



More Than Skin-Deep: Reading Past Whiteness in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

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Few are the stories that a fiction writer can refer to and feel confident that other writers will most likely have read, but one such story is Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Often presented as an example of early minimalism, a literary style that Hemingway pioneered and that saw a revival in the 1980's with Raymond Carver and other writers of the Gordon Lish school, "Hills Like White Elephants" has long been discussed in a number of contemporary textbooks and creative writing workshop as illustrative of the art of dialog and subtext. It is a testament to Hemingway's exceptional writing abilities that the craft techniques used in "Hills Like White Elephants," published in 1927, are still relevant to the study of fiction today, but subtext is not the only lesson the story can teach a critical theory of creative writing. Examining "Hills" with a close emphasis on and deeper understanding of Hemingway's craft techniques, viewing it within the context of the cultural forces that influenced his work, a socio-political element in the plot emerges that has been hitherto gone undetected, one that addresses gender and racial inequalities and the disruptions these brought to the social world that Hemingway knew and observed in his writing.

My purpose here is to show how this undetected element in Hemingway's story is trenchant to the burgeoning critical theory that informs pedagogical practices in creative writing, as old interpretations of "Hills" point to a "white orientation, white narrative, white dominance, white defensiveness" (Rankine 2016) that is revealed when a formalist creative writing pedagogy is examined closely; yet it also illustrates what can be gained by marrying an understanding of craft and style to critical interpretation of a text in order to construct a pedagogy of creative writing that is socio-political in nature and more inclusive than standard practices.

When Paul Dawson, in "Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy" argues that workshop pedagogy is "not so much a theory of writing, but a theory of reading," because how "a work is *composed* by the student is not as important as how it can be *read*." He proposes,

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furthermore, that the survival and success of creative writing as a discipline in the “post Theory” academy would depend on working out the problem of “how to accommodate the insights of critical theory, identity politics and cultural studies, and the critiques of literature which these offer, while still retaining the central pedagogical aim of Creative Writing, which is to teach students how to develop their writing skills in order to produce literary works.” In tracing the evolution of the “reading as writers” practice that engendered workshop from Besant, to Brande, to Cassil, and on, Dawson identifies “an attempt to distinguish Creative Writing from literary studies not by virtue of the work students produce, but the manner in which they read literature,” but calls this a “difficult distinction” as it hinges, presumably, on the reader’s motivation to write rather than to appreciate the writing, and on a murky question of expertise. Dawson furthermore dismantles the idea that standard workshop pedagogy (which he summarizes under two admittedly reductive concepts: show, don’t tell, and discovering one’s voice) as “not only practical advice about craft based on the guild knowledge of writers, but the dissemination in the workshop of a long-standing critical opinion on the aesthetic development of both poetry and the novel towards a dramatization or ‘showing’ of the material.” In other words, show don’t tell, and creative writing pedagogy, is a critical theory derived from historically traceable aesthetic opinions.

Many besides Dawson have demonstrated the restrictiveness of a craft-based pedagogy that assumes an arbitrary standard of good taste, as the pedagogy that Dawson describes does (for example, Amanda Boulter, Katherine Haake, Joanna Russe, etc.), but Janelle Adsit in particular calls it a “policing of tastes” that perpetuates, a “white orientation, white narrative, white dominance, white defensiveness” (Rankine 2016) in the discipline that excludes writers whose socio-cultural background may be at odds with the standards that such a narrative proposes.

It is again to Paul Dawson that I turn to:

If we accept that what underpins Creative Writing pedagogy is a critical reading practice...reconfiguring this practice will enable the discipline more productively to engage with the concerns of the New Humanities. The problem requires shifting the pedagogical focus of the workshop from narrowly formalist conceptions of craft to the social context of literature, but without diminishing the importance of craft as an intellectual skill, and without detracting from the purpose of improving students’ writing. This means paying attention to the content of a literary work, as this is what connects it to the outside world, but without isolating content from form. What is required, then, is to demonstrate how content is realised in the formal construction of a text, and this means shifting from a formalist poetics to a sociological poetics.

It is with this sociological poetics in mind that I turn my attention to “Hills Like White Elephant” and the assumptions projected upon it, and upon the minimalist school to which the story’s writing style belongs.

Minimalism, especially early minimalism is often reductively explained even among experienced writers to describe concise and pithy prose, neglecting other elements of the style that Hemingway in particular adopted: while it may be true that the quintessential Raymond Carver minimalism of the 1970's and 80's consisted primarily of short stories in pared down language "written in austere, emotionally muted prose" (Miller 2004), in Hemingway's work that simplicity of language was matched in equal proportions by a complexity of meanings: because sentences were carefully pruned, whatever words remained in the text had to carry the load of all interpretive possibilities, nuancing content through allusion. The dominant pedagogy practices based on the critical theory that Dawson describes as based on the principles of show don't tell and discovering one's voice discourage an exploration of minimalism's cultural roots and what is lost is particularly evident in "Hills." Without the cultural context that informs "Hills" and without an understanding of how craft is part of the conversation between author and the socio-political environment of his work, it is easy to reduce a description of Hills as a story about a couple trying to decide on an abortion. There is, however, another dimension to the plot in "Hills Like White Elephants," one that emerges much like the image in an auto-stereogram, a flat two-dimensional picture that will reveal a three-dimensional scene only if one is able to disrupt one's habitual visual focus, and this other dimension can only emerge with close textual reading that is both informed by craft and by the author's socio-cultural context. "Hills Like White Elephants" has traditionally been appreciated two-dimensionally only for its most apparent qualities because it has been observed under the habitual focus of a white-centered perspective; one fueled, moreover, by the myth of masculinity and white privilege that Hemingway projected and encouraged of his public persona, which may have been true of the man, but not necessarily of the work he produced.

"Hills Like White Elephants," first published in 1927 in *Transitions*, and later that same year appearing in the collection *Men Without Women*, tells the story of a romantically involved couple sitting at a train station in Spain, waiting for the train for Madrid to arrive from Barcelona. As they wait, the couple, sparingly described as "the girl" and "the American," sample drinks while engaged in a quiet but sustained argument. The couple never explicitly name the nature of the conflict between them, but it is clear by the end of the story that their relationship will never be the same. This is particularly evident in one of the final moments of their long conversation, when the girl asks:

"Would you do something for me now?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" (478)

The girl has had enough of the discussion. There is no more rationalizing the situation. She uses the word “please” a total of seven times: there will be no happy reconciliation of points of view. The couple fails to forge any agreement, not even one of silence, as, moments later, the American attempts once again to revive the argument, with the girl’s response being, “I’ll scream” (478).

The minimalist prose in “Hills Like White Elephants” intentionally reveals very little detail about the couple and their surroundings, and almost none of their past together, with the exceptions of a few hints that can be gleaned from their conversation and their observations. In the spirit of illustrating “show don’t tell” in a fiction writing class, students are guided to notice how Hemingway reveals details about the couple’s past through carefully planted phrases: we gather that the couple has been traveling together for some time because their suitcases had “labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights” (478); we gather that the couple’s lifestyle is self-indulgent because the girl says, “That’s all we do, isn’t it – look at things and try new drinks” (476).

Even less is revealed in their dialog: neither of the two characters explicitly makes mention of babies, pregnancies, or abortions. Thus, the story earned its reputation as a classic example of the dynamics of subtext, wherein what is not spoken carries as much or more weight than what is. That the couple is dealing with an unwanted pregnancy is often treated like a foregone conclusion, although, even with that universally accepted interpretation, there are, nonetheless markers in the prose that, far from being obvious, are rather obscure to a 21st century audience unfamiliar with early 20th century cultural references and language use, as is particularly true, for instance, of the American’s obscure reference to “the operation” that he wants the girl to undergo as being only a matter of “letting the air in.”

“I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig. It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in.”

The girl did not say anything.

“I’ll go with you and I’ll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it’s all perfectly natural.”

Then what will we do afterwards?”

“We’ll be fine afterward. Just like we were before.”

“What makes you think so?”

“That’s the only thing that bothers us. It’s the only thing that’s made us unhappy.” (476)

Contemporary readers can easily pick up that “the only thing that bothers us” refers to an undoable mistake, a regret the couple is now trying to sort out. However, without knowing that in the 1920’s an abortion was performed by inserting a long instrument past the cervix through a tiny

mucus cap, and that the intention was to puncture a hole in the uterus in the hopes of inducing an infection, the reference to “letting the air in” and it all being “perfectly natural” remains at best unclear. More importantly, and trenchant to workshop pedagogy, understanding the details of the procedure may in fact prevent an accurate reading of the girl’s character, particularly with regards to her response to her lover’s suggestion, since the puncture was by no means a sure way of ending the pregnancy without risk: the hole led the fetus to bleed out, and the body to reject the pregnancy -- a dangerous practice that surely caused a number of fatalities among the women who tried it.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s assertions in “Discourse in the Novel” that “all words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour” (293) has special relevance here. An author’s voice, far from being “a given self-sufficient and hermetic utterance” (274) is, rather, heteroglossia, that is, by Bakhtin’s definition, language that is comprised of a “diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (298). The author’s voice is, then, not original with the individual, but a language derived from social and cultural interactions, experience, and circumstances. “Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (293).

An incomplete reading of the story may lend empathy to the American, who observes how other patrons in the train station’s bar seem to “reasonably” wait for the train, whereas his (implicitly unreasonable) girlfriend refuses to comply with his (implicitly reasonable) request – an interpretation that reflects that white-centered perspective Rankine so eloquently warned us about in her 2016 AWP Keynote speech, and that is further exacerbated by that Hemingway myth that paints the man as a larger than life character who spent his time chasing lions and wars.

As recently as 2011, *The Wall Street Journal* posted an article titled “Talk That Walks” by John L’Heureux, a novelist and a professor in Stanford’s writing program. Like many before him, L’Hereux expended great effort in analyzing the dialog between the girl and the man, characterizing the girl as “angry and aggressive” and her seven repetitions of “please” as “her hysteria.” There is no explanation of “letting the air in” as a euphemism for abortion. The critical reading theory that purports to focus solely on craft does not concern itself with clarifying the cultural allusions of the story’s language, as if an understanding of the story’s allusion were not necessary to deconstruct a craft that can render such delicate and layered allusions. Yet, in my teaching experience, that very phrase is often what prevents younger readers from understanding even just what the plot is about, as students do not possess sufficient medical history to correlate “letting the air in” with the dangerous practice of wounding a woman’s uterus in order to induce infection.

It's hard to imagine how L'Heureux, or any contemporary reader, could characterize the girl's refusal as "hysteria" were the specifics of the procedure and the dangers involved explicit. Yet, if as teachers we insist on underscoring specific verb and noun usages for emotional effect as a means to demonstrate that "show don't tell" heuristic so typical of creative writing pedagogy, how can we justify ignoring the emotional impact of a phrase that is rightly framed in its cultural context? How can we fail to consider, wherever possible, where that heteroglossia in a writer's voice informs the story's intended effect?

When more recent criticism refocused on textual evidence, it is harder to support a vision of the American as reasonable. There have been a few scholars who, divorcing the story from the tradition of interpretations that precede it, have pointed out that the text does not necessarily support the legend of the author's reputed misogyny that has influenced past interpretations, particularly regarding the claim that Hemingway's female characters are shallow, one-dimensional, and unsympathetic. We can see evidence of this contradiction in "Hills Like White Elephant." Margaret Bauer, in her essay "Forget the Legend and Read the Work," argues that Hemingway's misogyny is a myth mostly created by his readers, taking sides with scholars like Stephen P. Clifford and Linda Patterson Miller, who have brought up similar views. Bauer further explains that when her students read "Hills Like White Elephants" without having first been subjected to the legend of Hemingway's misogyny, their interpretations favor critic Linda W. Wagner's contention that "Hemingway's sympathy is clearly with the girl" (qtd. in Bauer 129).

While traditional critical interpretation sees the girl as likely to submit to the operation at the end, Howard Hannum puts a twist to this idea, suggesting that if she does, the girl will nonetheless leave the man, pointing out that she has already tired of him (47). And while Timothy O'Brien and Kenneth Johnson both see the final moments of the altercation as suggesting that the girl agrees to the abortion, Thomas Maher Gilligan sees the shifting of the bags from one side of the station to the other as a sign that the man gives in to the girl's desire to have the baby, an interpretation that challenges Ian Marshall's assertion that gender (and race) in Hemingway's early stories appear only to "adorn the white masculine identity of the [white, male] protagonist" (211) and that the female (and black) characters in his stories exist "outside of the universe of whiteness – and subsequently, humanity – that Hemingway and his protagonists embrace" (200). Yet, Stanley Renner and Howard L. Hannum both conclude that the girl will not continue the relationship with the man, now wiser to what she previously considers charming, again contradicting or at least challenging an assumption about the implicit misogynistic intentions of the work that sees women and minorities as essentially "non-human" and uninterested in and unable to exercise will (Marshall 179). Hannum further elaborates on the

girl's ability to speak in ironies, often stating exactly the opposite of what she means, (49-50) as an example, using sarcasm to point out that it is hardly likely the abortion will bring them any peace:

“And you think then we'll be all right and be happy.”

“I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it.”

“So have I,” said the girl. “And afterward they were all so happy” (“Hills” 477).

To imagine that there could be any other interpretations than the ones discussed by Renner and Hannum is difficult to a contemporary reader. The girl's final exclamation, “There is nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” (478) comes across as an affirmation of self-worth: she is not sick; she is not “unreasonable” or high maintenance. A pregnancy is not a sickness. He is the one who is not fine; he is the unreasonable one. Her statement echoes Hemingway's words exactly as reported in *A Movable Feast* when, while drinking at a café with Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway learns that Zelda has accused Scott of being anatomically inadequate, “a matter of measurements” (161) explains Scott. Hemingway agrees to examine Scott's anatomy in the bathroom.

We came back into the room and sat down at the table.

“You're perfectly fine,” I said. “You are O.K. There's nothing wrong with you.” (161)

It seems disingenuous to suggest, then, that in the mouth of the girl in “Hills” this phrase, “I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me,” would have a meaning opposite of what Hemingway intended in his own parlance: the girl is affirming her adequacy, in spite of the man's attempts to make her feel otherwise. Hers is hardly a submissive attitude.

Understanding the euphemized procedure affects our sympathies, as it raises questions about the character of a man who is trying to pass off this dangerous and illegal operation as “perfectly simple.” The girl, rather than appearing “angry and aggressive” or as giving in to hysteria, rather seems smart enough to understand that the man is selling her smoke. We can deduce that the American has been doing that all along, as for instance, when goading her to try absinthe, a known aphrodisiac -- something that the girl hints to with some malice as an example of a long-awaited pleasure that turned into disappointment. No wonder she's reluctant to trust that this “operation” is as “perfectly simple” as he claims. Here, too, is an example that reading a text without extending it to its cultural content leads to an incomplete appreciation of both content and craft: 21st century readers are unlikely to understand the double-entendre of the girl's quip on absinthe and the man's sexual prowess unless they understand the cultural correspondence of absinthe as the Viagra of the 1920's.

The inevitable question then arises: if so many writers and students of fiction have glossed over the mysterious turn of phrase, is it not possible that we may have overlooked other important references, too? What about details that shed different light on our previously held interpretations? And is the reverse also true? Has literary criticism failed to pick up on important interpretative themes because of a diminished importance of craft and its role in a writer's dialog with the socio-dynamics of the culture that influences the work?

These are not insignificant questions. With as much as has been written about this story that's just barely over 1,400 words, it is clear that every word carries enough nuance to contribute fodder for volumes of criticism.

In her monograph, *Towards an Inclusive Creative Writing*, Janell Adsit points out that "one of the most obvious forms of taste- policing occurring in creative writing curricula is the policing of intention... Craft texts warn against didactic or polemical approaches to creative writing; they warn against explicitly engaging in "political" issues in literary work...(52). This pedagogical assumption is not reflected in the proliferation of activist literature, and is moreover pernicious: "To ban political writing from the study of creative writing is to potentially silence or ignore the exigencies that give rise to these forms of art- making" (52).

What, then, are we to make of Hemingway's intentions? What are we proposing students take away from praising a story by contextualizing the character who is most oppressed in the narrative as "hysterical" and "aggressive?"

Hemingway certainly did seem to have socio-political intentions while composing his story and manipulating his craft skills to that effect. It seems possible that with "Hills," in addition to making an observation on the changing social rituals of marriage and romance, Hemingway was fulfilling what he understood was his obligation as a writer to report an experience in its most authentic terms. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway explains the main preoccupation of his early writing: "I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced" (11-12).

Hemingway did not enjoy discussing the meaning of his work and was succinct in explaining his methods. In *A Movable Feast*, he admits: "It made me feel sick for people to talk about my writing to my face" (127). He gives only a sparing description of what he calls his theory of omission: "you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood" (63). Later this theory would more commonly be known as the iceberg theory, which he would explain in equally succinct terms in

Death in the Afternoon with this often-quoted passage:

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. (154)

We can better understand Hemingway's style of omission in context with the literary movements that were the author's early influences when he lived in Paris. The poet Ezra Pound in the early 1920's was a close friend and critic. Their creative partnership allows us to frame Hemingway's early style in context with the Imagist and Vorticist movements, both (comprised mostly of the same group of writers and artists) having specific commitment to an exactness of language, to compression, to treating "the thing itself" as an authentic representation of the experience unfiltered by sentimentality or perception, and to the image as the fundamental element of good writing. Vorticism and Imagism were both waning when Hemingway met Pound, but Hemingway's style was invariably influenced by his predecessors.

In *A Movable Feast*, Hemingway would recall appreciatively Pound's mentorship: "here was the man I liked and trusted the most as a critic then, the man who believed in the *mot juste* – the one and only correct word to use, the man who had taught me to distrust adjectives as I would later learn to distrust certain people" (118). The Flaubertian *mot juste* for Pound, as it would later be for Hemingway, was not just a craft technique. It was almost a religion: the poet, the writer, had an obligation to select, among all the possible ways of describing something, only that word or phrase that would accurately and most authentically represent "the thing itself" and not some ornamental definition of it that elevated language at the expense of meaning. It follows that any fair interpretation of the work of Hemingway requires as much attention to the *mot juste* as it does to the silences and omissions in the dialog that are so often discussed in workshops and textbooks.

"Hills Like White Elephants" is without a doubt a story about a couple discussing an unwanted pregnancy, but this explanation, though accurate, may prove to be incomplete if we pay closer scrutiny to the words that were painstakingly selected to describe the couple and their situation, specifically, the preponderance of light and shadows that overwhelm the prose.

Paris in the 1920's was bursting with cosmopolitan energies. It was not only a melting pot of expatriates, it was a cross-pollination of cultures and artistic junctions, where figures like Stravinsky, Picasso, Rummel, Antheil, Picabia, Man Ray and Hemingway met in the same salons and cafes, the musicians as likely to talk about painting and architecture as the poets would about music, or the artists about poetry. Invariably, the various mediums influenced each other. Hemingway met Gerald Murphy a year before

he wrote “Hills Like White Elephant.” Murphy was then already an accomplished Cubist who would produce some startling works around the time of his friendship with Hemingway.

Linda Patterson Miller has written a compelling comparison of the similarities of Murphy’s Cubism with Hemingway’s minimalism, with specific attention to the use of “negative space” which bears mention here:

The role of invisible space is more readily identifiable in painting than in writing, and it was Hemingway’s literary adaptation of this artistic principle that made him the father of modern American prose. The artist can paint by relying entirely upon a negative space. At such, he shades in everything that is not there – the space which surrounds objects. When he has filled in all the spaces, the objects stand out in visible contrast, now defined in counteraction as negative white spaces. The invisible has now created the visible. The writer must inevitably work in the opposite direction, using the visible to illuminate the invisible. As Hemingway recognized, it was precisely what he chose to make visible that determined the dimension of those negative spaces. (44)

Hemingway had seen *The Watch* about a year before he wrote “Hills Like White Elephants” and that, furthermore, the story “exhibits many of the same qualities as Murphy’s *Watch*” (43). Paterson further notes:

“Hills,” like *Watch*, establishes a sharp contrast of light and dark coloring, which unsettles more than it soothes. It also has linear Cubism which is both flat and multidimensional. In both works, it is the repeated coming together and jarring of inner and outer spaces that make “visible” their underlying truths. The creative tension which arises from this juxtaposition of exterior and interior detail generates the almost obsessive penetration into the “experience itself” which characterized Murphy’s best work...and also Hemingway’s.” (43)

Patterson’s essay aptly establishes the importance of lightness and darkness in Hemingway’s “Hills” composed as though the story were itself a painting.

“The opening paragraphs of “Hills” establish a pictorial framework, in the form of special boundaries: the hills “long and white” across the back; the blinding starkness “on this side” leading up to the hills; the station “between two lines of rails in the sun.” In “close against the side of the station” is “the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out the flies.” Then the picture’s composition center is brought into focus.: “The American and the girl with him” sit “at a table in the shade outside the building.” (44)

In spite of this careful attention to black and white dissection of the setting in which the couple’s

drama takes place, Patterson overlooks what may be the most important of Hemingway's meaningful omissions, the omission of proper names, and the words that replace them, "the American" and the presumed nick-name "Jig" used only once, and, precisely because of its singular use, signaling special importance.

Hemingway scholars have universally assumed that Jig is the girl's first name or her nick-name, though there is no apparent record of Jig as a proper girl's name in English-speaking countries. Timothy O'Brien, for instance, also assuming that "jig" is a nick name, analyzes the possible significance of the word "jig" around his contention that everything the man observes belongs to a mechanical, artificial world of "reasonability" whereas everything the girl observes belongs to the natural world, which O'Brien interprets as a deliberate contrast between masculine and feminine values. O'Brien relies on the various dictionary meanings of jig: a fishing lure, a mechanism used to separate ore from coal, a measuring glass for a whiskey shot, a sheathe for a tool that goes up and down, even a useless object, jig, short of "jigger," concluding that the man uses the nickname only when he wants to "sexually dehumanize" the girl (21).

"Jig," however, was until recently a fairly common term used to describe a young girl of African descent, especially in the American South. To ignore the racial implications of the use of "jig" means to ignore what is perhaps the strongest clue to the source of tension between the couple: that their relationship crosses racial boundaries. A brief etymological search will reveal "jig" to have been used throughout the US. It belongs to a list of racial slurs even on Wikipedia, which joins it to the less than flattering "jigaboo," a term used in the early 20th century to refer to black people.

The word first came into use in the 1920's, exactly when Hemingway was penning his story, and it was often applied to rag time bands like Scott Joplin's, which were called "jig bands." "Jig" presumably characterized a black person's loose, dance-like body movements, which were thought to resemble the Irish dance, the jig. More disturbing still, the expression "the jig is up" today used to mean a trick or game has been discovered purportedly had a different and more disturbing meaning in the American South: it used to refer to a successful lynching, meaning the "jig" or black person, was up and hanging from the tree.

Hemingway was not squeamish about racial slurs. He made use of the word "nigger" and "coon" prolifically in many of his letters as well as in his short stories and novels. In his story "The Battler," written in 1925, two years before "Hills," Hemingway's fictional alter ego, Nick Adams, describes Bugsy, the white prizefighter's black companion, alternatively as "nigger" and "negro." More tellingly, when he first spots Bugsy moving through the forest, "Nick knew from the way he walked that he was a negro" (126). Notwithstanding, the lack of sensitivity and disparaging use of language that was dominant in the 1920's does not preclude the possibility that Hemingway

possessed sufficient observatory powers to recognize the disparities implicit in racial divides and to accurately report the consequences. It was, after all, an exciting time in literature, when writers of the Harlem Renaissance were working towards evidencing the shifts in social dynamics occurring in their times, something that Hemingway would have been highly attuned and sensitive to notice.

Toni Morrison makes extensive analysis of Hemingway's use of racial slurs in dialog and narration, observing how Hemingway's Africanist presences in his stories complicate and enrich his novels. In her critical manuscript, *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison's analysis focuses mostly on *The Garden of Eden*, and on *Green Hills of Africa*, both novels written considerably later than "Hills" and after Hemingway had established himself as a major American writer.

With "Hills Like White Elephants," however, the reference to the girl's race required special caution. Hemingway had difficulties publishing the story with established journals because mainstream journals would not risk scandalizing their audience with a story about abortion. Omission, then, was probably not just a crafty literary technique: it was a necessary strategy. When "Hills Like White Elephants" was first published, *Transitions* was known as an experimental journal for Avant-garde poetry, not an ideal fit for the piece, but it is clear that if publishing a story about an abortion was difficult, trying to find a publisher for a story about an interracial couple's abortion might have been next to impossible.

In recent times, a few scholars have re-examined the complexities of Hemingway's attitudes towards race. Josep M. Armengol-Carrera argues "scholars have repeatedly simplified race in Hemingway's works, when they have discussed it at all" (44). He then illustrates how Hemingway's racial attitudes experienced profound and significant changes from his earlier books to his posthumous *The Garden of Eden*. Similarly, Michael Riobueno argues that Hemingway makes "aesthetics decisions in order to more clearly examine the disparity between whites and both women and racial minorities in America" (1).

Toni Morrison also offers a complex response to the riddle of Hemingway's treatment of race. In preparing to discuss the unexpected complexities that emerge from Hemingway's Africanist presences, she points out that many American writers of Hemingway's time could not help but absorb, consciously or unconsciously, the realities of race division and race struggle. As such, the African American presence in these writers' work is paralipsis:

Encoded or explicit, indirect or overt, the linguistic responses to an Africanist presence complicate texts, sometimes contradicting them entirely. A writer's response to American Africanism often provides a subtext that either sabotages the surface text's expressed intentions or escapes them through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register. Linguistic responses to Africanism serve the text by further problematizing its

matter with resonances and luminations...They provide paradox, ambiguity; they strategize omissions, repetitions, disruptions, polarities, reifications, violence. In other words, they give the text a deeper, richer, more complex life than the sanitized one commonly presented to us. (Morrison 65)

One of the most interesting examination of racial and gender attitudes in Hemingway's early work is Margaret Wright-Cleveland's "*Cane and In Our Time: A Literary Conversation About Race*," which compares Hemingway's work to Jean Toomer's, a Harlem Renaissance writer, who, though not a friend of Hemingway's, may have been an influence, as the criticism of Wright-Cleveland suggests. According to Wright-Cleveland, both Toomer and Hemingway "reject in their formal writing socially constructed restrictions of race and gender, including white privilege," and use their writing to "expose how those historical constructions continued to haunt contemporary white and black American identity" (174-175). In Wright-Cleveland's work, Nick Adams' interactions with various women, American Indian and African American characters, like Marjorie in and Bugs in "The Battler" challenge Nick Adam's privilege as a white male and push him to confront an inadequacy of language to address the shifts in the racial and gender dynamics that re-defined identity in post war America. Her convincing take on Hemingway's authorial intentions suggests that reading any of Hemingway's work for craft in the traditional sense intended by Besant and Brande without consideration for how that craft was used towards specific political ends would be to miss much of what his technique reveals about the possibilities inherent in that craft.

It is often noted that white privilege is blind to itself. Critics of literature and creative writing have been analyzing "Hills" from a white-centered perspective, with enough depth to extrapolate on the metaphoric significance of the abortion and the meaning of the white elephants, the function of the bamboo beads and more; yet they have yet to considering the obvious references to the black and white objects and spaces that these protagonists inhabit and manipulate, how their difficulties transcend reluctance to commitment but move from glib invisibility to blatant transgression of early 20th century social rules.

The story is a chiaroscuro masterwork of shadows and light. Every object that is mentioned in the story possesses one of a finite selection of colors: white, blond, black, clear or green. The narrative makes mention of only a finite number of objects as well: train rails (iron black), fields of grain (blond), bamboo beads (blond) beer (blond) the river (grey or clear for the water), the hills (white), licorice (black), Anis (clear, white), absinthe (green, or cloudy white when diluted), trees (in a dry, arid land, brown), and other referenced objects that add brightness or shadow: the sun, the word "bright" to describe the girl's observations, water, shadow, shades, and clouds. These objects are arranged so that the space they occupy dissect the tableau as in a painting.

Those objects that belong to the man's world are white or blond: like the various drinks that the man, with his whiteness and green dollars, can afford to lavish upon the girl. In turn, these objects are juxtaposed with those belonging to the girl, the iron-black tracks that separate her world from his, the shadows and dark clouds, the licorice, the dry brown land and the trees through which she sees the white hills. A Spanish servant woman enters and exit through the blond-colored bamboo curtains, which seem to separate the world of the man and the girl from other patrons, passengers who "reasonably" wait for the train. The Spanish servant's presence, too, is significant, since racial attitudes do not stop with black and white and have a tendency to further separate "brown" races and "Mediterranean" races from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant at the head of the white social order. A Mediterranean servant, while not quite "white" in the eyes of supremacists, would nevertheless be able to cross from the white to the black worlds, to carry messages and to step in and out of white spaces as needed. In a footnote to his essay titled "Race-ing Hemingway" Armengol-Carrera states:

"Interestingly, he sees "no bloody difference" between Africa and Spain, either, "only the buildings" (GHOA 151) . In Hemingway's view, then, not only Africans but all non-white and/or non- American citizens seem to look alike." (59)

For the couple in "Hills," having the baby would have meant defying the social order to which they had, to that point, remained invisible: a wealthy American traveling around with a young black woman would have suggested to onlookers that she was his servant. There is a precedent in Hemingway's own work of this arrangement of convenience between wealthy whites and poor blacks in "The Battler," which parallels "Hills" in other ways as well. "The Battler" also takes place near a railway. The protagonist, Nick Adams, after having been thrown out of a train, discovers a couple camping in the woods, a former white prizefighter, Ad, and his black companion, Buggy. Ad and Buggy are able to travel around the country because Buggy by all appearances, is Ad's servant though it soon becomes clear to Nick that he's much more than that. This arrangement enables Buggy to "see the country" and not have to "commit larceny to do it" as Ad's wealth takes care of all the expenses. "I like living like a gentleman" Buggy tells Nick, with a speech far more articulate and polished than Ad's or Nick's ("Battler" 130).

The relevance of this story to "Hills" takes on even more significance if we consider George Monteiro's allusions that Bugs and Ad are not just master and servant, but something more emotionally complicated (229). There are homoerotic suggestions of Bugs' appreciation of Ad's beauty, and other allusions to their mannerism with each other. Furthermore, the jack with which Buggy "taps" Ad to knock him unconscious "had a flexible handle and was limber in his hand. It was made of worn black leather..." Buggy then explains that the jack under the leather (black) is made of whalebone (white) ("Battler" 128), showing Hemingway's play on colors in objects that define the dynamics of cross-racial interaction, but in this case, with both violent and homoerotic undertones.

It is easy to imagine that in post-war Europe, with the explosion of the hedonistic lifestyle of Paris' artists, a wealthy white man traveling with a black servant would hardly have raised eyebrows, even if that servant were a mistress. A white man traveling around with a pregnant black girl, however, might have created insurmountable problems from the white-ruled sensitivities of the time, a boundary-defining obstacle not unlike white hills, which separate the fields of grain and the life-giving river, or the couple's fertility, from the view that lies beyond, that bohemian, carefree lifestyle that they've enjoyed to now.

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything."

"We can have everything."

"No we can't."

"We can go everywhere."

"No we can't. It isn't ours any more."

"It's ours."

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

"But they haven't taken it away."

"We'll wait and see."

"Come on back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't feel that way." (477)

To the American, "we can have everything" is the same as "we can go everywhere" which he repeats to the girl in response to her "we can't" as though going everywhere and having everything is one and the same. So why should a simple pregnancy prevent their traveling? While it's true that a child may be a practical impediment to a conscientious parent, a wealthy American who can afford to cross the Atlantic with a girlfriend, staying at various hotels to "see things and try new drinks" would not be especially impeded by the arrival of a child.

Certainly, it was not impossible in Hemingway's world. Though Wyche makes a good case that the abortion in "Hills" may be a metaphor for his temporary separation from Pauline (70), the birth of Hemingway's first son, Bunky, evidently did not stop Hemingway from divorcing Hadley or

from marrying Pauline, or from traveling the world and acquiring new mistresses (in the 1950's, Hemingway even sustained a romantic affair with an African woman named Debba). Nor was Hemingway the only absent father of his time. Hemingway's close friend, Ezra Pound, never a wealthy man, had a legitimate child, Omar, whom he did not meet until the child was twelve. He also had an illegitimate daughter, Mary, who was being raised by a family of farmers in the Tyrol with his and his mistress' paychecks. In Hemingway's world, in other words, men did not hijack their carefree lifestyle on account of children. To assume that this is what preoccupies the man is to deny Hemingway credit for his vision and imagination. "Hills" has much greater scope.

"We could have everything," the girl says, but it is "they" who will take it all away. To the girl, freedom of movement is freedom of existence. It is so because as a woman of color, her freedom is dependent on the social allowances that authorities are willing to make for her, only because of her relationship to the white and solvent American. The frequent mention of railway tracks brings to mind another expression used to indicate divides in social class, which are nearly inextricable from racial divides, the phrase "the other side of the tracks" to allude to the bad side of town, or to a poor neighborhood. The girl does not say that the American or herself will sacrifice "everything" for the pregnancy: she uses the pronoun "they," a deliberate reference to an external force, the white ruling social class that, up to now, has been willing to remain blind to their indiscretions, but that would likely not tolerate a full-fledged relationship and pregnancy to continue. Why else would "they" take away "everything" (their freedom to go anywhere)? How would "they" be empowered to do so?

It is especially telling that once the girl offers this assessment of their situation out loud, the American urges her to come back to the shade. She has become too visible. She mustn't feel that "they" will take everything because such feelings too clearly define a relationship that, up to now, he has been happy to keep under the radar of most people's observational powers – and it is probable that it's that lack of visibility that has allowed it to exist in the first place.

To what degree this situation represents Hemingway's life or his feelings for the black race is difficult to determine, but all the same important. Writers write the story they want to write, which is not necessarily the story of their lives. Sometimes, writers write a story that is not the story they intended, as Morrison suggests about the Africanist presence in much of 20th century American literature. All the same it is hard to resist mentioning that much has been written about Hemingway's fetishizing the black race, and particularly, fetishizing sex with black women (Morrison 83-87). The reference to the American wanting to keep the girl in the shade would take more meaning if we want to understand the girl as a fetishized desire for the man.

Support for an interpretation of the story as an observation of race, class and gender comes from another stylistic device that Hemingway uses, the “objective correlative,” best explained by another of Pound’s protégées and Paris contemporary, T.S. Eliot. In “Hamlet and his Problems,” first published in Atheneum in 1919, Eliot describes objective correlative as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (qtd. in Wright 589). The hills and the track, the beads and the drinks are all examples of objective correlatives: objects that are handled, contemplated and manipulated by the characters to evoke specific emotions.

We may reconsider the significance of the white elephants as objective correlative, taking into account the interracial aspect of their relationship. “They don’t really look like white elephants,” the girl admits. “I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees” (476). It is not by accident that the girl (and Hemingway) uses the word skin to describe the stony white hills. The choice of diction is both unusual and deliberate, a way to bring attention to what the girl is really referring to: the man’s skin color, his privilege in the world acting as his protective front, his façade. Her skin color, brown, like the trees through which she sees the white hills, and like the dry land, makes it so that the only negotiation that can happen between her and the man concerns keeping or getting rid of the child, not marriage, nor settling down, or legitimizing the relationship: these options are never brought up. When the girl proposes, “We could get along” (477), hers is not a request for legitimacy, but a plea to continue with their present illicit arrangement.

The girl sees her own pregnancy as the blessing of a white elephant: her skin, stretched out with the fetus of a white man, could seem white “through the trees.” The girl’s unexpressed desire manifests in her imagining that hills have skin and that the skin’s coloring, in the white light of the sun, seems white. Her imagination reflects her unconscious desire for the power and control over her life that would come with being white.

Here again Bakhtin’s reference of the writer’s voice as heteroglossia becomes relevant. The meaning of the white elephants has been fodder for many interpretations, the most popular of which connects the phrase to a “white elephant sale,” a charity event where people donate the things they are no longer interested in keeping, like old trophies or heirlooms, etc. operating under the principle that one person’s garbage might be another person’s treasure (Weeks 77). Thus, it is often explained, the girl gazing upon the hills is projecting the man’s rejection of her child, his intention to give it away. However, this interpretation seems to contradict the action in the story: the man has no intention of “giving away” the child. He quite simply wants to destroy it.

Another possible source of the “white elephant” phrase is derived from Siam (now Thailand), a saying that found footing both in Europe and across the Atlantic. According to this variation, to be a white elephant means to be clumsy or useless; therefore, a “white elephant” signifies an object or creature of value, but one that requires such high maintenance that the benefit of owning it is insufficient to justify the expense and care needed to maintain it. The expression originates from a Siam lord who was in the habit of gifting a white elephant, considered a sacred animal, to subjects he found annoying. Due to the rarity and holiness of the elephant, receiving one was an honor. However, the elephant was expensive to maintain, tradition requiring special foods for it, and accessibility to pilgrims who would venerate the animal. Often, the illustrious gift would result in the subject’s financial ruin, since the animal could neither be gotten rid of, nor put to work to defray the costs associated with its maintenance (Weeks 77).

Further popularizing the phrase was an event concerning the circus owner P.T. Barnum, who, having had success with a particularly intelligent elephant named Jumbo, wanted to maximize his profits by purchasing another sensational elephant for the 1884 circus season. He had heard of the sacred and rare white elephants of Siam and finally persuaded the King of Siam to sell him one for the not so modest sum of \$250,000. The regent was reluctant to concede, since he must have been aware that the animal was hardly intended for sacred purposes, but at last he did sell it— and when it arrived, Barnum and the rest of the world discovered that a white (really, albino) elephant isn’t actually white. It is reddish brown, with pink spots. Barnum’s particular elephant was a dirty grey (Harding 110). The disappointment became international news and served to emphasize the expression “a white elephant” to mean an object of presumably great value that turns out to be a useless expense.

Another relevant interpretation concerns the expression “the elephant in the room” usually employed to refer to a problem that is obvious, but that no one wants to acknowledge openly. The fact that the girl’s elephant is white does not disqualify this interpretation: there is most certainly an elephant in the room between the girl and the American beyond her pregnancy; it is the problem of their respective skin color, which makes the elephant conspicuously white.

Moreover, it is the girl who makes first mention of the white elephant. Although scholars seem to assume that the girl means she is the white elephant, such an interpretation clashes awkwardly with the American’s reaction to her observation, which is defensive and aggressive at the same time:

The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

“They look like white elephants,” she said.

“I’ve never seen one” the man drank his beer.

“No you wouldn’t have.”

“I might have,” the man said. “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.”
(475)

Although the girl does not explicitly connect the American to white elephants, the American reacts nonetheless as though her remark was personal and aimed at him. His response, that he’s never seen one, is plausible, since the animal is rare and known to inhabit remote parts of east Asia, but it’s a curt remark. He does not want to encourage the girl’s simile because he senses something accusatory seeping beneath the literal meaning of her words. He wants to steer her away from examining the nature of their relationship or to reflect on his role in her life, since his most urgent thought at this time is to convince the girl to lose the baby. He evades her allusion by stating that he’s never seen a white elephant, implying that he has no means of comparison: he’s never experienced a useless gift, or, for that matter, never seen something rare and precious. Almost immediately, when the girl taunts, “No, you wouldn’t have,” (475) expressing her skepticism that he’d ever recognize anything holy or rare if he were presented with it, he petulantly contradicts himself, arguing that she wouldn’t know what he has or hasn’t seen, even though he’s just admitted that he hasn’t seen a white elephant.

The couple is implementing a language of multiple meanings that echoes the multi-representative nature of the objective correlative technique -- on one level we have the representation of the object as the thing itself, the hills as an actual landmark, which happen to look like white elephants; on another level, we have the emotional resonance that the comparison of the hills to white elephants generates for the protagonists and readers. The girl protests that her remark was “bright”: she refers to the literal interpretation of her words, that the hills really do look oddly white. The man, however, doesn’t take the bait, claiming he’s never seen a white elephant, because both of them know that they are not discussing elephants at all.

If the general consensus in the scholarship on “Hills” is correct, and the white hills represent her pregnancy, then we are faced with another incongruity: it is generally agreed that the girl wants the child; to her, at least, her pregnancy is not a give-away, nor a useless expensive burden. The analogy, if it indeed is an analogy of an unwanted pregnancy, comes from the wrong character’s mouth. Given how much her assertion upsets the American, it seems emotionally dissonant to the rest of the argument to suppose that she mentions elephants based on what she thinks he may be feeling about her pregnancy. Another interpretation is that the white elephant is the American, as Hannum also suggested (53), though for different reasons. It is plausible that to a young black girl in the ‘20’s the attentions of a rich white American might at first seem rare, desirable, precious, and

almost sacred due to the privileges that his skin color entitles him to in the world they inhabit. Upon further experience, however, his love turns out to be clumsy and expensive: it comes at the cost of her own health, the loss of her child, and the loss of her freedom.

The man, equal to her nuances, senses that they are not talking about hills, which is why as soon as she claims that he hasn't seen a white elephant he turns tetchy and defensive. On the literal level, he wants to remind the girl that she does not know him as well as she thinks she does— he might have traveled before to exotic places without telling her, reminding her that he has lived a life of privilege long before she came along, a nudge, also, to the privilege of his class. At the figurative level, he means to imply that she may be as much of a white elephant to him as she may think he is to her. Just because he said he never saw her as a white elephant, it didn't mean that he actually meant it.

Immediately after the mention of the white elephant, and almost as a means to change the subject, the girl looks at the bamboo curtain and sees the advertisement of Anis del Toro. The seemingly irrelevant gesture serves a purpose: the bull which is in mythology the epitome of masculine strength, is pared here with "Anis," a potent drink that, similar to absinthe, has aphrodisiac qualities, and happens to be clear green or colorless, except when it's diluted with water, at which point it turns white. When the girl tastes it, she is in a sense tasting what the white American represents, his money, his sexual potency, and the promise of narcotic pleasure; for her, the lifestyle the man is offering is as close as she can ever come to being white. As soon as she drinks the Anis, however, the effect is that it "tastes like licorice," a black, bitter substance that has been thought to shadow the bitterness and resentment that has settled in the relationship. To the girl, now that she's pregnant, Anis, though white, tastes like licorice: that is to say, it tastes black and bitter, because black life is bitter; it is life in subservience to the demanding, sacred, and useless white elephants (or white race) that black people are compelled to serve.

Hemingway's use of color as a craft technique is also relevant to our appreciation of the content. Green is, of course, the color of the dollar, and Hemingway is sure to specify in this sparing story that the man is an American. It is also the color of fertility and youth: green, as someone too green is usually thought of as someone young and inexperienced: here too there is a distinctive division; for him, green is solvency and power, for her, it is fertility and the reckless risk that comes with being inexperienced and young.

The nature of the discord between the girl and the American, then, might very well be that her pregnancy has put an end to the invisibility of their relationship. Such a situation would lead the man to propose a dangerous abortion, a desperate measure, which both are willing to discuss, in spite of the fact that it likely means the death of their relationship, and possibly of the girl, as well.

Naturally for the girl, his request, and the reality of their situation, clashes so brutally against the sweet life the couple has experienced to now that it would produce nothing but bitterness. The story, in short, is not just about a couple discussing an unwanted pregnancy; it is about a couple that dared to defy the social order and to cross racial boundaries, and who must now wrangle the inevitably bitter consequences.

According to Doris Lanier, “Hemingway once optimistically predicted that those of his stories which had been at first rejected by publishers would someday be understood, though gradually, as a painting is understood” (47). In the case of “Hills Like White Elephants,” it seems to be so the more we distance ourselves from stances that are steeped in theories that favor white-centeredness and explore the work instead with a model first proposed by Dawson and further elaborated by Neil MacCaw as “a model of enlightened close reading” that “facilitates a broader sense of writerly and intellectual development, in which the words on the page are but the first step in a wider cultural interaction... a method that steals from the formalist processes of reading as well as from the culturally-sensitive, discursive transgressiveness of strategies of critical reading that are firmly located within the episteme(s) in which the texts are conceived, produced, and read” (McCaw 32).

To discuss “Hills Like White Elephants” solely as a work that best exemplifies subtext in dialog means to disregard how Hemingway’s use of negative space and omission served to portray a socio-political reality that cannot entirely be extricated from authorial intention; it is to ignore the intensity with which Hemingway labored over each line, to find that *mot-juste*, to identify that omission that most contrasts the presence of something unmentionable, and to sprinkle his sparing prose with those set of phrases or objective correlatives that recreate the experience itself, in an attempt to create an unfiltered “authenticity” that has, rather, resulted in generating volumes of speculative criticism about its intentions. The white elephant, the unmentioned unmentionable, becomes a metaphor then not just for the couple’s problem, but also for the workshop context in which the story is still discussed.

What we can learn from this as teachers of creative writing is to reconsider what we lose by continuing to present the story to our students under limited parameters, without a discussion on the larger considerations implicit in not talking about the unmentionable: What does it suggest that a theory of omission was applied to represent a black female whose role, especially in the world of the early 1920’s, would have been considered already invisible? How are we to reconcile this representation with the oppressive, white-male dominated positions historically attributed to Hemingway’s socio-political views, particularly when we take into account the many young writers who still find inspiration from his works and his life who may be toxically oblivious to these themes and what they suggest? And who or what are we serving by ignoring these implications when presenting the story stripped of its class and racial commentary as merely a story “about an abortion”? Are we not

still perpetuating a silencing of those who might want to respond, perpetrating that “e-race-sure” that Rankine warned against, maintaining a “supremacist narrative inside a culture of amnesia” (Rankine) without inviting a response, through creative means or otherwise, to the assumptions presented in the story?

If we agree with what Janelle Adsit argues, that “the field should be reevaluated for its role in teaching students to become cultural producers and to intervene in literary- cultural spheres” (50), then “Hills Like White Elephant” is an entry point into that conversation. To propose to students of craft that Hemingway’s use of color and omission served as a means to expose the need for social change, even if we alternatively present that use of omission, of black and white and objective correlative – of a minimalism that is about much more than simplified, austere diction, a minimalism that is, rather, about carefully layered allusions and meaningful omissions – even if we present this use of craft in light of the traditionally accepted view that Hemingway was concerned with the loss of white male privilege, we are inviting our students, nonetheless, to expand their imagination, to envision how craft can be used towards ends that transcend the limiting boundaries implied by formalist pedagogy. It is to admit, whatever the difficulties we may encounter following that admission, that language, and storytelling are inextricable from culture, from context, from politics, and however we use them, we reveal something about ourselves and the culture that gave rise to our thinking, and we provoke thought, and we invite response, and in the best of cases, we may even trigger change, which is, after all, what the best literature is intended to do.

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