIT CRITIQUES: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies”, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Jeff Corntassel, “Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination”, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 86-101, 89.

offering forth “a healing methodology for historic as well as present day trauma.”<sup>22</sup> This examination of queer erotics in relation to healing is a notion that has definite resonance for any reading of Belcourt’s work. Rather than focus literally or exclusively on the land, Belcourt uses sex as a means of centring queer Indigenous desire, providing an outlet for healing the traumas attached to existing as a person who is both colonised and marginalised by the Canadian state. As “healing historical traumas” is inherently entwined with decolonisation, Belcourt’s centring of queer Indigenous desire ultimately involves itself with decolonising poetics and practises.<sup>23</sup>

When analysing Belcourt’s use of queer sex to envision decolonisation by healing from traumas and surpassing colonialism, it is important to consider the historic and cultural backdrop of the pathologisation of gay sex, and the backdrop of sexual assault that is explored in the poem ‘A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT’.<sup>24</sup> As its title suggests, this poem uses historical anecdotes to comment on the continuance of trauma and injustice into the present. It provides commentary on settler colonialism and the impact of past events on present experience for Indigenous people in the way of sexual and physical violence. Belcourt evokes these themes by conjuring the images of sexual assault and police brutality, harking towards the injustice of violence against Indigenous bodies in Canada and summoning this difficult imagery in order to link the pains of physical and sexual violence with his choice to “give [his] body to men,” that he doesn’t find attractive.<sup>25</sup> Recollection of how “the reserve [caught] fire [and] never stopped burning,” in the aftermath of the anecdotal 1990s rape presented in the poem, uses fiery imagery to

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<sup>22</sup> Burford, 177.

<sup>23</sup> Driskill, “DOUBLEWEAVING TWO-SPIRIT CRITIQUES: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies”, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Hollier, 7-9.

<sup>25</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.18.

represent rage ripping through the reserve following the assault in question, whilst figuratively representing the symptomatic ongoing hurt that ensues through intergenerational trauma.<sup>26</sup> With the inclusion of this anecdote, Belcourt harks to the historic and ongoing sexual violence against Indigenous people by settlers, with the accompanying acknowledgement of his sexual choices acting as a form of self-abuse that may signal towards “survivor’s guilt”—the guilt of having been spared the initial trauma of the sexual assault; of having been spared the wounds of that experience whilst knowing you survived the wounds that preceded your own.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Belcourt treats Indigiqueer experience as inherently impacted by settler colonialism through the conveyance of fetishisation—as a means of unwanted sexual exoticism—and the homophobia within some Indigenous communities. This is central to shaping the importance of queer sex in this collection. Belcourt motions towards these themes in the poem ‘SACRED’. This poem deals with love and despair and is positioned in conjunction with ceremony and community distaste for queerness. The opening line of this poem—“a native man looks me in the eyes as he refuses my hand during a round dance”—sets the tone of despair to follow as it draws focus to the disdain shown towards queerness within some Indigenous communities.<sup>28</sup> The “refus[al]” to touch the hand of a queer man is reminiscent of the pathologisation of queerness and reinforces the imposition of settler colonial attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people upon Indigenous groups.<sup>29</sup> Belcourt speaks to the repression of queerness as a symptom of colonial induced fracture—one that adversely affects some Indigenous people—when he

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Driskill, ‘Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic’, 53; Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.23.

<sup>28</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; NB ‘Kookum’ is the Cree word for Grandmother.

questions how many have given “up on desire because they loved their kookums more than they loved themselves?”<sup>30</sup> Here Belcourt brings to attention the colonisation of sexuality and gender which Driskill attends to by claiming “The invaders continue to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, [and] shameful.”<sup>31</sup> This sense of shame in relation to sexuality is elicited with the line “i know i am too queer to be sacred anymore.”<sup>32</sup> The suggestion that one cannot be “sacred anymore,” once their queerness is made known echoes the way in which “[t]he love that was natural,” in many Indigenous communities “has become unnatural,” and “consumed by the white world and the values therein.”<sup>33</sup> The shame attached to sexuality is highlighted alongside the feeling of disembodiment in the first sentence of the third stanza which reads, “i dance with my arm hanging by my side like an appendage my body doesn’t want anymore.”<sup>34</sup> This highlights a creative friction within Belcourt’s work between the presentation of Indigiqueer folk as visible, sexual, desiring beings on the one hand, and disembodied, invisible and desexualised or stigmatised on the other. The dynamic act of “dancing,” which requires agency and mobility, coupled with the imagery of the disembodied “arm,” showcases this friction, as the duality between a moving and visible body, and an unwanted “appendage,” extends the metaphor of bodily and emotional disconnect.<sup>35</sup> What is more, the arm in this extract functions as a metaphor for sexuality, and the sentence itself beckons to internalised homophobia and the shame that has caused a longing for distance between oneself and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic”, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.17.

<sup>33</sup> Brant, p.78.

<sup>34</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



one's queerness. In presenting the arm as an unwanted appendage Belcourt reinstates a sense of alienation that echoes across many of his poems concerned with queer Indigeneity, heightening disembodiment as a feeling, and despair as a result. With all this considered, 'SACRED' is a poem that considers Indigeneity and sexuality in tandem, with its discussion of attitudes towards queerness and the experience of queerness against the backdrop of Indigenous ceremony. It is no accident that the ceremony that encompasses the action and thought within this poem is "a ceremony for both grief and love," as 'SACRED' ultimately contemplates the feelings of disembodiment and despair attached to love when non-normative sexualities are not accepted by Indigenous community.<sup>36</sup>

The fetishisation of queer Indigenous bodies is explored across the collection. As the discussion of queer sex is often in the context of dating-app hook-ups, the dangers attached to pursuing sex in this way—with regards to sexual health, fetishisation, and the aforementioned abuse explored in 'A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT'—are of note. In this regard, Belcourt's collection evidences the identity-related and intergenerational traumas that come with being queer and Indigenous. Moreover, it shows that these are not mythical and do in fact move from the past into the present and the future for Indigenous and Indigiqueer people. What his work does highlight, however, is that the widely held but misplaced and erroneous belief that Indigenous people are defined and limited by, and to, lives of trauma is a myth.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## Sex as Healing

This can be seen in the presentation of sex as a mechanism for healing. With the real traumas of fetishisation and sexual violence in mind, revering sex in this way is a compelling choice and one that does not coincide with the violence attached to sex for queer Indigenous people in the form of the history of sexual abuse addressed in ‘A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT’, and the correlation between queer identity and abuse on the reserve.<sup>37</sup> Despite this, Belcourt’s reclamation of sex as something with positive potential in ‘OKCUPID’ and ‘NATIVE TOO’, begins to deconstruct the myth that Indigenous people are defined by their traumas. As suggested by Driskill, the “erotic lives and identities [of Indigenous people] have been colonized along with,” their homelands, and so through the presentation of sex with other queer Indigenous people specifically, Belcourt “rework[s]...the codes of bad affect,” by utilising shared experience to reconfigure what sex can mean and achieve for himself and others like him.<sup>38</sup> Driskill goes on to suggest that the erotic is used by Indigenous writers to “participate in the process of radical, holistic decolonization,” and Belcourt’s work is no exception to this.<sup>39</sup>

The poem ‘OKCUPID’ centres queer Indigenous desire, and in doing so, envisions decolonisation through sex. The poem uses the backdrop of trauma bred from fetishisation—“ask me what my “ethnicity” is/ and say *that’s interesting*/ when i tell you i’m native”—to highlight the healing nature of sex with another queer Indigenous

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<sup>37</sup> Janice Ristock and others, "Impacts of Colonization on Indigenous Two-Spirit/LGBTQ Canadians' Experiences of Migration, Mobility and Relationship Violence", *Sexualities*, 22.5-6 (2017), 767-784 <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716681474>>.

<sup>38</sup> Driskill, "Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic", 52; Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.58.

<sup>39</sup> Driskill, "Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic", 58.

person.<sup>40</sup> The poem's consideration of fetishisation draws attention to the pains of engaging in sex with "white men;" the same demographic of men who historically committed acts of sexual violence against Indigenous people.<sup>41</sup> Belcourt addresses fetishisation through painful parodies of religious ritual before moving to acknowledge the opposite truth of sex with fellow Indigiqueer folk. This is prevalently shown in stanza five, as he attends to how "native and queer" people "count the number of times/ [men] baptize [them] with words like/ beautiful and handsome and sexy."<sup>42</sup> The allusion to settler colonial religion here, with the image of the religious ritual of baptism evoking connotations of salvation from or cleansed from original sin in order to ascend to heaven, seems laced with knowing irony here, since Belcourt appears to suggest that sex has freeing, healing abilities, even as he acknowledges the limitations of non-Native structures and associates baptism with whiteness and frames the sexual act as a grotesque smoke screen for the pain it causes.

In opposition to this, the stanza that follows speaks to the healing abilities that sex can have when it is between "two native boys."<sup>43</sup> In this stanza, Belcourt repeats the use of ritual imagery, but in this instance refers to Indigenous rituals and ceremonies by describing sexual encounters as "bodies protesting/ dancing in a circle/ to the beat of/ a different drum."<sup>44</sup> This alludes to Indigenous ceremonies such as the round dance, and works as a metaphor for the importance of queer Indigenous sex and its power. In the context of the final stanza that signals to the world changing effects of Indigiqueer sex as "an act of defiance," and "a/ world in and of itself," Belcourt's positioning of Indigenous

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<sup>40</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.32.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

ritual within ‘OKCUPID’ places Indigenous tradition in conversation with sex.<sup>45</sup> This illustrates Driskill’s point that the “Erotic relates [queer Indigenous] bodies to [their] nations, traditions, and histories.”<sup>46</sup> The coupling of this with the pinpointing of Indigenous ceremonies that were once banned as a result of colonialist assimilation policies, such as the Indian Act and the 1880 Potlatch Law, highlights once more the decolonising power that Belcourt suggests sex and desire have.<sup>47</sup> The poem’s discussion of sex with non-Indigenous partners and the evocation of the presence of settler colonialism across Indigenous-white sexual relations, strengthens the conception of Indigiqueer sex as a mechanism for healing. As sex between “two native boys” enacts “a kind of nation-building” that envisions decolonisation through its ability to “evinc[e]... new world[s],” and in the “defiance” of the wrongdoings against them at the hands of the settler state.”<sup>48</sup>

Turning to Driskill’s notion of decolonisation as a mode for “healing historical [and ongoing] trauma,” Belcourt also seeks to achieve this in his poetry through the modes of sex and desire.<sup>49</sup> ‘NATIVE TOO’ describes a sexual encounter with another queer Indigenous man, and highlights the connection between healing, sex and decolonisation through its pre-occupation with trauma; the “intersections of violence, love, and the body” serve as vital mechanisms for healing the past and reconciling the future.<sup>50</sup> Belcourt’s pairing of a longing to “taste/ a history of violence,” with the erotic description of wanting

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Driskill, ‘Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic’, 52

<sup>47</sup> Bob Joseph, “Potlatch Ban: Abolishment of First Nations Ceremonies”, *Ictinc.Ca* <<https://www.ictinc.ca/the-potlatch-ban-abolishment-of-first-nations-ceremonies>> [Accessed 1 April 2021].

<sup>48</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.59; Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.33.

<sup>49</sup> Driskill, “DOUBLEWEAVING TWO-SPIRIT CRITIQUES: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies”, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Tatonetti, 155.

“saliva to mix/ and create new bacterial ecologies:/ contagions that could infect/ the trauma away,” illuminates this balance between identifying the historical traumas at hand within Indigenous communities, and the suggestion of queer sex as a mode for healing from them.<sup>51</sup> The admission of wanting to “infect/ the trauma away,” highlights the longing for healing the present, with the verb “infect,” and its connotations of contamination and harm, highlighting the pains experienced and the need for something—in this case queer desire and sex—to act as an antibody to heal it.<sup>52</sup> By considering trauma as a wound or a gap, Belcourt’s desire to “infect the trauma away,” becomes especially affecting.<sup>53</sup> Etymologically, “infect” is described as affecting or impregnating something or someone with a “substance, sound, taste, or odour; to pollute; to taint.”<sup>54</sup> In this vein we can consider “infect” as meaning to “put into” suggesting that Belcourt is imagining trauma as a hole to be filled with a healing infection.<sup>55</sup> Not only does this subvert the common view of infection as harmful and as something to be avoided, particularly in relation to queerness with the pathologisation of gay sex and the AIDS epidemic, but it also evokes sexual healing from the outset, illustrating how Belcourt envisions healing as coming from new sexual encounters with fellow Indigiqueer people.<sup>56</sup> Whilst this could be read as a means of self-sabotage and destructive behaviour, the disparity between the presentation of sexual experience with white men versus fellow Indigenous men somewhat negates this reading in relation to this poem. Its final lines reinstate this idea of a hole being filled to aid healing, but this time the

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<sup>51</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> ‘Infect’ in The Oxford English Dictionary [online], <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95266?rskey=HATYN8&result=3#eid>>, [Accessed 03 December 2020].

<sup>55</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26.

<sup>56</sup> Hollier, 7-9.

suggestion is overtly sexual: “i wanted him to fuck me,/ so i could finally begin/ to heal.”<sup>57</sup> These two lines hold great substance in the way of conveying the use of sex as a method for healing. As ‘NATIVE TOO’ explores a sexual encounter with another Indigiqueer person, these lines signal to Belcourt’s desire to use sexuality to share in an escape from the traumas of their shared queer Indigeneity. This sharing of trauma and experience through sex signposts toward a removal from the effects of settler colonialism and is indicative of its restorative qualities.

Additionally, ‘NATIVE TOO’ contains a bounty of emotive imagery that echoes the decolonisation present, and can be seen in the following lines:

i wanted to smell his ancestors  
in his armpits:  
the aroma of their decaying flesh,  
how they refuse to wilt into nothingness.<sup>58</sup>

This extract illustrates the use of desire to evoke a lineage of assimilation and elimination, and the stereotype of the “Vanishing Indian,” and the “vanish[ing] Indigenous queer,” through the dichotomy of “their decaying flesh, and their refusal “to wilt.”<sup>59</sup> Potentially illustrating an admiration for historical and ongoing Indigenous resilience against settler colonialism in the rejection of attempts to be silenced, this appears to forge links between desire and death,-and suggests a search for an excess of life that persists beyond “decay” and resists “nothingness.”<sup>60</sup> This search for an excess of life through desire speaks to

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<sup>57</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfe, 397; Burford, 177; Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26.

<sup>60</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26.

Belcourt's ability to reclaim sex as something with positive possibilities for queer Indigenous people, thereby reminding us that the traumas involved with queer Indigeneity for some are not final and unending.

The use of desire to resist nihilism persists throughout the poem with the hope that their "colliding," through sex will "create a new kind of friction/ capacious enough/ for other worlds to emerge."<sup>61</sup> The hope of "other worlds," emerging through sex signals to a form of "nation building," and a healing that might "sketch a different tomorrow;" one which allows for queer Indigenous people to "love better."<sup>62</sup> This language of potential demonstrates that there is more to queer Indigenous sex than the violence perpetrated by settler colonialism, and more to Indigiqueer life than that which settler colonial structures prescribe. Therefore, in its use of queer desire and sex to search for more than what is given, this poem is bound up with decolonisation in its hopes to deconstruct myths around trauma and to move beyond the constraints of settler colonial life.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.26; Ibid., p.33; Ibid., p.59.

### Collectivity/Collectivism

Collectivism is also displayed as necessary to heal from trauma and to bolster visions of decolonisation in Belcourt's work, with queer sex and desire shown as capable of fostering this feeling of collectivity. The power of collectivism shown illuminates bell hooks' conception of the margins as "both sites of repression and sites of resistance," in the seminal essay "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS"<sup>63</sup> Whilst Belcourt's poetry highlights the despair and trauma attached to being colonised, his presentation of sex with other queer Indigenous people suggests that repression, sadness, and trauma shared through the unbodied experience of love and sex can lead to resistance and create shared grounds for decolonisation and the escape from traumatic experiences.

Accordingly, Belcourt highlights the "collectivity" that comes with sexual collaboration in the poem 'OKCUPID'.<sup>64</sup> In the motioning toward the success of collaboration through sex via imagery and references to "nation-building," the final stanza of 'OKCUPID' speaks to removal from trauma.<sup>65</sup> This stanza elicits the power of "two native boys/ find[ing] each other's bodies," counteracting the pain expressed in the previous stanzas in relation to fetishisation and sex with non-Indigenous "strangers... met an hour ago."<sup>66</sup> The suggestion that this sexual act is "an act of defiance," "nation-building," and "a/ world in and of itself," speaks to the constructive nature of queer sex by presenting its power to create bonds that resist settler colonial expectations of Indigiqueer people as supposed to "die out" or "go away to nowhere," and, as people who

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<sup>63</sup> bell hooks, "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS", *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 1989, 15-23 <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/44111660>> [Accessed 24 September 2020], 21-22.

<sup>64</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.59.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



have historically been, and continue to be, sexualised, fetishised and sexually abused by settlers.<sup>67</sup> That queer Indigenous sex is described as “a/ world in and of itself,” suggests that queer sex is powerful in its ability to place those involved separate from the settler colonial world queer Indigenous people are subjected to, to evoke new worlds, and, consequently to provide a means or a place that might offer some reprieve from trauma.<sup>68</sup> This summons the idea that Indigiqueer sex can offer an escape and provide means of “healing.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, whilst still highlighting the despair and trauma attached to queer Indigeneity, Belcourt’s work fundamentally concerns itself with providing examples and suggestions for ways of resisting settler colonialism through sexual collaboration, and the removal from the systems that induce trauma.

Likewise, the poet’s presentation of sex as a means to incite collectivity continues in ‘NATIVE TOO’. The opening lines “he was native too/ so i slept with him,” suggest that Belcourt is almost longing to share in the mutual experience of another, in order to “sketch a different tomorrow.”<sup>70</sup> In seeking to create this “different tomorrow,” Belcourt indicates towards a future that transcends the bounds of colonisation, one which allows Indigiqueer people to be future bound and hopeful, and addresses Burford’s want to attend to the impact of violent colonial erasures on Indigenous and queer people in relationship to one another, by underscoring the two facets of his identity—queerness and Indigeneity—which invigorate the need for sexual induced collectivity at all.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.; Burford, 168; Driskill, ‘Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic’, 53.

<sup>68</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.33.

<sup>69</sup> Burford, 177.

<sup>70</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.; Burford, 169.

The power of “collectivity” through the mode of queer sex is reiterated by Belcourt’s own commentary on the collection in its ‘EPILOGUE’.<sup>72</sup> Belcourt uses the ‘EPILOGUE’ to outline that his collection is “a tribute to the potentiality of sadness.”<sup>73</sup> He “insists” that sharing “the feeling of being lonely,” can be used to “make new forms of collectivity.”<sup>74</sup> In a collection that is preoccupied with despair and trauma, Belcourt uses sex with and desire for sex with Indigiqueer people as a mechanism for creating “new forms of collectivity,” that serve to highlight this “potentiality of sadness.”<sup>75</sup> Though queer Indigenous individuals experience despair and trauma, they also seek to find refuge from it by creating feelings of unity through sex, which signal to a decolonised future that moves them away from the trauma that settler colonialism imposes.<sup>76</sup> Belcourt exhibits this as his poetry traverses colonised and marginalised identities, presenting their hardships, whilst rejecting the effects of colonialism on Indigiqueer people. In his work Belcourt is, by his own admission, also resisting the idea that associating Indigeneity with “sadness and...misery,” is “always-already bad”; he would appear to suggest that by acknowledging this notion and by allowing time and space to work through that notion, and various emotions in Indigenous storytelling, it becomes possible to “rework[...]the codes of bad affect.”<sup>77</sup> This, in turn, allows for a discussion of the “potentiality” of queerness, love, desire and sex as they are freed “from the apoliticized cages of pathology and the private.”<sup>78</sup> And so, through sex and desire, Belcourt highlights the collectivism

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<sup>72</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.26; Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.59.

<sup>73</sup> Belcourt, *This Wound is a World*, p.59.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.58.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.59; Ibid., p.58.

that can come from despair, defying the myth that the nothingness prescribed to the “vanished Indigenous queer,” is inescapable.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

Fetishisation and the erotic are two vital facets of Belcourt’s work, continuing into his more recent publications *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field* (2019) and *A History of My Brief Body* (2020), and serve to highlight the presence of varying temporalities of trauma, from historical through to the present.<sup>80</sup> Belcourt presents fetishisation as being an Indigiqueer issue of both the past and the present, and displays the erotic as being bound up with decolonisation: a theory that Indigiqueer people long to become reality but that is future bound amidst the settler colonial structure of Canada. Divergence from the myth that trauma is integral to Indigenous and queer Indigenous life is crucial; we must move to a narrative which places settler colonialism in conversation with trauma and queer Indigenous experience, and does so with the objective of showing that Indigiqueer individuals are not limited to lives effected by settler colonialism and that they too, strive to move away from trauma. With this considered, the potential within academia to comprehend the intersectionality of queerness and Indigeneity is evident.

The richness and complexity of Belcourt’s collection in its dealings with settler colonialism in relation to themes of intersecting identities, justice, fetishisation, sexual violence, trauma, love, and the erotic, speaks to the potential for further analysis and discussion of Belcourt’s collection and more recent writing. These themes could, and should, also be considered in relation to the work of other Indigiqueer writers such as

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<sup>79</sup> Burford, 177.

<sup>80</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2019); Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body* (London: HAMISH HAMILTON Penguin Random House Canada, 2020).

Arielle Twist and *Disintegrate/Dissociate* (2017), Joshua Whitehead's *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* (2017), and Smokii Sumac's *You Are Enough: Love Poems for the End of the World* (2018).<sup>81</sup> Though there was not space in this article for these works, there is space in wider scholarship for an interesting and necessary discussion of contemporary queer Indigenous poetry that is emerging from Canada, and Indigenous writing more broadly, in relation to the use of "storytelling... as a decolonizing process," and emerging themes of twenty-first century colonisation and marginalisation alongside queer Indigenous online presence.<sup>82</sup>

Belcourt's poetry collection *This Wound is a World* highlights the importance of understanding the role of settler colonialism in the lives of Indigenous and queer Indigenous people. As touched on by Belcourt in relation to joy as an act of resistance and his PhD thesis at the webinar *Feminist Futures in a Time of Pandemic: Loneliness and the Affective Life of Settler Colonialism: A conversation with Billy-Ray Belcourt*, Indigenous trauma is an already highly theorised aspect of academia.<sup>83</sup> It is for this reason that the conversation surrounding trauma in Indigenous texts should strive to consider the understudied, multi-layered experiences of trauma in relation to Indigiqueer experience, and to avoid the one-dimensional and mythical notion that Indigenous and Indigiqueer folk are unable to resist and persist despite the trauma that has befallen them at the hands of settler colonialism.

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<sup>81</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2019); Arielle Twist, *Disintegrate/Dissociate* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2017); Joshua Whitehead, *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2017); Smokii Sumac, *You Are Enough: love poems for the end of the world*, (Canada: Kegedonce Press, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> Simpson, 19.

<sup>83</sup> Cvetkovich and Belcourt.

In highlighting the complexity of trauma by stressing how intersecting colonised and marginalised identities are impacted by settler colonialism, Belcourt's poetry exhibits how these intersections confirm the presence of despair in queer Indigenous lives—and settler colonialism's role in creating that despair—whilst simultaneously highlighting how these identities can be used to strive for decolonisation. As suggested by Simpson, there can be no “resurgence without centering gender and queerness.”<sup>84</sup> Belcourt's centring of queerness in this collection is an example of decolonising poetics through its ability to enact resurgence. Whilst settler colonialism functions to ensure the persistence of trauma, Indigiqueer people are not limited to a future bound only by despair. In actuality, Indigiqueer folk also seek to reclaim the negative effects of settler colonialism and to visualise a future free from it, and with that, a future free from despair and traumatisation.

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<sup>84</sup> Simpson, 30.

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## **Operation Goodwood: Myths and Historical Misconceptions of British Armoured Forces in the Normandy Campaign June-July 1944**

**Nathan Ilett**

### **Abstract**

The discipline of military history is no stranger to historical misconception and myth, especially with regards to culturally significant events that are popular with the general public and have a large body of historical research. One such area is armoured warfare during the Second World War. While there are a large number of myths and misconceptions in this field, one of the most common myths surrounds the British Army's use of armoured forces. A great deal of historiography examines the technological inferiority of Allied and British tanks and the Allies' failure to effectively utilise their armoured forces. This article will examine one specific event that has been caught up in this debate; Operation Goodwood, part of the battle for Normandy. The outcome of the operation and the substantial material losses suffered by the British has frequently been used to support the theory that the British Army's armoured units were poorly equipped, trained and led. However such views of the Operation fail to take into account the strategic situation of the wider Normandy Campaign, and contribute to the myth that the British Army did not understand armoured warfare and were incapable of effectively utilising their armoured forces. In this article I intend to shed more light on Operation Goodwood in order to challenge some of the common misconceptions around the British Army's use of Armoured forces, and to argue that the operation was a strategic success that highlights the contributions of British and Commonwealth forces to the Battle of Normandy.

## Introduction

After the D-Day landings on the 6th of June 1944, it would take the Western Allies almost two months to break out of the Normandy bridgehead. For the early part of the Normandy Campaign, the goal was to capture Cherbourg and its deep-water port; this was achieved by American forces that fought their way up the Cotentin Peninsula, finally capturing Cherbourg on the 27th of June. Meanwhile, the British and Canadian troops were holding the bridgehead against the German forces around the town of Caen, a target that was supposed to have been taken on D-Day.

Once Cherbourg was taken, the Allies could shift focus to breaking out of Normandy, and a number of operations were launched by the British and Canadians, in order to take Caen, which would help to facilitate an Allied breakout into France. These include Operation Epsom (26th-30th June), Operation Charnwood (8th-10 July) and Operation Goodwood (18th-20th July). However, these operations would not lead to a breakout from Normandy. Eventually, with the capture of St-Lo on the 18th of July and the launch of Operation Cobra on the 25th of July, the Allies were able to break out of their bridgehead in Normandy and began to advance across France.

A number of historical myths and misconception surround the British Army and its use of armoured forces during the Normandy Campaign. Many are positions which have become entrenched in the public imagination, such as the technical inferiority of allied tanks.<sup>85</sup> These views have become quite common, as can be seen in the 2009

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<sup>85</sup> See Belton Cooper, *Death Traps*, (New York: Presidio Press, 1998) and Max Hastings, *Overlord D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1984).

documentary *WWII in Colour*, which mentions the Tommy Cooker Myth, which refers to the idea that Shermans were prone to bursting into flames due to their use of petrol fuel.<sup>86</sup> The majority of tank fires were ignited by ammunition propellant and not fuel choice.<sup>87</sup> As all tanks are containers of combustible and explosive materials, tanks bursting into flames after a hit to the fuel tank or ammunition storage is hardly a unique flaw of allied tanks, yet it is a critique frequently level at Allied tanks alone.

While there are many examples of such individual cases, they all broadly fall into one category, criticism of Allied strategy, tactics, and equipment. Most relevant to this article is the particular focus on the British use of armour as an Allied failing, with popular perception being that the British Army had bad tank designs, did not understand armoured warfare, and as such they poorly utilised their armoured forces.

The historiography of the Normandy Campaign discusses several topics, including Operation Goodwood itself, the performance of the British Army in the wider Normandy Campaign, and the command of the British Army, particularly Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. The historiography of Operation Goodwood is divided predominantly into two schools of thought. The first sees the operation as a failure and often seeks to use this failure to demonstrate various flaws within British doctrine, equipment, and command. For example, David French uses the failure of Goodwood to point out deficiencies in British aerial bombardments.<sup>88</sup> This perspective is also supported by those who use Goodwood to criticise British armoured performance in Normandy,

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<sup>86</sup> 'Overlord', *World War 2 in Colour*, Channel 5, 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Steven J. Zaloga, *Panther vs Sherman: Battle of the Bulge 1944*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008) pp. 22-23.

<sup>88</sup> David French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 268.



such as Robert Citino and Basil Liddell Hart.<sup>89</sup> Goodwood is also referenced by historians who view Allied equipment as inferior to their German opponents. With Max Hastings arguing that at Goodwood ‘the British paid the price for their lack of a survivable battle tank’ and that had the British had a tank equal to the Tiger or Panther, they may have succeeded.<sup>90</sup>

The second school takes a more balanced approach, made up of those who highlight the strategic success of Goodwood, like Timothy Harrison Place, who states that ‘at the strategic level, Goodwood served Montgomery’s purpose admirably since it ‘wrote down’ powerful German forces that might otherwise have been used to hinder the American breakout to the west.’<sup>91</sup> This would help the Americans to successfully breakout around St-Lo with Operation Cobra. In his work *Six Armies in Normandy* John Keegan focuses the entire chapter on the British Army around Operation Goodwood. While he points out a number of tactical failures in the attack, Keegan highlights the impact on the German forces, stating that ‘the defenders had been terribly battered ... and their longer-term strategic prospects gravely compromised.’<sup>92</sup> Russell Hart’s *Clash of Arms* also unfavourably compares the British Army to the American and German forces in Normandy. However, in his review of the work, Harrison Place asserts that ‘the sophistication of the factors that influenced the relative performance of the four national armies in Normandy far exceeds that of the formulae Hart uses to estimate their

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<sup>89</sup> See Robert M. Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: the evolution of operational warfare*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004) and Basil Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1970).

<sup>90</sup> Max Hastings, *Overlord D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1984), p. 305.

<sup>91</sup> Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army 1940-44 from Dunkirk to D-Day*, (London: Frank Cass, 2000), p. 158.

<sup>92</sup> John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy From D-Day to the Liberation of Paris*, (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 218.

underlying proficiency.’<sup>93</sup> In short Hart, like many others, fails to adequately take into account the different circumstances faced by different armies.

This school is also supported by historians who disagree with the claims of the first school, such as John Buckley who disagrees with the critical views on the performance of British armoured units in Normandy. Buckley states, of the harsh critiques levelled against British Armoured performance, that ‘these views are incomplete, distorted and based largely on the assumption of certain writers that the Allies should have fought a campaign quite different from the one they did.’<sup>94</sup> The works of Buckley and other historians have done much to provide the strategic context to the actions of the British during the war and examine the factors which explain tactical failures and poor performance, rather than writing off the British Army as an effective fighting force.

The fighting in the Normandy Campaign has attracted a great deal of study and controversy, with various potential reasons for the Allies’ slow progress being suggested, such as poor tactics, outdated equipment, or bad command decisions. This article will be focusing on the performance of British armour in Operation Goodwood and how it reflects on the British use of armour in the rest of the Normandy Campaign by examining a number of areas. Firstly, it will seek to evaluate whether British armour in Normandy was used in an effective way, by examining what the role of armour was within the British Army and how this was impacted by the conditions in Normandy. Secondly, it will examine the plans and objectives of Operation Goodwood in order to judge how successful the operation was and how this reflects on the performance of British armour

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<sup>93</sup> Timothy Harrison Place, ‘Review of Books’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3, (2002), pp. 685-687, (p. 686).

<sup>94</sup> John Buckley, *British Armour in Normandy*, (London: Routledge, 2004) p. 209.

in the wider Normandy Campaign. Thirdly, it will assess whether the training of British armoured units was appropriate for the campaign. Fourthly, it will consider whether the British armoured forces were effectively led by their commanders. Based on these examinations, this article will argue that while the British armoured forces may have suffered tactical defeats and faced numerous issues, during both Operation Goodwood and the wider Normandy Campaign, overall, the British use of armour in the Normandy Campaign was strategically successful.

## **Section 1: Training**

### **Interwar and Early War Armoured Training**

From the end of the First World War to the start of the Second, Britain's armoured forces had very little opportunity for actual combat. This meant that it was difficult to identify what appropriate doctrine and training would be. Furthermore, due to the significant technological advancements that were being made, armoured warfare was changing rapidly in a short amount of time. Training during this period was therefore of the utmost importance. Even though Britain's interwar armoured force was small, if it was effectively trained, then it would be easier to expand the force later on if war broke out.

The type of training armoured forces received was very different from the other branches of the British Army. Harrison Place explains that the reason for this is due to the difference between technical and tactical skills. In the infantry, tactical skills were the most important, whereas artillery units required much more technical skill. In armoured units, both the tactical and technical were important. As Harrison Place states 'a tank could fight only by the continuous collective application of the various technical skills of

the crew in driving, gunnery and wireless.’<sup>95</sup> So while the technical skills of the crew were important, it was also important that the commander, and to a lesser extent the crew, knew how to use the tank tactically on the battlefield. However, it was the technical aspect which made up most of the basic training for armoured units, with separate specialist training programs for driving, gunnery and wireless.

Tactics training on the other hand was very simple, and mainly focused on those who showed potential for becoming tank or tank troop commanders.<sup>96</sup> This meant that tank crewmen fresh from basic training, while proficient at their own role, would struggle to understand the tactical situation, and the part their tank was playing in it, and they would have to gain this experience once they were assigned to their fighting units.

During the interwar years, with the British Army facing financial cuts and sparse resources, cheaper training options were preferred, such as Training Exercise Without Troops (TEWTs). These were theoretical exercises conducted in the field with limited numbers of troops and virtually no equipment. While these exercises provided some experience, they are generally considered to not have been very effective, especially in armoured units, with Edward Smalley arguing that these types of exercises ‘denied officers genuine experience of command in the field ... and prevented practical, procedural and equipment problems from being identified.’<sup>97</sup> The training of armoured units was also hampered by the fact that there were only a few central armoured fighting

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<sup>95</sup> Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 80.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>97</sup> Edward Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force 1939-40*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

vehicle ranges, where tank crews could go and train in realistic conditions. Each armoured unit was typically given only two to three weeks a year at these ranges.<sup>98</sup>

Due to these constraints, the armoured forces were not able to get much training experience in battlefield tactics. The British Army did see some improvements to its training in the early years of the war. For example, in 1942, the General Service Corps (GSC) was activated; new soldiers would first be sent to the GSC, where they would undergo a number of tests to determine the best place in the army for them to be sent.<sup>99</sup> This would help to ensure that those who were best suited for service in the armoured units would be assigned correctly.

Unfortunately for the British Army, its poor and inconsistent standards of training in the interwar years would have a knock-on effect on their performance in the Second World War. Although, steps were taken to improve training, these took time to implement, and the British Army would suffer from this for most of the war. The armoured units were no exception, highlighting another cause of the tactical failures of British armoured units, especially in the early years of the war before the armoured units gained significant battlefield experience in North Africa. This also shows that when it came time for the British to train their forces for the Normandy Campaign, the British training system was still being improved from the interwar system.

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<sup>98</sup> Harrison Place, *Training in the British military*, p. 83.

<sup>99</sup> David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them the British Army in the Second World War*, (London: Cassel, 1983), p. 87.

### **Combined Arms Training**

Even from the inception of the tank in the First World War, they were designed to work alongside the infantry through combined arms operations, which are widely considered to be the best way to utilise armoured forces, as tanks could create breakthroughs in the enemy lines which could then be exploited. Therefore, training for combined operations, or even just basic coordination between service arms, was needed to form an effective fighting force. Of course, training for combined arms operations requires large scale exercises with multiple units taking part. These were very expensive, both financially and in terms of resources, so between the wars, the British Army only conducted two exercises at the corps level, one in 1925 and the other in 1935, both of which only lasted a few days.<sup>100</sup> The lack of armoured fighting vehicle practice ranges also reduced the amount of combined arms training that could be done during the interwar years.

The development of a combined arms doctrine was further stymied by the organisation of the British Army. The imperial police role of the British Army in the interwar years had created a need for flexibility, as units may have had to fight in the various different terrains across the empire. Due to this need for flexibility, a system developed where British battalions and divisions were only provided with their basic weapons, with support and heavy weapons, such as artillery guns, tanks, anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank guns assigned to separate units controlled from above, and deployed as necessary.<sup>101</sup> For example, before the war, British divisions did not possess any heavy machine guns, as these were held in machine gun battalions which were not under the

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<sup>100</sup> French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 169.

<sup>101</sup> Jonathon Fennell, *Fighting the People's War the British and Commonwealth Armies in the Second World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 38.

control of the division commander. However, a German division commander had access to 138 heavy machine guns under his direct command.<sup>102</sup> While this flexibility was useful for the British Army's interwar role, it was wholly inadequate for the Second World War. As a result of the lack of training and poor organisation, at the outbreak of the war, the British Army was very unfamiliar with combined arms warfare.

The need to fix this situation became apparent very quickly. The British saw the need to improve their ability to conduct combined arms warfare, particularly in armoured units, after gaining experience of fighting in North Africa and witnessing the effectiveness of the German attack in France in 1940. The British had learned an important lesson that 'tanks were incapable of helping the infantry in the attack unless the infantry furnished reciprocal support to the tanks.'<sup>103</sup>

In an attempt to rectify the situation and properly train British forces in combined arms warfare, the British Army conducted three large scale training exercises during the war, Exercise Bumper (27th September - 3rd October 1941), which involved around 250,000 troops in 12 divisions, including three armoured divisions, Exercise Victor 2 (15th-19th February 1942) and Exercise Spartan (4th-12th March 1943), which each had five corps taking part.<sup>104</sup> These exercises were able to provide British troops with experience of fighting in large formations during battles, and also provided a level of combined arms training for the armoured divisions. This allowed the British to refine their tactics and to see if any problems arose when conducting large scale operations.

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<sup>102</sup> French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 38.

<sup>103</sup> Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 128.

<sup>104</sup> French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, pp. 207-209.

While it was far from perfect, by 1943 the British Army had significantly improved its combined arms war fighting capability from its pre-war status and was ready to conduct such operations in Normandy. The ability to conduct combined arms warfare would allow the British to launch large scale attacks during the Normandy campaign, and while they may have suffered tactical defeats, they were still inflicting significant losses on the Germans, who could not afford this. This allowed the British to win a strategic victory in the long run.

### **Armoured Training for Normandy**

By 1943, it was becoming clear that the Allies would attempt to mount a cross channel invasion of Europe, and that planning for this Operation was well under way. The training of the participating troops would be crucial to the success of such an operation. Training in the British Army had been rapidly overhauled in the first years of the war. The training of soldiers had been centralised as much as possible through the implementation of the GSC, and specialist corps training centres. These ensured that the recruits were assigned to the most appropriate units for them to serve in, with the Armoured Fighting Vehicle School at Bovington created for the training of armoured units.<sup>105</sup>

According to Jonathan Fennel, '21st Army Group was trained and ready to go.'<sup>106</sup> However, there were some inconsistencies in its doctrine and preparation. This was especially true within the armoured units of the 21st Army Group. Despite improvements, there were still issues when it came to practical training. Buckley states that a lack of space, equipment and ammunition reduced the effectiveness of practical armoured training, with

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<sup>105</sup> Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 473.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 478.



many tank crews having only fired 15 to 20 live rounds before Normandy.<sup>107</sup> This can help to explain the reliance of the British Army on its veteran units, like the 7th Armoured Division, as the training of newer units was not enough for them to match the abilities of the more experienced units. This also helps to explain why the British experienced tactical failures when using their armoured forces during the Normandy Campaign.

The British armoured units' training also suffered from disagreements over doctrine, how tanks should be used and the continuing debate over infantry and cruiser tanks, with Montgomery 'rejecting the distinction between infantry and cruiser tanks', as he believed that tanks should have been able to perform both roles.<sup>108</sup> These problems in the training of the British armoured units have led Harrison Place to suggest that 'Britain's armoured divisions were neither trained nor organised for the kind of battles they would have to fight in Normandy.'<sup>109</sup>

However, as the British armoured units fought through Normandy, facing some of the toughest fighting in the campaign, they were able to somewhat overcome the problems that they faced at the start of the campaign by gaining experience and skill through battle. For example, the number of battle casualties increased the promotion of talent. Stuart Hills, a tank commander in the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, wrote in his memoir that 'the losses amongst tank commanders meant that the Colonel was always on the lookout for suitable NCOs to be given their own tanks.'<sup>110</sup> This demonstrates how the British were able to adapt and improvise as they fought through Normandy. Despite the deficiencies

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<sup>107</sup> John Buckley, *Monty's Men the British Army and the Liberation of Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 44.

<sup>108</sup> Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 153.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>110</sup> Stuart Hills, *By Tank into Normandy*, (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 113.

they had in the training of their armoured units, and the strong resistance they faced from some of the best German troops in Normandy, the British were able to achieve victory over the Germans in the Normandy Campaign.

In summary, the British suffered from serious deficiencies and inconsistency in their training during the interwar and early war years. However, from 1942 onwards, the British saw marked improvement in the quality of their training, especially combined arms training, as more resources were available to the army. However, problems remained, especially within the armoured units of the British Army, mostly in terms of practical combat training, which was difficult to conduct. Furthermore, while overall the British Army was quite well prepared for the Normandy Campaign, the armoured units were not. This contributed to the tactical failures of the British armoured units during the Normandy Campaign. However, enough of a base level of training was provided such that the armoured units were able to improve as they gained battlefield experience throughout the Normandy Campaign.

The myths, misconceptions and criticisms that surround the British use of armoured forces tend to focus on the failures and deficiencies of British tanks especially when compared with German tanks, which are often considered technologically superior. However, it is clear that the performance of British armoured forces was damaged far more by poor investment in training, rather than the technical standards of their equipment.

## Section 2: The Role of Armour

### The Tactical Role of the Tank

After the end of the First World War, the British development of theory and doctrine for armoured warfare was often slow and at times confused. For example, despite being at the forefront of tank development during the First World War, the establishment of the Kirke Committee, which was responsible for examining the lessons of the First World War, did not take place until 1932.<sup>111</sup> The need to demobilise after the First World War also hindered the British development of armour, as well as the later financial squeeze placed on budgets by the economic crisis which followed the Wall Street Crash in 1929. J.P. Harris states that in 1932/33 the British Army budget was cut from £40 million to £36.5 million and that the British Army was the last of the services to be given money for rearmament, only being approved in 1936.<sup>112</sup>

Despite setbacks, the British had developed an armoured warfare doctrine by the start of the Second World War, following the advice from the Kirke Committee that tanks were needed that could work with infantry.<sup>113</sup> At the start of the war, the British Army broadly focused on using two types of tanks. Firstly, infantry tanks, which were heavily armoured and armed with machine guns and/or guns capable of firing high explosive rounds. They would advance with the infantry, providing fire support and dealing with hardpoints such as pillboxes or machine gun nests. Secondly, cruiser tanks which were fast and armed with an anti-tank gun. Such tanks would engage with enemy tanks and

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<sup>111</sup> Williamson Murray, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 20.

<sup>112</sup> J. P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks British Military Thought and Armoured Forces 1903-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 237.

<sup>113</sup> French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 97.

attempt to exploit gaps in the enemy line. Essentially, they were to operate like cavalry. Indeed, part of the reason for the development of different types of tanks was due to cavalry officers wanting to ensure the survival of traditional cavalry units in an age of mechanisation, but as Harris states, the cavalry officers wanted this mechanisation done ‘in the way most congenial to them, not necessarily that most useful to the Army.’<sup>114</sup>

During the interwar years, the British Army had not seen a need for large, armoured formations, mainly due to the fact that the interwar army’s primary role was imperial policing. This necessitated a predominantly infantry-based force, armed with light, accurate weapons able to fight in the wide variety of terrains across the empire. By the outbreak of the Second World War, the British Army only had two armoured divisions.<sup>115</sup> However, this mindset changed after the German offensive in the summer of 1940, and the British began expanding their armoured forces. Although, as Timothy Harrison Place states, ‘when the British Army returned to France in 1944, there was no greater consensus over armour than there had been five years earlier.’<sup>116</sup> The British Army essentially found itself learning the lessons of armoured warfare as it went along.

Peter Beale highlights two important lessons the British learned. Firstly, that dispersing tanks around the army lead to defeat in detail, which was learned in France, and secondly, that while mobile forces could achieve great successes under the right conditions, tanks on their own could not win wars, as exemplified by the Western Desert Force’s rapid advance through Libya during Operation Compass in 1940.<sup>117</sup> By 1944,

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<sup>114</sup> Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks*, p. 263.

<sup>115</sup> Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 80.

<sup>116</sup> Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 81.

<sup>117</sup> Peter Beale, *Death by Design: the fate of British Tank Crews in the Second World War*, (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2009), p. 33.

these developments had led the British to favour combined operations, where tanks and infantry would operate together in support of each other.

Overall, despite a challenging start, the British Army had learned a lot about conducting armoured operations during the early years of the Second World War. This is significant when studying the Normandy campaign, as it puts the state of British armoured warfare experience in context. The British armoured units had gained experience and won victories in the deserts of North Africa, where the operational conditions were very different to those which would be later found in Normandy. This was something the British armoured forces would have to contend with as they further refined their tactics and strategies. This must be taken into consideration when examining British armoured performance in Normandy.

### **The Conditions in Normandy and the effects on the British Army**

The conditions in Normandy were very different from the deserts of North Africa, where the British had the most experience of armoured warfare. The wide, flat, and open deserts were the best place for large scale armoured attacks, but even on such favourable terrain, armoured attacks still required infantry to support the tanks. This lesson had been learned the hard way through armoured attacks against well emplaced German defences.

The Bocage of Normandy could not have been more different, with small fields and forests separated by hedgerows; it was also dotted with hills, valleys, and ditches. Montgomery described the conditions in a letter to Field Marshal Alan Brooke, where he stated, 'we are fighting in ideal defensive country. We do the attacking and the Boche is

pretty thick on the ground.’<sup>118</sup> However, tanks could still be effective in such terrain, especially through supporting infantry attacks, the exact role that the British had envisioned for the infantry tank during the interwar years. Lieutenant-Colonel J.R Bowring wrote a report entitled *Impressions on Fighting in Normandy*, in which he stated that ‘it is quite clear from even a short experience of fighting in this type of country that the tanks require a great deal more infantry with them than is provided by the motor battalion.’<sup>119</sup> This view clearly shows that the British armoured divisions required substantial amounts of infantry with them to successfully carry out attacks. However, this was not always possible and contributed to some of the failures suffered by the British in Normandy, which will be discussed later in this essay.

The terrain in Normandy also contributed to the slow progress and attritional combat the British forces were experiencing. Jonathan Fennel argues that this slow advance caused a serious drop in morale, as both the optimism that surrounded the initial landings and hope that the war would soon be won faded.<sup>120</sup> This problem of low morale was even more pronounced in the veteran units of the British Army, such as the 7th Armoured and 51st Highland Divisions. These veteran units had fought on multiple fronts, and they were often sent to the next one immediately after finishing the previous one, as demand for battle hardened troops was high in all theatres of the war. For example, the 7th Armoured, who had fought in North Africa from December 1940 to May 1943, then became involved in the early stages of the Italian campaign, before finally being transferred back to England in November 1943 for the build up to Normandy. The 51st

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<sup>118</sup> *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy A Selection From the Diaries, Correspondence and other Papers of the Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, January to August 1944*, Eds Stephen Brooks, (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2008), p.208.

<sup>119</sup> WO 205/422 Immediate Report IN20 ‘impressions on fighting in Normandy’, 17th June 1944.

<sup>120</sup> Fennel, *Fighting the People’s War*, p. 526.

Highland Division had fought in France during the 1940 campaign. They were then sent to participate in the North African campaign, followed by the Sicilian campaign and the Italian campaign, where members of the division took part in the Salerno Mutiny.

The reliance of the British on their veteran units had led to discontent, as the troops felt they had insufficient leave between deployments.<sup>121</sup> When this was combined with the slow progress, it created a no-end-in-sight mentality, which severely reduced the morale of the best units in the British Army. Montgomery was so concerned with the performance of the 51st Highland that he wrote in his diary that 'it is clear the 51 (Highland) Div is not battleworthy ... it is regrettable that this fine division should have sunk to such a level.'<sup>122</sup> As a result of this, Charles Bullen-Smith, the Division's commander, was fired on the 15th of July.<sup>123</sup>

It is clear that the conditions in Normandy posed a number of challenges to the British Army, with the difficult terrain and low morale certainly contributing to the failures suffered by the British in Normandy. This helps to establish that the failures suffered by the British were not entirely their own fault, and other factors were impacting the performance of the British Army units. Despite these challenges, the British and Allied forces were still able to achieve a strategic victory over the Germans in Normandy. The kind of terrain in Normandy would be harsh for anyone on the offensive regardless of how good their tanks were, this being an important consideration when comparing the performance of Allied and German Armour, one that is not often taken in consideration

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p. 527.

<sup>122</sup> *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy*, Eds Brooks p. 215.

<sup>123</sup> Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 527.

in amateur historical discourse on the British Army's use of tanks in the Second World War, which contributes to the development of historical myth and misconception.

### **The Manpower Issue**

One of the most significant factors which affected the British use of armour in Normandy was a lack of manpower. This was an issue that had been growing as the war dragged on. Buckley states 'Britain simply did not have the manpower and resources to sustain the bloodletting that had accompanied the military effort of the First World War and had epitomised the war on the Eastern Front'.<sup>124</sup> By mid 1944, the British had been at war for four-and-a-half years and had some 2.7 million men in the Army.<sup>125</sup> This represented a significant proportion of the fit for military service population of Britain. In short, Britain was running out of manpower for the army.

As previously discussed, the conditions in Normandy were not advantageous to the attacker and the type of fighting that took place was attritional. Montgomery wrote to Brooke 'I would say we lose three men to his one in our infantry divisions.'<sup>126</sup> Even before D-Day, there had been predictions that the manpower crisis would worsen as a result of casualties sustained during the Normandy Campaign, with the War Office forecasting that the fighting would create a deficit of 35,000 men in the infantry units by September 1944.<sup>127</sup> As the invasion began and casualties started to mount, the reality of the situation sank in. In July 1944, the Adjutant-General Bill Adam warned Lieutenant-General Miles

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<sup>124</sup> Buckley, *Monty's Men*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>125</sup> WO 73/162 General Return of the Strength of the British Army for the Quarter ending 30th September, cited in, John Robert Peaty, 'British Army Manpower Crisis 1944' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, King's College University of London, 2000).

<sup>126</sup> *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy*, Eds Brooks p. 208.

<sup>127</sup> W032/10899 Directorate of Staff Duties file on manpower, 1944-45, cited in, John Robert Peaty, 'British Army Manpower Crisis 1944' (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, King's College University of London, 2000).



Dempsey, the commander of the British 2nd Army, that ‘if infantry casualties continued at the recent rate it would be impossible to replace them ... for we had put all our available man-power into Normandy in the first few weeks.’<sup>128</sup> Various measures would be taken by the British to address the manpower shortage, for example troops were transferred from anti-aircraft batteries in England and some divisions were broken up to provide troops to fill gaps in other infantry units.

British strategy in Normandy was definitely affected by the manpower concerns, which could be seen during the planning of Operation Goodwood. Montgomery wrote that ‘the Second Army has three armoured divisions, 7, 11 and Gds these are quite fresh and have been practically untouched.’<sup>129</sup> Dempsey clearly shared the view that the British could rely more on their armour. In an interview after the war, Dempsey stated that ‘tank reinforcements were pouring into Normandy faster than the rate of tank casualties. So we could well afford ... to plan an operation in which we could utilise that surplus of tanks, and economise infantry.’<sup>130</sup> This highlights one of the key features of Operation Goodwood: the main attack was to be made using armoured forces to try and ease the burden on the infantry. This can explain the high tank losses suffered by the British during the attack. David Fraser writes that the British tank casualties at Goodwood were ‘not a serious loss strategically, as replacements were plentiful, but indicative of the attrition rate suffered by the armoured divisions.’<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> CAB 106/1061: Notes of Conversations between General Sir Miles Dempsey, Commander of 2nd Army, and (a) Lt. Col. G.S. Jackson 8th March 1951 (b) Capt B.H. Liddell-Hart 28th March 1952.

<sup>129</sup> *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy*, Eds Brooks p. 208.

<sup>130</sup> CAB 106/1061: Notes of Conversations between General Sir Miles Dempsey, Commander of 2nd Army, and (a) Lt. Col. G.S. Jackson 8th March 1951 (b) Capt B.H. Liddell-Hart 28th March 1952.

<sup>131</sup> Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 334.

The high losses suffered by the armoured divisions could indicate poor performance. However as Major General George Phillip Bradley Roberts, commander of the 11th Armoured Division, argued in an interview after the war, ‘Goodwood was a justified misuse of armour, the justification being that Montgomery could afford to lose tanks.’<sup>132</sup> As such, it is clear the manpower shortage faced by the British Army in 1944 had an impact on the British armoured units at Goodwood, which helps to show that the tactical failures were not entirely the result of the performance of British Armoured units at Goodwood. This helps to counter the misconception that the losses at Goodwood were caused by British incompetence in using armoured forces.

In summary, the interwar years had seen a somewhat chaotic development of British armoured doctrine. However, further refinement after British experiences in the early years of the war, particularly in North Africa, meant that the British were not arriving in Normandy completely unprepared or lacking any kind of doctrine or experience of armoured warfare. The conditions they faced in Normandy were extremely different from what they were used to from their experience in North Africa. The Bocage terrain did not lend itself well to the use of armoured units and as such, the armoured units needed to have adequate infantry support. However, the morale issues caused by the slow campaign as well as manpower shortage meant that such infantry was not always available, and when it was, the infantry themselves needed to be protected from severe losses.

These challenges the British faced can begin to explain why the British suffered tactical failures, but the fact that the British eventually achieved victory in Normandy

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<sup>132</sup> Cited in, Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 158.

shows that the British were able to overcome the challenges facing them in Normandy and win a strategic victory. This simple point, that victory was achieved, is often missed in historical misconception or myth. Simple discourse, which focuses on how it could have been done better or over emphasises Allied failures, can start to drift away from actual analysis towards alternate history or armchair-generalship.

### **Section 3: Operation Goodwood**

#### **The Plan**

When assessing the outcome of Operation Goodwood, it is important to consider the plan and aims of the operation, as they are responsible for much of the disagreement over the operation's success. The initial plan for Operation Goodwood, developed by the commander of the British 2nd Army, Lieutenant-General Miles Dempsey, was for an armoured attack across a nine-mile front in the vicinity of Caen, with the goal of securing the southern half of Caen as well as a series of villages and the Bourguébus Ridge to the south and southeast of Caen. The task of taking Caen would fall to the 2nd and 3rd infantry Divisions of the Canadian II Corps. Securing the villages to the southeast would be in the hands of the British 3rd infantry Division and the 51st Highland Division.<sup>133</sup>

The spearhead of the attack was to be led by the three armoured divisions of VIII Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor. This was in part a response to the manpower shortage that was discussed in the previous chapter, as the British commanders wanted to limit infantry casualties by conducting a mass armoured attack. The 11th Armoured Division was to capture the Bourguébus Ridge, the Guards Armoured Division was to take the villages of Cagny and Vimont and the 7th Armoured

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<sup>133</sup> Fennel, p. 520.

Division was to be available to support the other divisions of VIII Corps and exploit any opportunities in the centre.<sup>134</sup>

Both Dempsey and O'Connor envisioned the operation would take Caen and the surrounding villages, which would then facilitate a further breakout into the Falaise Plain. In his notes on the Goodwood plan, O'Connor wrote that the objective of the operation was 'to break out of the southern flank of the Orne bridgehead ... Subsequently to break through the Caen - Falaise Plain, with a view to an armoured thrust in the direction of Falaise.'<sup>135</sup> This initial plan for the operation clearly views it as an attempted breakout and this view was shared by the Allied high command. Carlo D'Este writes that the mention of Falaise was what contributed to the view held by senior commanders in the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), such as Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower and Deputy Supreme Commander Sir Arthur Tedder, that Operation Goodwood was planned as a breakout.<sup>136</sup>

However, on the 15th of July Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the overall commander of Allied ground forces, issued a memorandum adjusting the objectives of Operation Goodwood, with the main objectives outlined as 'to engage German armour in battle and "write it down" to an extent that it is of no further use to the Germans ... [and] to gain a good bridgehead over the Orne through Caen, and thus to improve our positions on the eastern flank.'<sup>137</sup> Montgomery did not want to risk the eastern flank of the bridgehead being exposed to a German counter attack, as he wrote, 'the eastern flank is a

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<sup>134</sup> WO205/1121 Operation Goodwood 2nd Army Plan Break Through to South of Caen, 9th September 1944.

<sup>135</sup> WO 205/1121 Operation Goodwood 2nd Army Plan Break Through to South of Caen, 8 Corps COMD's [Richard O'Connor] Notes, 26th July 1944.

<sup>136</sup> D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 362.

<sup>137</sup> *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy*, Eds Brooks, p. 213.

bastion on which the whole future of the campaign in NW Europe depends; it must remain a firm bastion; if it became unstable the operations on the western flank would cease.’<sup>138</sup> It is very easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to dismiss this as overcautiousness, but as plans for the American breakout were already laid out, an operation in the East to distract and tie down German forces around Caen would provide a substantial benefit to the American breakout attempt. However, if such an attack was overly ambitious and left the eastern flank exposed, a German counterattack could throw the Allies off balance and require them to restabilise their lines before any further offensives could be mounted. As John Buckley writes, ‘the importance of Caen as the fulcrum of events in Normandy was apparent to the German staff’ and as such, the Germans had deployed substantial forces to the Caen sector throughout the Normandy Campaign.<sup>139</sup>

This last-minute change by Montgomery to the plans for Goodwood creates confusion over whether the operation was supposed to be an attempted breakout or not. The memorandum issued by Montgomery only reached Dempsey and O’Connor and did not arrive at SHAEF and so at the start of the operation Allied high command still believed it to be a breakout attempt.<sup>140</sup>

### **How the Operation Unfolded**

As clear weather was required for the mass bomber strike, confirmation for the operation to go ahead was not given until 2:00 am on the morning of the 18th of July.<sup>141</sup> As planned, the operation was opened with a tactical strike by over 2,000 bombers from the Royal Air

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

<sup>139</sup> Buckley, *British Armour in Normandy*, p. 121.

<sup>140</sup> D’Este, *Decision in Normandy*, P. 364.

<sup>141</sup> D’Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 367.

Force (RAF) and the United States Army Air Force (USAAF).<sup>142</sup> With the German frontline in disarray, the British armoured units made quick progress throughout the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> and by midday, lead elements of the 11th Armoured Division had reached the bottom of Bourguébus Ridge, the division's primary objective.<sup>143</sup> However the British infantry divisions on the eastern flank had been slowed down by German defences that had survived the aerial bombardment. This allowed the Germans time to reorganise their forces in the east and to reinforce their centre around Cagny and the Bourguébus Ridge. As a battle study, written after the war to assess the operation, notes; although Cagny was hit by the aerial bombardment, 'from the very strong resistance [in Cagny], it seems probable that enemy reinforcements from 21 SS Pz Div had entered the town before our troops could arrive.'<sup>144</sup>

The situation was further complicated by traffic congestion on the only three bridges across the Orne River, and that, for security reasons, the British could only start to cross just before the operation began. This 'bottleneck in the early stages of the 8 corps advance was aggravated by a minefield, which had been laid to cover the original southern face of the bridgehead, through which only three gaps could be cleared in the time available.'<sup>145</sup>

Ahead of the operation Dempsey had advised O'Connor 'what we want over are the tanks... don't worry about your infantry or your sappers or field ambulances or any

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<sup>142</sup> John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy*, p. 193.

<sup>143</sup> Fennell, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 522.

<sup>144</sup> WO 291/956 Department of the Scientific Advisor to the Army Council, Military Operational Research Unit Report No. 23. Battle Study Operation "Goodwood" October 1946.

<sup>145</sup> WO 205/1121 Operation Goodwood 2nd Army Plan Break Through to South of Caen, 9th September 1944.

of your [administrative] trail. Just get the tanks and motor divisions over.’<sup>146</sup> It was clear from this, that tanks were to be given priority to cross ahead of the infantry and, as such, the armoured divisions only had some of their infantry brigades with them across the river and most of this infantry was fighting to dislodge German defences in the villages. As a result, many of the armoured units in the forward area of the battle found themselves without infantry support, which caused their momentum to slow.

Due to these issues, progress continued to slow, and the German defences stabilised. By the end of the 18th, most of the initial objectives had been taken, but the British had been unable to take the Bourguébus Ridge or Vimont. Little ground was taken over the next two days and the operation was halted on the 20th of July, with the most advanced British units only around seven miles from their start points. All this was achieved for the loss of some 400 tanks, with the 11th Armoured Division alone losing 180 tanks on the first day of the operation and 5,537 infantry casualties across the three Corps.<sup>147</sup>

### **How Successful was the Operation?**

Judging the success of Operation Goodwood greatly depends on whether it is viewed as a breakout attempt or not. If the operation was an attempted breakout, then the results fell far short of the aims. The operation has received much criticism from historians, for example, Robert Citino who describes Goodwood as, ‘a disastrous breakout attempt ... [and] a classic set piece battle gone wrong.’<sup>148</sup> However, if the operation is considered to

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with Chester Wilmot, cited in Carlo D’Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 372.

<sup>147</sup> WO 205/637 Daily AFV states June-July 1944.

WO 171/139 War Dairy 21st Army Group, ‘A’ Branch, PRO. KIA, WIA and MIA 18th July - 22nd July

<sup>148</sup> Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm* p. 107.

be following Montgomery's plan to tie down and deplete the German forces in Normandy, then it had much more success. As David Fraser writes, 'two reinforcing Panzer divisions were certainly drawn towards Caen ... and a further SS Panzer Division [the 9<sup>th</sup>] moved east on 24th July.'<sup>149</sup> This argument is backed up by George Stein who writes that, 'while the British and Canadian forces kept seven of the remaining nine German panzer divisions occupied in the Caen sector, ... the United States First and Third Armies moved south on the western side of the Cherbourg Peninsula.'<sup>150</sup> The German forces had also suffered heavy casualties, the 1st and 21st SS Panzer Divisions lost 109 tanks, the 16th Luftwaffe Field Infantry Division was almost totally wiped out, and the Germans lost around half their anti-tank guns.<sup>151</sup> From these arguments, a general consensus can be drawn, that while Operation Goodwood was a tactical failure, it was also a strategic victory.

However, there is further debate over why Operation Goodwood was a tactical failure. The fact that it failed to achieve its tactical objectives is often used to highlight the poor performance of British Armour in the wider Normandy Campaign. One of the more traditional arguments is that the British were poorly equipped with inferior tanks and as such, were doomed to fail against the technologically superior German tanks. This argument is prevalent in popular history, with authors such as Max Hastings and Tim Ripley comparing the British Shermans, Cromwell's and Churchills, unfavourably with the German Tigers and Panthers. However, such an argument is simplistic, overly focused on technical specifications, fails to take into account the limited numbers and reliability

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<sup>149</sup> Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*,) p. 336.

<sup>150</sup> George Stein, *The Waffen SS: Hitler's Elite Guard at War, 1939–1945*, (New York State: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 221.

<sup>151</sup> John Keegan, *Six Armies in Normandy*, pp. 218-219.



issues of the German heavy tanks and tends to ignore advantages held by the British such as the 17 pounder gun, which was capable of penetrating the frontal armour of a Tiger.

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Citino puts forward a more comprehensive argument based on British doctrine and command, arguing that,

The real link between D-Day, Villers-Bocage, Epsom and Goodwood is that none of them was carried out within the spirit of mobile warfare ... Each one featured numerous opportunities to outmaneuver and outflank the Germans and, perhaps, break through to open ground. What the British Army lacked were officers who could recognize such momentary opportunities when they arose and a military culture that encouraged them to seize those golden moments.<sup>153</sup>

While it is true that British armoured doctrine was lacking, and the army in general had a problem with initiative among its junior officers, his argument does not consider some of the other reasons, not directly related to the British use of armour, for the poor performance at Goodwood and in the rest of the Normandy. For example, one of the key problems faced at Goodwood was the congestion experienced by British forces. The bottleneck caused by the lack of bridges and the minefield had slowed the movement of troops and armour across the Orne and into the battle area, which limited the speed at which the British forces could advance. This gave the Germans more time to recover from the aerial bombardment. This time to recover was crucial. Assessments of the effect of air bombardments done during the war had shown that the morale of the enemy troops

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<sup>152</sup> Only 120 Tigers and 650 Panthers saw action in the Normandy Campaign, compared with the over 900 Panzer IVs and 550 Sturmgeschütz IIIs. The Tigers and Panthers were also much more prone to suffer from mechanical faults, for example the panther's armour could fragment and the resultant shrapnel could injure the crew. See Buckley, *British Armour in Normandy* pp. 117-121.

<sup>153</sup> Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm*, p. 108.

under bombardment suffered greatly, while the morale of friendly troops increased. However in an assessment of the use of air power during Operation Goodwood, Lieutenant General J. T. Crooker wrote that, ‘in order to take full advantage, therefore, speed in following up the air bombardment is of the highest importance, for the good moral effect on our own troops and the bad moral effect on the enemy fairly quickly wears off.’<sup>154</sup> Armoured units were perfect for this sort of attack, quickly advancing to take advantage of the enemy’s weakened state. However due to the previously mentioned congestion and slow advance, this advantage was lost, especially as the Germans were able to reinforce some of the areas that had been hit by the bombardment like Cagny and the Bourguébus Ridge.

Fennel puts forward that another reason for the poor performance of the British forces at Goodwood was ‘due to a morale problem that by the middle of July was having a serious impact on the effectiveness of the British infantry in Normandy.’<sup>155</sup> As previously discussed the slow progress of the campaign and the battle-weariness of some British infantry divisions had taken its toll on the morale of the British forces. This morale issue can help explain the slow advance of the British infantry on the flank of the operation and the slow progress the armoured division’s infantry brigades had in early stages of the advance. This left the armoured units of the 11th Armoured Division without infantry support for their assault on the Bourguébus Ridge, thus contributing to the failure to take this position on the first day of the operation.

In summary, Operation Goodwood is an example of a tactical defeat, but also a strategic victory. Although the operation failed to take some of its key objectives, namely

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<sup>154</sup> AIR 37/858 Lessons from Operation “Goodwood”, 22nd July 1944.

<sup>155</sup> Fennel, *Fighting the People’s War*, p. 530.

the Bourguébus Ridge and Vimont, it was successful at forcing the Germans out of Caen and tying down a large number of German units in the Caen sector. This limited the resistance the Americans faced in their breakout as part of operation Cobra five days after the conclusion of Operation Goodwood. Also, the tactical failures seen at Goodwood were not just a result of poor use of armour by the British as has been posited by some<sup>156</sup>, but rather were a result of a myriad of factors, such as congestion and morale issues, which led to the failure to achieve the tactical objectives of the operation. As such Operation Goodwood is not an example of the British failing to properly utilise their armoured forces in Normandy. This further demonstrates the pitfalls in classic historical misconceptions about the Second World War, they often do not go into important details such as logistics, morale, and tactical vs strategic objectives. This can lead to simple critiques of British armoured forces which are not sufficient and do not hold up to scrutiny.

#### **Section 4: Command**

During the Normandy Campaign, the British 21st Army Group was under the command of Field Marshal Montgomery, who was also the Commander in Chief of Allied Ground Forces. He would be responsible for the strategic command of the British forces, including the armoured units. Montgomery has been described by Michael Carver as a commander who believed that planning and preparation were crucial to the success of an operation, as well as one who felt that it was vital to build up a strong force before committing to battle.<sup>157</sup> For the campaign in Normandy, Montgomery laid out his overall strategy as soon as possible, which was fairly clear and straightforward. As Michael Carver states ‘as early

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<sup>156</sup> See Citino, Cooper and Hastings.

<sup>157</sup> Michael Carver, ‘Montgomery’ in *Churchill’s Generals*, eds by John Keegan (London: Cassell, 1991), p. 155.

as 7 January 1944 [Montgomery] declared that the task of Bradley's First US Army would be the capture of Cherbourg ... and that of Dempsey's Second British Army [was] to operate to the south to prevent any interference with the American army from the east.<sup>158</sup> This shows what the main purpose of the British forces in Normandy was; to hold the frontline around the beachhead until the Americans were able to secure the Allied supply lines by capturing the deep-water port at Cherbourg, at which point the US troops would be able to assist in breaking out of Normandy. Cherbourg was captured on the 29th of June.

However, at a meeting on the 10th of July between Bradley, Montgomery and Dempsey, Bradley expressed concerns that 'his forces would require more time to manoeuvre their way into position before launching a major offensive ... Consequently, the British and Canadians would have to maintain or intensify the pressure around Caen to lock the elite German units and heavy armour in place.'<sup>159</sup> This shows the strategic conditions that contributed to the development of Operation Goodwood by Dempsey and Montgomery. As has previously been mentioned, the operation was to be spearheaded by armoured units to ease the burden on the British infantry, which was suffering from morale issues and manpower shortages.

While the strategic command level did not have much direct control over how tanks were used tactically on the battlefield, Montgomery had some opinions on how armour could best be utilised. One of these views was that there was no need for the infantry tank role. Writing in January 1944, he states that 'a heavy tank specially designed for supporting

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<sup>158</sup> Carver, 'Montgomery' p. 159.

<sup>159</sup> Buckley, *Monty's Men*, pp. 93-94.

infantry only is not required.’<sup>160</sup> Montgomery felt that all tanks should be able to work in coordination with infantry, while retaining the capability to engage enemy tanks and exploit breakthroughs. Montgomery also saw the benefits of combined arms operations, however, he also strongly believed in the use of overwhelming force, and as such he argued that ‘It may be found necessary, during the early stages of an operation, to group all or most of the armd divs into one or more Corps. During later stages it may be advantageous to have mixed Corps.’<sup>161</sup> This was the type of strategy used at Goodwood, where the three British armoured divisions were combined into VIII Corps, which would be a powerful armoured fist which could overrun the German positions after they had been disrupted by the air strike.

One of the central issues of the planning of Operation Goodwood is whether or not the plan was overly optimistic. Montgomery is somewhat responsible for this, as he probably overstated the aims of the operation to secure the necessary air support from SHAEF.<sup>162</sup> However, Dempsey has also been criticised for his plan, as Terry Copp argues ‘Dempsey can be fairly criticised for committing 8th Corps to an operation that it had virtually no chance of carrying out successfully.’<sup>163</sup> Dempsey and O’Connor did view the operation as an opportunity for a potential breakout. However, it was Montgomery who scaled back the primary aims of the operation, with his memorandum on the 15th of July, as he did not want to overextend the eastern flank of Allied operations in Normandy before the Americans had fully secured the west and were ready to breakout.

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<sup>160</sup> *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy*, Eds Brooks p. 28.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

<sup>162</sup> Nigel Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield 1942-44*, (Sevenoaks: Coronet, 1985), p. 719.

<sup>163</sup> Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire the Canadians in Normandy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 154.

Montgomery is a controversial figure as he has attracted both a fair amount of criticism and a rigorous defence from different historians. Notable critics include Correlli Barnett and Alan Allport<sup>164</sup>, while some of his defenders are Michael Carver<sup>165</sup> and Nigel Hamilton, Montgomery's biographer.<sup>166</sup> Montgomery is often criticised for being difficult to work with and would often claim sole credit even when there were multiple contributors. Montgomery's slow, preparation focused approach has been criticised by some, who consider it to have been overcautious, as it allowed the enemy time to build up their own defences. However, Montgomery's strategy had developed from his experiences in the First World War, after which he concluded that 'soldiers' lives must not be squandered in ill planned, sloppily executed operations, based on failure to take all relevant factors into account.'<sup>167</sup> The manpower shortage and the morale issues in the British Army meant that preserving lives and morale was important. Furthermore, Montgomery could afford to take his time and build up his forces, as the Germans would never have been able to overcome the materiel superiority of the Allies, regardless of any extra time gained due to Montgomery's methodical approach. In addition, while he may have been difficult to work with, Montgomery was very good at ensuring that the British units had effective commanders, which can be seen through his appointment of O'Connor, one of Britain's most experienced tank commanders, to command the armoured units of VIII Corps, and through his removal of the 51st Highland Division's commander.

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<sup>164</sup> See Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (London: Kimber, 1960) and Alan Allport, *Browned Off and Bloody-Minded: The British Soldier goes to War 1939-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>165</sup> Michael Carver, *Dilemmas of the Desert War: The Libyan Campaign 1940-1942* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1986).

<sup>166</sup> Hamilton, *Master of the Battlefield 1942-44*.

<sup>167</sup> Carver, 'Montgomery' p. 151.

In summary, the British Army was well led during the Normandy Campaign, with a clear, well thought out, overall strategy which it was able to act on through operations like Goodwood. While Montgomery himself may not have been an expert armoured commander, he did know how to best use his tanks strategically and was aware of whom his most capable armoured commanders were. The slow, methodical approach that characterised Montgomery's command style may not have been the fastest way to achieve victory in Normandy, but it did help to preserve the material, manpower and morale of the British Army, which allowed it to continue to fight successfully until the very end of the war. This further highlights how the British were strategically successful in the Normandy Campaign.

## **Conclusion**

The performance of the British Army in Normandy has come under a large amount of scrutiny since the end of the war, often focused on the armoured units of the British Army. This has led to the orthodox view that the British did not understand armoured warfare, had inferior tanks to the Germans, and that the British attacks were uncoordinated and unsuccessful attempts to break out of the Normandy beachhead. A number of these are a result of myths and misconceptions, such as the "Tommy Cooker" narrative. Particular focus of this criticism falls on Operation Goodwood, which is often held up as an example of British failure, specifically the failure of British tanks and their doctrine. However, these conclusions of British performance in Normandy seem to only come from a surface level analysis of the Normandy Campaign and Operation Goodwood itself.

It is easy to argue that the British failed at Goodwood, as they lost 400 tanks, only gained seven miles, and failed to break out of Normandy. However, this ignores the fact that Operation Goodwood was not an attempted break out and was instead part of the wider

British strategy of trying to tie down as many German forces as possible while the Americans secured Cherbourg, which would help to facilitate further Allied operations in Northwest Europe. It also ignores the fact the Goodwood finally saw the capture of Caen, through the supporting attack by the Canadian II Corps, and also captured a number of its assigned objectives.

Furthermore, the criticism of Operation Goodwood ignores the strategic situation of the war in 1944; the Germans could not win, and an Allied victory was practically inevitable. The Germans expended vast amounts of war material, resources, and manpower to hold the Allies in Normandy, very little of which they could afford to lose. The British may have suffered materiel losses from the attritional campaign, but they could replace them. The manpower situation and the morale of their soldiers were much more concerning for the British Army. The British chose to conduct a mass armoured attack at Goodwood, not because the British did not fully understand how armour should be used, a common misconception, but rather to limit infantry casualties and preserve morale.

Overall, Operation Goodwood was a strategic success for the British. Although it did suffer from tactical failures, this was not as a result of poorly utilised armour by the British but was rather a result of a complex combination of factors which impacted the British during the Normandy Campaign. This included the issue with morale within sections of the British forces and the inconsistent training of armoured units, as well as disagreements over how armour should be best utilised on the battlefield. Ultimately, after months of hard fighting against some of Germany's best troops, the British were strategically successful in the Normandy Campaign, and the Allies were able to liberate the rest of France and go on to win the war. The factors examined in this article



demonstrate the lack of nuance and analysis in criticism of the British Army's use of tanks during the Normandy Campaign and help to dispel some of the myths and historical misconceptions about the Performance of British armoured forces in the Normandy Campaign.

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# **Atomic Alchemy: Negotiating the Relationship Between the United States, Mythology, and Nuclear Science (1895-1940)**

**Tom Wood**

## **Key Words**

United States, nuclear, alchemy, atomic, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, apocalyptic, utopian

## **Abstract**

The United States' relationship with atomic energy is turbulent, transient, and imbedded with various facets of human fascination. From the dawn of the twentieth century, the United States has negotiated its relationship with radioactivity through a lens of mythology. Radioactive decay from nuclear materials suggested that transmutation (the changing of one material to another) was possible and brought about a resurgence of alchemical ideals such as the creation of riches and eternal life. By exploring various atomic consumer products and academic writings, it is possible to explore how the early twentieth century was a rebirth of fantastical ideas about magic where the tools of creation were within reach of humanity. I explore how these ideas of mythology tied into early twentieth century American culture by exploring nuclear physics through both a commercial and fatalistic lens. Early atomic science in the US is encompassed by the dichotomy between extreme optimism and pessimism for radioactivity due to its ties to magic, creation, and ultimately destruction. Drawing upon a number of scholars within American commercial, cultural, and religious studies, I argue that America's relationship with radioactivity and atomic science is indicative of wider cultural ties to mythology in the United States' construction of its sense of self in the early twentieth century.

## Introduction

Since the very beginning of the atomic age, radiation has been imbued with mythological qualities of the miraculous. By offering hopes of curing all disease, providing immortality, and creating riches, the discovery of radioactivity in 1897 by Henri Becquerel spawned mass interest in the newly discovered radioactive elements like radium, thorium, and uranium. The decade following Becquerel's discovery saw numerous books, articles, and lectures, particularly by the English chemist Frederick Soddy, discussing how atomic radiation was akin to alchemy.<sup>168</sup> These comparisons to the archaic practice of alchemy were to do with transmutation: radioactive elements such as uranium naturally decayed overtime transmuting (or changing) into new elements. The idea that an atomic element could change into something else led many to theorise that understanding and probing newly discovered radioactive elements could unlock the secret of the philosopher's stone – one of the principle myths surrounding alchemical practice. Nuclear physics and chemistry gained significant traction throughout Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century, spawning a host of commercial and cultural products depicting what harnessing radioactivity could do for humankind. In this article, I will evaluate the public culture which emerged in the wake of scientific discoveries, experiments surrounding atomic radioactivity, and how mythology shaped early opinions of atomic energy prior to the discovery of nuclear fission in 1938.

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<sup>168</sup> Philip Cantelon, Richard Hewlett, and Robert Williams, 'Introduction' in *The American Atom: A Documentary History of Nuclear Policies from the Discovery of Fission to the Present*, ed. By Philip Cantelon, Richard Hewlett, Robert Williams (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992): p. 1.

Mythological associations of atomic science have often been attributed to the period directly following the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945.<sup>169</sup> The post-WWII era was certainly dominated by atomic mysticism – fuel had been given to the apocalyptic fatalism of American Christianity, referring to end of the world predictions that were taken factually to interpret contemporary global events. Groups such as the Watchtower projected the atomic bomb into depictions of coming apocalypses: “The nations making and exploiting the atomic bomb are described in Holy Writ as “the beast with two horns like a lamb.””<sup>170</sup> Though mainstream nuclear pessimism is undoubtedly a result of the construction and utilisation of atomic bombs, it is interesting to evaluate early depictions of atomic annihilation from the beginning of the twentieth century. Atomic anxiety is useful for evaluating wider apocalyptic connotations of the atomic bomb. In particular, atomic science is seen as being part of either two extremes: apocalyptic destruction, and white-city utopianism, and these views have remained markedly consistent since the early 1900’s. In today’s world, we still fear atomic annihilation. With hostilities between Western powers and Russia, nuclear fears again captivate public attention.<sup>171</sup> But there is also an element of optimism with the development of nuclear fusion reactors, now able to sustain reactions for five seconds.<sup>172</sup> By evaluating early nuclear culture (1895-1938), I aim to contribute to contemporary understandings of how views of atomic science have and will continue to captivate, fascinate, and terrify society.

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<sup>169</sup> Daniel Wojcik, “Embracing Doomsday: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Nuclear Age,” *Western Folklore* (1996), 55.4: pp. 297-330, p. 297.

<sup>170</sup> [Anon], “The Sun Gun and the Atomic Bomb”, *Consolation Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1945: p. 30.

<sup>171</sup> Gordon Corera, “Ukraine conflict: What are the nuclear risks”, *BBC*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

<sup>172</sup> Jonathon Amos, “Major breakthrough on nuclear fusion energy”, *BBC*, 9<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

When writing about early nuclear culture (pre-1945), scholars have focused on the role of breakthrough experiments and influential physicists and chemists.<sup>173</sup> Radiation was painted as a wondrous discovery which would provide a new technological boom akin to the discovery of the steam engine. Soddy's lectures and books received attention both in the UK and USA and his accessible writing style was picked up by newspaper journalists who sought to spread the message of radioactivity's mythological possibilities.<sup>174</sup> Ideas of radium, and radioactive material more generally, and unlocking the secrets of the universe proved captivating for the American public and provided ample inspiration for commercial products, business ventures, and artistic endeavours.

Nuclear scientists are important to perceptions of atomic science as mythological in the early twentieth century and to expand upon this, I will explore the publicly constructed products that emerged as a result of the writings of scientists like Soddy. That is not to discount the early scientific perspective on radioactivity, but instead explore the commercialisation of scientific discoveries and their communication. Though not confined to the United States, my research will focus on the interconnectedness between corporate America, scientific discoveries and the American public. I will draw upon a range of scientific histories, commercial histories, and mythological histories as well as news, art and commercial products produced during the first half of the twentieth century

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<sup>173</sup> In Richard E. Sclove, "From Alchemy to Atomic War: Frederick Soddy's 'Technology Assessment' of Atomic Energy, 1900-1915," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* (1989), 14.2: pp. 163 - 94, p. 170, Sclove discusses how Soddy wanted to stimulate an English radium industry so that scientists could acquire radium for lower prices. In Tom Siegfried, "Atomic Anatomy," *Science News* (2011), 179.10: pp. 30–32, Siegfried analyses Soddy and New Zealand physicist Ernest Rutherford's work showed how they soon became aware that radioactivity was demonstrating the properties that alchemy had set out to create. And Spencer Weart, *The Rise of Atomic Fear* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011): p. 32 talks about how Rutherford was elevated to the position of "heir to the quest for the philosopher's stone" in reference to nuclear science's alchemical associations.

<sup>174</sup> The *New York Times* comments on Soddy's book *The Interpretation of Radium*, declaring radium to be a perpetual motion machine of energy in William James, "Radium the key to other realms", *New York Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> July 1909: p. BR431.



in the United States. I will first explore the idea of radiation as a miracle product that could restore life and lead to wealth. Building upon this, section two explores the construction of the white-city and radioactive utopianism in literature and art. The third and final section explores early atomic anxiety and the mythology of annihilation within the American zeitgeist. Exploration of all three areas will demonstrate the role of mythology in constructing the American past, present and future.

### **Visions of Life: Selling the Atom**

Steel tycoon Ebenezer Byers was much like any other 1930's venture capitalist, renowned for being a sportsman and socialite. At the age of 51, on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1932, news of Byers' untimely death became front-page news with numerous national publications covering the story claiming that he had died from pneumonia and cancer attributed to radium poisoning.<sup>175</sup> His death was immediately connected with the sheer quantity of radium infused water Byers' consumed in the years leading up to his death. From 1928, Byers' had become ill and started self-medicating using water infused with radium salts. He believed that drinking four to six ounces of radium water per day would help him, and initially it was reported that there were some benefits. Overtime, however, the radium was absorbed into Byers' blood causing the gradual destruction of bone tissue and terminal carcinoma throughout his entire body.<sup>176</sup> Byers' death represented both the hope and consequences of nuclear commercial culture in the United States. Products such as the Radithor water were marketed as mythological cures for eternal youth, promising an end to death, decay, and suffering.

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<sup>175</sup> [Anon], 'Eben M. Byers Dies of Radium Poisoning', *The New York Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1932: p. 1, 11; [Anon], 'Death Predicted Last September', *The Los Angeles Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1932: p. 1.

<sup>176</sup> [Anon], 'Eben M. Byers Dies of Radium Poisoning', *The New York Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1932: p. 1.

The medicalisation of radium was not unusual during the twentieth century. Radiation was being experimented with by American medical practitioners for the treatment of psoriasis, eczema, and skin cancers. As early as 1903, one doctor described the treatment of skin conditions with radiation as ‘nothing short of miraculous.’<sup>177</sup> From the beginning of radioactive experimentation, there was an impetus to describe the results as being beyond what doctor’s thought was possible. When confronted with disabling, debilitating, or unsightly lesions, it was believed that small doses of radiation would do more good than harm.<sup>178</sup> It is worth considering that radiation sickness can take years to manifest from consistent radiation exposure, with radium therapy being such a new technology, the seeming lack of medical complications and supposed miraculous cures made it ripe for the commercial sphere to capitalise on, distil into an easy-to-use domestic product, and sell to affluent Americans.

Consumer choice was central in marketing the atom from 1910s onwards despite increasing ethical regulations regarding the advertisement of drugs. From 1912, the newly created Food and Drug Administration (FDA) enacted the Shirley Amendment which prohibited fraudulent therapeutic claims on drug labels, and the use of dangerous substances such as heroin, morphine, and cocaine.<sup>179</sup> With the radium commercial boom only taking off in the years prior, radium was not restricted by this act and remained mostly unregulated. Even with cases such as the radium girls, radium remained difficult to regulate in the consumer market until 1938. Historian Clare Gordon points out that

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<sup>177</sup> Ernest Armory Codman, ‘The Use of X-Ray in Surgery’, *The John Hopkins Medical Bulletin*, 14.146 (1903): p. 8.

<sup>178</sup> Manuel Lederman, ‘The Early History of Radiotherapy: 1895-1939’, *International Journal of Radiation Oncology, Biology and Physics*, 7.5 (1981): pp. 639-48, p. 640.

<sup>179</sup> Jeremy A. Greene and David Herzberg, ‘Hidden in Plain Sight: Marketing Prescription Drugs to Consumers in the Twentieth Century’, *American Journal of Public Health*, 100.5 (2010): pp. 793–803, p. 794.

technology advanced faster than legislation could be pushed through resulting in numerous loopholes that commercial manufacturers abused.<sup>180</sup> The “Lifetime” Radium Water Jar sold by the National Radium Corporation (NRC) did not even market itself as a medical product. The product guide exclaimed: ‘*Not a Medicine – Not a Drug – But a Natural Product*’ and ‘Every family *needs* one and can procure one. Radiumized water is restorative of health and youth. It is preventative of disease. It is not a drug or a medicine.’<sup>181</sup> The NRC was adamant that radium water did not constitute being a medicine which allowed the product to bypass restrictive legislature. Further, claims of Radithor water being natural only aided in creating distance between radium and experimental drugs. Safety testing could be bypassed even as cases of radium necrosis began to surface throughout the 1920s.<sup>182</sup>

Though high-profile cases such as the Radium Girls and Eben Byers resulted in investigations and a slurry of media coverage, opinions for radium products remained positive throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Weart’s exploration of early radium perceptions (1920 onwards) comments that until the late 1930’s, positive articles always seemed to overshadow negative or anxious coverage of radium.<sup>183</sup> Most articles covering radium poisoning appear around 1925 when the Radium Girls situation was reported, then in

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<sup>180</sup> Clare Gordon, ‘Encouraging a Broader Narrative of American Pure Food Legislation: Understanding the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act 1938’, *Retrospectives*, 4.1 (2015): pp. 33-43, p. 35.

<sup>181</sup> The National Radium Corporation, *The “Lifetime” Radium Water Jar* (Butler P.A., 1925): p. 4.

<sup>182</sup> [Anon], ‘Radium Necrosis Is New Industrial Disease’, *New Britain Daily Herald*, 20<sup>th</sup> November 1925: p. 10 discusses how radium necrosis should be compensatable. Also see [Anon], ‘Luminous Paint Causes Death of Man Who Made It’, *The Evening Star*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1928: p. 27 also discusses the death of Dr Sabin Vonsochocky, the inventor of radium paint, from radium necrosis. Mayor Walker of New York City was also reported to have died from radium poisoning during a series of investigations which followed Eben Byers’ death in 1932, see [Anon], ‘Mayor Walker Among Radium Water Users’, *Imperial Valley Press*, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1932: p. 6.

<sup>183</sup> Weart: p. 31.

1928 when compensation was received in the radium girls court trial, and finally in 1932 following Eben Byers' death.<sup>184</sup>

Promise of a natural remedy and the lack of consistent negative coverage allowed stories of mythological radium cures to flourish throughout the 1920s. The radium water jar pamphlet, for example, opened with 'The Quest of Ponce De Leon', the Spanish Conquistador said to have discovered the Fountain of Youth: 'Today at a nominal cost, an individual "Youth Fountain" is at hand with the LIFETIME JAR.'<sup>185</sup> The following pages went on to discuss a history of natural and distant wellsprings with supposed natural healing properties. By imbuing radium with natural and mythological properties, the Radium Corporation provided an answer to why these lost, ancient locations contained mythical healing properties. And now it was available for a low price and within the domestic space with Radithor's Lifetime Water Jar. Another product called Radium Hand Cleaner claimed that it 'takes everything off the skin'.<sup>186</sup> One of the primary beliefs behind alternative radiation treatments was the idea that radiation kick starts the natural cell repair process. The hand cream was proposed to be a miraculous product. Not only removing grime, but restoring the hand to a clean healthy condition, deodorising the body, and also working as a household surface cleaner. Though the hand cream does not feature mythological tales on the product itself, the product contains similar messages of maintaining youth, whilst also being a cure-all for all hand-related ailments and general kitchen hygiene.

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<sup>184</sup> *chronicallinamerica.loc.gov* allows users to search local newspapers from across the United States, national coverage of radium necrosis or poisoning between 1920 and 1940 when radium products were most circulated rarely covers cases other than the aforementioned instances.

<sup>185</sup> The National Radium Corporation: p. 1.

<sup>186</sup> Radium Compound Co., 'Radium Hand Cleaner' (1915) in *Atomic Advertising in the 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries: An exploration of cultural attitudes towards nuclear science and technology in advertising and packaging from 1910 to 2010*, Nuclear Museum.

Radium products were marketed to these affluent Americans seeking to capitalise upon the health fads of the 1920s. Historian Simon Carter identifies many beliefs associated with heliotherapy including the idea that nature, and sunlight in particular, was ‘pure, uncomplicated, and innocent’ and that those who were seen to become tanned by outdoor activity were themselves virtuous.<sup>187</sup> Radium companies imbued their advertisements with similar messaging which helped establish radium itself as natural, pure, and harnessing the power of the sunlight. Radium tablets, sold by the Radium Products Corporation, implored readers ‘Don’t try to wait for sunshiny weather, but let millions of little RADIUM RAYS spread sunshine throughout your system and ward off the sickness.’<sup>188</sup> Less explicit, a British company called *Radior* began to make headways in the USA late into the 1910s, their advertisements included a radiograph bursting with rays similar to cartoon sunlight as a slew of toiletries emanates from the image ‘Each imbued with LIFE by Radium.’<sup>189</sup> Radium beauty and health products were presented to consumers as scientific fact. These nuclear products were advertised as harnessing and distilling the power of the natural world, condensing it into an easy to prescribe form for the affluent American consumer. Advertisements drew upon the distant, overwhelming and mythological power of the sun and claimed to be able to spread its healing properties throughout the body.

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<sup>187</sup> Simon Carter, “Leagues of Sunshine: Sunlight, Health, and the Environment”, in *Environment, Health and History*, ed. Virginia Berridge and Martin Gorsky (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): pp. 94-112, p. 95. Vitamin-D products began to pervade the American market in the late 1920s, with adverts claiming that only naked children could eat in any bread, normal and clothed children would need Vitamin D Bond Bread to get daily sunlight intake, see: Daniel Freund, *American Sunshine: Diseases of Darkness and the Quest for Natural Light* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 154.

<sup>188</sup> *Radium Products Company*, ‘Christmas Prospects’, *The Evening Star*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1923: p. 40.

<sup>189</sup> *Radior Co.*, ‘Radium and Beauty’, *Vogue*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1919: p. 8.

Intent on bringing atomic mythology into the domestic sphere, radium corporations sold consumer's eternal youth. Radium advertisements were wrought with claims of harnessing the natural powers of the universe to deliver restorative rejuvenation and eternal life. Soddy originally argued that radium had the power of the Philosopher's Stone, serving as *the elixir of life*.<sup>190</sup> Though the number of advertisements examined here is but a microcosm of the commercial radium industry's products, they demonstrate the lengths that advertisers went to sell radium as a revolutionary and magical product. The power of the sun, the power of nature, and the power of mythological tales of youth were all imbued into radium creams, water coolers, and medicines. The phenomenon of radium offered possible explanations for a range of folktale phenomena and mythology which corporate America, tying into ongoing narratives of natural healing and alternative therapy, used to captivate affluent Americans. Radium products were a cure of their time, but the mythology of radium extended much further. Harnessing the power of eternal life at the start of the twentieth century opened the doors of imagination for what a nuclear future might hold for humanity.

### **Visions of Hope: Atomic Utopian Futurism**

The white-city fantasy has been a consistent part of American utopian futurism: from Disney's Tomorrowland and Epcot Centre, to the 1920s depictions of the flying cars of tomorrow (1973).<sup>191</sup> Utopianism is an intrinsic part of the American cultural identity and can be understood in mythological terms. When discussing Utopian Futurism, I am referring to a community's desire to work towards constructing a perfect environment

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<sup>190</sup> Frederick Soddy, *The Interpretation of Radium* (London: John Murray, 1909): p. 243.

<sup>191</sup> Matt Novak, '1923 Envisions the Two-Wheeled Flying Car of 1973', *Smithsonian Magazine* (Online), 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/1923-envisions-the-two-wheeled-flying-car-of-1973-114027072/> [Accessed 15 April 2022].

based on their current moral and social ideals. Mythological symbols in American culture aid in creating digestible stories of pride and hope in a constant quest for betterment. The Revolutionary War saw Paul Revere's renowned ride to Lexington become a symbol for freedom and liberation. Equally, in post 9/11 America, symbols of American heroism and unity arose from the ashes through recognisable figures and groups such as New York's Fire Department and the passengers of Flight 93. American cultural mythology throughout the twentieth century can be defined in terms of rapid technological and economic progress. Even with the First World War, the Great Depression, and attack on Pearl Harbor, technological symbols of futurism provided images of hope and ambition in an increasingly interconnected and tense world stage. Atomic science and the power invested in the atom provided a symbol for how American's can achieve a white-city utopia. A care-free life of convenience, robotic servants, and clean cities interconnected with a manicured natural world.

Ideas of utopianism stem in large part from the writings of Soddy who attempted to produce accessible, mainstream pieces of scientific literature. His writings were fantastical and offered suggestions of what an atomic society could look like:

*'A race which could transmute matter would have little need to earn its bread by the sweat of its brow. If we can judge from what our engineers accomplish with their comparatively restricted supplies of energy, such a race could transform the desert, thaw the frozen poles, and make the world one smiling Garden of Eden.'*<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Soddy, p. 244.

Soddy promised a return to the purity of humanity's creation in his writings. The atom was identified as the power source and building block of reality, and control of this power would afford humankind the ability to transform the Earth's resources to fit our needs. American newspapers capitalised on atomic utopianism in their depictions of nuclear power. The *Douglas Daily Dispatch* wrote '[the power of the atom] will be capable of heating the homes of the universe, furnishing power for all machines and machinery, fertilizing the earth, pumping water in arid lands and doing the vast labour of the universe.'<sup>193</sup> Another wrote that once the atom is harnessed 'power will be the most plentiful thing on Earth.'<sup>194</sup> Similar to previous energy booms such as petroleum and steam power, Aaron Sachs concludes that Americans saw obvious benefits with each energy revolution marked by more leisure time and less arduous physical labour.<sup>195</sup> Since humankind produced fire for the first time, its story has been intrinsically connected to energy production to enhance and automatise our lives. The suggestion of inexpensive and abundant nuclear power offered the prospect of turning the wastelands of Earth into utopian Gardens of Eden.

The creation of the utopian garden city was a dominant visual image in early twentieth century Western culture. Martin Meyerson's article on utopian city planning examines the rise of social and technological utopia following World War I. In his analysis of Swiss architect Le Corbusier depictions of inter-war Paris, nature and urbanised landscapes integrated seamlessly within the industrial cityscape – something

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<sup>193</sup> [Anon], 'Atomic Power', *Douglas Daily Dispatch*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1926: p. 2.

<sup>194</sup> [Anon], 'The Power in an Atom', *Washington Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1921: p. 24.

<sup>195</sup> Aaron Sachs, 'Energy in American History', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of American History* (2011). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.54> [Accessed 17 April 2022].



only enjoyed at that time by the privileged or peasantry.<sup>196</sup> The idea of the utopian garden city sprouted up as skyscrapers began to dominate the New York City skyline. Dense urban sprawls filled with population only seemed to be expanding outwards and upwards at an increasing pace.

Utopianism offered a solution in which technological innovation would alleviate human wants with a few specialised technicians providing for every need.<sup>197</sup> American Architect Hugh Ferriss, active in the 1920's and 1930's, drafted many depictions of the future American cityscape in his book *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*. Though Ferriss' suggests the city of tomorrow is still powered by coal, the utopian cityscape bleeds out of his drawings creating a Babylon-esque city of technological innovation which encapsulates nuclear utopia. In his book, roads interweave each other as pedestrians walk above, towering skyscrapers feature hanger bays, and the roofs of smaller structures are converted into sun porches and gardens, 'there is two feet of soil on these roofs, and trees are generally cultivated.'<sup>198</sup> The technological garden utopia provided striking visual imagery in the early twentieth century. Ferriss never dealt with how this would all be achieved, he only sought to plot the architectural evolution of American's cityscape, though as atomic science developed the mythological connotations of nuclear commercial products began to be imbued in visions of utopia.

Atomic utopia was a distant dream, though many imbued atomic science with the possibility to redefine humanity's place in the Universe shown through the urban cityscape. Within the realms of technological utopianism, the automation of life would

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<sup>196</sup> Martin Meyerson, 'Utopian Traditions and the Planning of Cities', *Daedalus*, 90.1 (1961): pp. 180-193, p. 189.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 186.

<sup>198</sup> Hugh Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (Mineola: Dover Publication, 2012): p. 71; 69; 116.

lead to temporary boredom and unemployment, Howard Segal suggests, but the prospect of a world free of war was worth aspiring towards.<sup>199</sup> Jack Binders' *If Utopia Were Achieved* was part of a series of futurist predictions of alternate futures humanity was heading towards. In the future, war is a thing of the past, with the last weapons being used a thousand years ago. Machines do all labour, atomic energy produces everything humanity could ever need, and people live lives of leisure, happiness, and pursue creative endeavours in a finely manicured city styled after Ancient Greece.<sup>200</sup> The mythology of ancient utopia is steeped in Arcadian fascination. Numerous literary scholars have commented on the myth of Arcadia: a land where humankind and nature live in a simplistic, natural existence.<sup>201</sup> Atomic energy in Binders' utopia removed the restrictions imposed by the modern industrial city providing a space for nature to flourish and man to enjoy, thus continuing Segal's idea of utopianism, nature is captured, preserved, and the 'climate is pleasant.'<sup>202</sup>

In the far future, atomic utopia seemed all but guaranteed. De Witt Douglas Kilgore's work on post-war Astrofuturism provides some insight into the role of technological utopia being achieved through the atomic mythos. Drawing upon popular cinematic endeavours of exploration and scientific heroism, 1930's science-fiction magazines sought to engage with the 'realistic more than the fantastic,' producing stories

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<sup>199</sup> Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): p. 21.

<sup>200</sup> Jack Binder, 'If Utopia Were Achieved', *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, 17.1 (1940): pp. 68-9.

<sup>201</sup> Arcadianism can be seen in American communities over the last two centuries. Landscaping the arid landscape of California became a prominent aspect of Californian culture prior to World War II creating Arcadianeque gardens. See Peter J. Holliday, *American Arcadia: California and the Classic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): p. 208.

<sup>202</sup> Segal: p. 27.

which combined fantasy with contemporary understanding of scientific and engineering mechanics.<sup>203</sup>

*Science Wonder Stories* magazine published a number of science-fiction stories from 1929 onwards. *The Lost Martian* detailed the story of an alien visitor from a civilisation 50,000 years more advanced than Earth, utilising radiation to create a levitator allowing Martian cities to defy gravity and build inter-terrestrial space craft.<sup>204</sup> Technological wonders and a unified Martian civilisation offer Utopian hope for those fascinated with nuclear energy. These depictions of Martian wonder provide answers to Hugo Gernsback's floating cities in *10,000 Years Hence*: atomic science reduces and alters the weight of substances allowing for the creation of gravity-nullifying devices. The flying city of tomorrow is a glowing metropolis of abundance where the weather, and consequently, nature has been harnessed for the benefit of humankind.<sup>205</sup> Whereas utopia in the early twentieth century did not have the resources of widespread knowledge of atomic power, by the 1930s, there is a clear move towards explaining utopian concepts through radioactive or nuclear solutions. These mythologies both construct utopia through the past and future. Soddy's writings explain that an advanced civilisation may have harnessed such power and become lost to the sands of time, whilst others depict how humanity could dominate the natural laws of the universe, residing in perfect utopian constructs blessed by the atom.

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<sup>203</sup> De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003): p. 34.

<sup>204</sup> Henry Harbers, 'The Lost Martian', *Science Wonder Stories*, 1.7 (1929): pp. 636-651, p. 641.

<sup>205</sup> Hugo Gernsback, '10,000 Years Hence' in *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientification*, ed. Grant Wythoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Available at: <https://manifold.umn.edu/read/the-perversity-of-things-hugo-gernsback-on-media-tinkering-and-scientifiction/> [Accessed 21 April 2022].

The wireless wonders of atomic energy gave life to utopian visions in the 1930s. Ideas of the philosopher's stone imbued atomic science with qualities of abundance of life, wealth, and commercialised products to the individual. As can be seen by the utopian cityscape, it also provided a source of limitless energy, power and control over the environments that we live in. The inter-war utopia was characterised by an end of conflict and return to the simplicity of the ancient world. Arcadia and Athenian culture were believed to thrive in an atomic world where matters of starvation, death, and destruction were in the past. However, whilst atomic predictions provided fuel for futuristic optimism, they would also come to embody anxiety surrounded by the belief that atomic energy represented the breaking of the seals foretold in Revelations.

### **Visions of Death: Atomic Apocalyptic Fatalism**

Mythology is a conversation between the past and present, engaging our understanding of the world around us through fantastical moral stories of the past. Mythology not only informs our present but can construct our ambitions or despair for the future. In my final section, I explore how mythological concepts of the past created anxiety towards technological progress and futurism. In the same way that section one deals with the role of corporations in explaining mythological phenomenon, the atomic boom of the early twentieth century incited fears that foreordained Armageddon was on the horizon and atomic science was its catalyst.

Depictions of atomic science in the early twentieth century was tumultuous at times, shifting between two extremes of atomic salvation and atomic destruction.<sup>206</sup> Rarely was a middle ground present. One of the earliest depictions of atomic annihilation

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<sup>206</sup> M. Joshua Silverman quoted in Martin V. Melosi, *Atomic Age America* (New York: Routledge, 2016): p. 3.

came in the 1895 book by the Irish author Robert Cromie, *Crack of Doom*. In the book, Brande, a scientist, discusses how atoms are alive as much as any person and contain vast energy capable of transmutating materials, and that the Earth contains a massive warehouse of etheric energy.<sup>207</sup> The dialogue gives some indication as to how the vast quantities of energy observed in atomic particles gave rise to both the possibilities of utopia and the world's ultimate destruction. Even Soddy picked up ideas of atomic destruction early on, inspired by the recent Utopian works of 1880-1900.<sup>208</sup> In a 1903 lecture, he described the Earth as a 'storehouse stuffed with explosives, inconceivable more powerful than anything we know of, and possibly only awaiting a suitable detonator to cause the earth to revert to chaos.'<sup>209</sup> These words served as inspiration for H.G. Wells' *World Set Free* in 1913, as tensions in the world were building towards the First World War. Technological marvels would also become symbols for a fiery destruction akin to the Noah's Ark flood.

American popular culture was also receptive of these ideas. One of the first stories in *Scientific Wonder Stories* is *The Reign of the Ray*. In it, a scientist develops a cathode tube to create a more efficient nuclear reaction. A student questions the scientist suggesting that a nuclear reaction would reduce the world to ash in a never-ending chain reaction.<sup>210</sup> Though he is reassured that this type of reaction is unlikely, the story goes onto show the military acquiring the device in the war of the Northern Alliance. The

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<sup>207</sup> Robert Cromie, *Crack of Doom* (Online: Project Gutenberg): p. 118-22. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26563/26563-h/26563-h.htm> [Accessed 21 April 2022].

<sup>208</sup> Sclove: p. 170.

<sup>209</sup> Soddy quoted in Weart: p. 14.

<sup>210</sup> Irvin Lester and Fletcher Pratt, 'The Reign of the Ray', *Scientific Wonder Stories*, 1.1 (1929): pp. 6-33, 81, p. 9.

technology becomes so widespread rendering even the most advanced weapons useless. Humanity returns to the Middle Ages undoing centuries of scientific progress.<sup>211</sup>

In contrast to the utopian depictions of the previous section, the invisible power of the atomic death rays was associated with predictions of humanity being reduced to a less civilised time. War is fought with knives and plate armour as modern technological advances are rendered useless. Substances in *The Reign of the Ray* take up qualities of mythological transmutation predicted by alchemists in the centuries prior: the oil in Soviet planes is separated into its original components causing it to crash from two miles away.<sup>212</sup> Mythos of commodore, cults of the fallen, and the preservation of peace became popular attitudes during the inter-war period.<sup>213</sup> Only a decade on from the slaughter of the First World War I, the technological pessimism and increasing intensity of conflict in *The Reign of the Ray* is apparent. There are parallels between the strive to develop more efficient and powerful weapons, though in this story, they are fuelled by the atom – a discovery described as being infinitely powerful.

Ultimately, the threat of atomic annihilation imbued the atom with the potential for cataclysmic fallout foreordained in the Book of Revelations. Wojcik's analysis of religious apocalyptic beliefs in the nuclear age suggests that atomic weaponry has become a fulfilment for a divine prophecy.<sup>214</sup> They require a rejection of institutional religious dogma and a move beyond established institutions which are regarded as evil, corrupt,

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid.: p. 81.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.: p. 33.

<sup>213</sup> See George L. Mosse, 'Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21.4 (1986): pp. 491–513, p. 492; John Mueller, 'Changing Attitudes towards War: The Impact of the First World War', *British Journal of Political Science*, 21.1 (1991): pp. 1–28, p. 1.

<sup>214</sup> Wojcik: p. 297.

and responsible for the end times.<sup>215</sup> The Seventh Day Adventists, for example, took the discovery of radioactivity to be a sign that the end times were coming. Though the atomic bomb would not be mentioned until after 1945, the Adventist's quote Soddy's claims that atomic emissions will produce so much heat and pressure that the world will explode, a sentiment repeated in other publications by the movement.<sup>216</sup> The mythology of creation within Adventist understanding came to be embodied by the atom: at some point these forces were set in motion by some force and eventually this clock would run out. Atomic decay became interpreted within the realms of temperature rises and the end of the Sun which would cause a sudden and violent cataclysm.

As noted by Weart, some religious figures warned that atomic science was too dangerous. One bishop suggested that a ten-year moratorium be put on research to give society time to adjust to new technological marvels, whilst other scientists received letters that radioactivity was supernatural and should not be tampered with.<sup>217</sup> Sir William Ramsay was one recipient of these letters, with spiritualists claiming: "Leave radium absolutely alone, it is too potent a force of nature for you to tamper with."<sup>218</sup> The magical qualities of radium inspired anxiety in addition to optimism, with claims that radium could extend life, restore the body, but also cause the decay and destruction of the Universe. Atomic science imbued both the potential for ultimate good and evil.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.: p. 230.

<sup>216</sup> LeRoy Edwin Froom, 'Modernism', *The Watchman Magazine*, 32.13 (1928): pp. 11, 24-25, p. 24. See also: Sir James Jeans' work on atomic disintegration is interpreted as imminent, inevitable, and only one force will stop it: God during the rapture in [Anon], 'The Watchman's Torch', *The Watchman Magazine*, 40.1 (1931): p. 24; another Adventist comments on the phenomenon: 'The atomic clocks are running down, to use a common figure, and there is no way of winding them up again', in Robert Howard Hervig, 'Is Science Finding God?', *Signs of the Times*, 58.25 (1931): pp. 10-1, p. 10.

<sup>217</sup> Weart: p. 19; p. 22.

<sup>218</sup> [Anon], Untitled, *The Richmond Palladium and Sun-Telegram*, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1907: p. 3.

The dangers of war in the new atomic world were even a catalyst for conflict prevention. The 1918 painting *Lest Liberty Perish from The Face of the Earth* depicts a burning New York skyline, the water ablaze and the Statue of Liberty a smouldering ruin.<sup>219</sup> In the aftermath of the First World War, the prospect of increasingly advanced weaponry suggested that nations could now be wiped from the Earth. No longer was conflict confined to the battlefield, but the whole nation.<sup>220</sup> *The Age-Herald* reported on depictions of atomic warfare in 1914. Referring to Leo Tolstoy's prediction that the Christianisation of the Earth will lapse, as people turn savage and maim, mutilate, and destroy their brothers, with the atomic bomb 'all life on the globe might be exhausted.'<sup>221</sup> Though dramatizing one possible future, it draws upon popular notions of the Book of Revelations.<sup>222</sup> Drawing upon the Biblical framework imbues the atomic discovery with a sense of imminence and ultimate power, creating a powerful tool for fictional stories as well as giving American Christian organisations a tool to evidence their beliefs.

Even with the mass nuclear commercial scene of the early twentieth century, the power of the atom also came to be associated with the end times. The potential for magical healing also brought about the possibility of cataclysmic destruction caused by the energy of radioactive transmutation. It was feared that harnessing the power of radioactive transmutation could trigger a chain reaction disintegrating the Universe. The dichotomy

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<sup>219</sup> Joseph Pennell, *Lest Liberty Perish From the Face of the Earth* (Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell Collection, 1918).

<sup>220</sup> The risks of atomic war in wake of the First World War is discussed in K. B. W., 'Bok Peace Plan Precipitates Lively "War" of Many Words', *The Lambertville Record*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1924: p. 1.

<sup>221</sup> George Bernard Shaw, 'Last War on Earth?' *The Age-Herald*, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1914: p. 43.

<sup>222</sup> See the burning of Babylon in *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (Online: Biblica, 2011), Revelations, 18.8-19. This is just one example of parallels made between the Bible and depictions of nuclear holocaust, many others exist. Psychologist Stephen Kierulff has produced one such study about American belief that nuclear war is a fulfilment of Jesus' second coming in 'Belief in "Armageddon Theory" and Willingness to Risk Nuclear War', *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, 30.1 (1991): pp. 81-93, p. 82.



between ultimate power and destruction is demonstrative of the widespread cultural fascination with atomic science in American thought. Though the atomic bomb ultimately drove the apocalyptic fears, early nuclear science provided the roots for dystopian destruction and the potential for the weaponization of its awesome power.

## **Conclusion**

Early twentieth century nuclear culture is a negotiation between magic and science. Wonderous discoveries of complex scientific ideas were communicated and sold to the public through a lens of the supernatural. Early writings on radioactive properties gave wake to utopian and apocalyptic fantasies in which humans would live forever, either thriving or meeting a fiery, destructive, and Biblical end in an inevitable apocalypse. The story of commercialism, utopianism, and apocalypticism in early nuclear culture is interweaved, all working to produce the black/white dichotomy present in contemporary understandings of atomic science even decades before the Cold War. Radiation was understood through the concept of energy. It contained and emitted powerful rays present since the dawn of the Universe. In many ways, wielding radiation was harnessing the power of creation which would enable humanity to make stories of legend a reality. The practice of alchemy had sought to transform material and preserve life, and atomic science has appeared to provide these opportunities.

My article has introduced the relationship between mythology and science in early nuclear culture. Though in my efforts to cover so much ground, some areas lack the necessary depth. When examining American culture, the religious aspect of society is important to evaluate how the Church operated and interacted with new discoveries, inventions, and progressions. Given the tendency of American politics to rely on religious beliefs, it provides an interesting avenue for study. Even the Jehovah's Witnesses, a sect

which was founded on an inevitable rapture, is often positive and fascinated by the mythological power of the atom. Evaluating early nuclear mythos from a religious stance will provide greater insight into how this fundamental aspect of American culture interacted with the atom in lieu of the atomic bomb.

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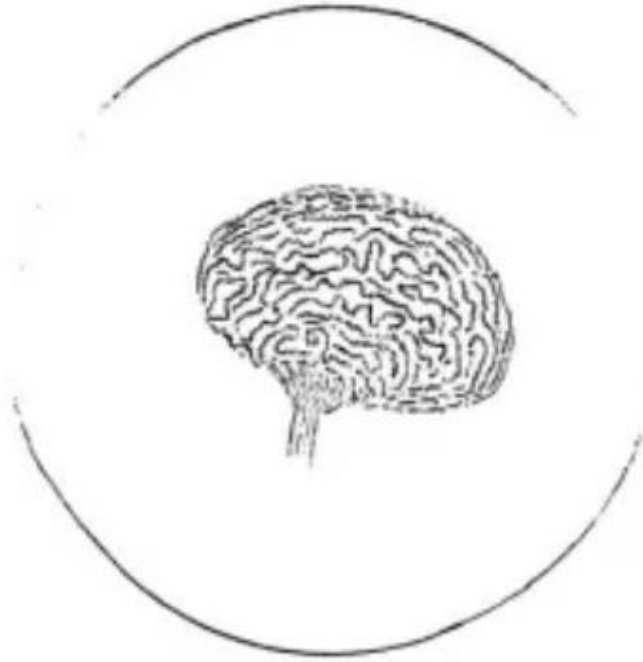
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