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The Emergence of the Student in *Colin in Black and White* & *Top Boy*

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This article considers the relational and positional emergence of the student in two shows (markedly different narratologically and socioculturally): *Colin in Black and White*, which features and is based upon the life of NFL player turned activist Colin Kaepernick; and *Top Boy*. Both shows are concerned with the intersection of race and class and with the role of place (as particularized geographic location) and space (as cultural, ideological, discursive) in that intersection. The article considers instances in which the student emerges as such in both the presence and absence of the discursive reach (or institutional gaze) of the school. *Colin in Black and White* not only depicts a young Colin Kaepernick negotiating high school (a ready microcosm for the social, cultural, and political landscape of America), but also takes its audience to school: the audience is positioned as one of the show's students. *Top Boy*, by contrast, dramatizes the emergence of teacher-student relations in the absence of formal educational structure. It does so by centring persons and places that are often marginalized, and marginalizing those which are often centred.

Our social identities are in large part relational and, therefore, positional. This is true both interpersonally and institutionally: We are perceived, recognized or counted, and are accorded certain roles or statuses, not only by other persons but by various institutions. Who and what we are emerge from our relations with our significant others and with those significant institutions that have us in their gaze. Who and what we are emerge at the intersection of our self-conceptions, others' conceptions of us, and our conceptions of others' conceptions of us (our self-conceived other-conceptions; or simply 'face,' as Erving Goffman called it).[1]

In what follows, I am interested in the relational and positional emergence of the student in two shows: *Colin in Black and White* (DuVernay & Kaepernick, USA, 2021), which features and is based upon the life of Colin Kaepernick; and *Top Boy* (Bennett, UK, 2019–2023). While very different shows narratologically and socioculturally, they share a concern with the ways in which race and class intersect and with the role of place (as particularized geographic location) and space (as cultural, ideological, discursive) in that intersection. Below, I consider instances in which the student emerges as such in both the presence and absence of the discursive reach (or institutional gaze) of the school. *Colin in Black and White* not only depicts a young Colin Kaepernick negotiating high school (a ready microcosm for the social, cultural, and political landscape of America), but also takes its audience to school: the audience is positioned as one of the show's students. *Top Boy*, by contrast, dramatizes the emergence of teacher-student relations in the absence of formal educational structure. It does so by centring persons and places that are often marginalized, and marginalizing those which are often centred.

Colin in Black and White

In 2016, in the last of his six seasons as Quarter Back (QB) for the San Francisco 49ers, Colin Kaepernick became a global figure of antiracist activism. Protesting police brutality, racism, and oppression in the USA, he began taking the knee at National Football League (NFL) games during the national anthem. Kaepernick has been a free agent since the close of the 2016 NFL season, when he left the 49ers, ostensibly because he did not fit coach Kyle Shanahan's vision for the team. While Shanahan is on the record supporting, unequivocally, Kaepernick's and other players' right to protest in any way they choose, however, many believe there has been a deliberate effort by the NFL to freeze Kaepernick out of football because of his activism.[2]

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[1] These claims are not new. They are, broadly, familiar constructionist and symbolic interactionist ideas.

[2] On Kaepernick's activism and sports career, see Brinson (2017), Maiocco (2020).

Kaepernick co-created *Colin in Black and White* with educator and filmmaker Ava DuVernay, who works in the tradition of protest art, itself an educational tradition inasmuch as its works are typically morally and politically didactic. Her company Array is framed in educational terms, too: a social collective which awards a number of annual grants aimed at increasing diversity in and activism through film; physical premises called Array Creative Campus, a space which, among other things, curates three murals, works of public art by diverse artists.[3] To watch a DuVernay production is, often, to be positioned as student. Certainly, this is true of *Colin in Black and White*, though this is hardly a remarkable claim: the show is part docudrama, rooted in the protest tradition. Documentary films often, and protest art of necessity, is didactic. It is not, then, the fact that the audience is positioned as student that is interesting, but the way in which this is achieved by the movement back and forth between diegetic layers as a function of the show's narrative structure and its 'gaze-work' (by which term I mean to encapsulate both the show's iconography of the gaze – the way looking is depicted in the show – and the logic of power relations as articulated through a visual medium).

Colin in Black and White is narratologically complex and generically hybrid: part protest docudrama, biopic, drama, memoir, *bildungsroman*; some viewers might also read the show as having light-comedy or so-called dramedy elements. The series is structured as a show within a show, the biopic contained within the docudrama frame which stars Kaepernick. The intradiegetic biopic-drama focuses on Kaepernick's high-school years, and so as well as the show's self-conscious generic hybridity, it is possible that it's also directed at a dual or multiple audience (young or new adult, as well as adult).

The diegetic or frame narrative offers a gloss or partial analysis of Kaepernick's teen life – often positioning it in sports-, national-, or world-historical contexts – which plays out in the intradiegetic biopic-dramatic narrative. Different kinds of narrative space, then, are correlated with different modes of navigation: the mimetic space of the show-within-the-show, in which first-order navigation of racialization and racism are dramatized. By contrast, the diegetic space of the documentary frame narrative, in which second-order reflection upon, or analysis of, that navigation is carried out. And, as we will see, between the two diegetic spaces, the show stages the sorts of racialized psychical fracturing theorized by W.E.B. DuBois and, later, Frantz Fanon.

[3] See the Array landing page (n.d.) and Array Spaces (n.d.).

Audience: The Implied Extra-Diegetic Student

Colin in Black and White is structured by an oppositional logic and *iconography* of the gaze. This is not Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic, presumptively white, and exclusively gender-focussed gaze (Mulvey 1975). Rather, it is closer to that developed by Tina M. Campt (2023). Campt suggests that contemporary Black visual art and artists have articulated a variety of gaze-logics and -images which resist and redirect the hegemonic gaze that, in Mulvey's account, reifies and holds captive, fetishizes and de-subjectifies. Arthur Jafa, one of the inspirations for Campt's book, has argued that, 'on a psychoanalytic level,' the camera, because it records, formalizes, puts things on the record, always 'functions as an instrument of the White gaze' (in Campt 2023: 23–24); and while Campt agrees with this to a degree, she is also with bell hooks (1992) in her belief that an oppositional and liberatory gaze-politics is possible.[4] In the artworks Campt considers, which include Jafa's, the reader-viewer-audience is challenged to forego the interpretative mastery of the gazeholder-spectator who, standing before the artwork, assumes a god-like view of it. In the works Campt considers, art looks back at the looker.

In *Colin in Black and White*, the camera's eye always fixes its objects in discourse by virtue of a two-way vision that holds both the audience and the film's characters in its gaze. The show's complex gaze-work is, in part, a product of the way the show plays with genre. Genres can be conceptualized in various ways, but if one way is to think of them as conceptual spaces,[5] then here is a generically intersectional show – situated in and between those genres mentioned above – which depicts an intersectionally de- and con-fined person who finds himself caught at multiple crossroads (or, let's say, intersections): making or missing the cut for two college-level sports (baseball wanted Kaepernick, football did not); a mixed-heritage teen navigating a white world; a local name in high-school sports on the cusp of celebrity; transitioning from home to away, from high school to college.

Colin in Black and White's frame narrative is a documentary cum lecture-series, in which is embedded a dramatization of Kaepernick's high-school years (a narrative that ends, it's worth saying, at the intersection of two roads as Colin drives himself to college). In the frame narrative, Kaepernick himself is our teacher-narrator; his monologues topping, tailing, and punctuating each episode. Sometimes his subject is his own childhood, sometimes sports culture and history, sometimes American or world history. Kaepernick, silhouette-like dressed in black, occupies a near-whitewashed room: a museum-cum-classroom-cum-theatrespace, dis- or un-located in place and

[4] Jafa (Jafa & Obrist 2017) qtd Campt (2023: 23–24).

[5] E.g. Belas (2011); Derrida (1992); Forster (1927).

time; a blanked as well as a blank space (a fresh page on which to re-write history, correct the record); a space of and for projection (Kaepernick's teenage years are projected onto the walls: film-reel as memory). And a space, possibly, for learning. Dis- and un-located, this is a space without place, an ou-topia (no-place) rather than a utopia (good place).[6]

I say the setting of the frame narrative is *near*-whitewashed: designed to look like marble, this no-place is made of the stuff of the classical, 'high', canonical art that has, by and large, been claimed or positioned as white (or, perhaps, has been whitened). And yet, this backdrop is white marble, black veined – a visual correlate, perhaps, of Toni Morrison's thesis in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), that American literary culture, like American political and economic culture, is built upon Blackness put under erasure; and-or an echo of the paint-mixing scenes in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Pointedly, in his 'inaugural' lecture in episode one, Kaepernick draws lines of connection between the slave trade and professional sports, both built upon the exploitation of Black embodied labour.

Whenever Kaepernick begins to speak, his mini-lectures are projected onto the walls-cum-screens of the near-whitewashed room. Sometimes, as in his opening lecture on slavery and sports, they come to life, overflowing the cinema-screen walls, spilling onto and sharing the floor with Kaepernick, eventually giving way – having set it in broader sociocultural context – to Kaerpernick's own carefully curated story. Once Kaepernick has settled to watch his own story, his (mimetic) screen becomes the audience's (diegetic) frame, and we may well forget, until Kaepernick's next narratorial interjection, that we are watching a story within a story.

The positioning of the audience as student is signalled from the very start of episode one, with the stylizing of the opening vanity card ('A Netflix Limited Series') as white chalk writing on a blackboard. Then: tight close-up on Kaepernick.

'Everybody knows,' he begins, looking straight into and through the camera, out at the viewer, 'the first step in making any football team is the tryout. And to make it to the pros, the tryout starts out with the combine.' Shallow depth of field: the tops of Kaepernick's shoulders are out of focus, but the viewer can see he is wearing black; the background, given very little room in the frame, is a white blur. All that is in sharp focus is Kaepernick's face – dead centre and filling the frame top to bottom – and his Afro, which fills the width of the screen. Within the first ten seconds of the first episode, we've moved from an image of white on black to Black blocking out, taking over, white space – the visually white space of the frame and the set, and the traditionally,

[6] The word *utopia* was always a kind of etymological joke that exploited the play between good (*eu*-) and no (*ou*-) and thus the impossibility of a perfect place (OE n.d.; Clute & Nicholls 1999).

structurally white-racialized space of the lecturer's podium.[7] Kaepernick claims and fills this space, is constituted in and by it as teacher-speaker addressing his students – us, the audience.

The pedagogical gaze-work of the documentary works very differently from the insidious hegemony of the Mulveyan (white) hetero-patriarchal gaze. While all narrative film addresses its audience in some way, in the documentary direct address to the audience is explicit. In the case of *Colin in Black and White*, the pieces to camera repeatedly puncture the fourth wall. Better, his pieces to camera are reminders that the fourth wall is never really there, is illusory: texts and audiences always address one another, whether directly or in-, acknowledged or un-.

The pedagogic address to camera inverts the logic that Mulvey attributes to classic narrative film. The camera fixes its gaze on Kaepernick who stares us, his student audience, down. We are here to be taught, and, perhaps, to learn something. The camera watches Kaepernick watching us, and his look dares us – to argue, to agree. But then, a swift transition: Kaepernick will turn from the camera and us to the mimetic screens in the near-whitewashed room. Now he's his own audience, his gaze redirected inwards: the dramatic gesture (Kaepernick's turn away from the audience to the screens behind him) signals a narratological intentional shift 'inwards' and 'backwards' (he no longer looks out to the audience, but 'in' to his story within his story). The audience is sutured into his point of view at the moment when his mimetic screen becomes our diegetic screen; the moment, that is, when we are no longer watching Kaepernick-now watching a teenage Colin-then, but are simply watching a Colin-then. The visual logic is that we are watching Colin-then through the (camera's) eye of Kaepernick-now. The pedagogical gesture or request is to watch and learn, perhaps directly to sympathize, if not to (try to?) empathize.

Colin: The Represented (Mimetic) Student & Fractured Consciousness

In the intradiegetic Colin-then story, the high school is an important setting as both located place and discursive space. A kind of cultural and institutional metonym, the high school is simultaneously *an* institution and *all* institutions, part of the town and

[7] White-racialized in an obvious, weight-of-numbers sense: how many Black, or BAME, lecturers are there in higher education; how may professors and-or senior administrators; how many Black female senior academics (Joseph-Salisbury 2018; Rollock 2019; Shilliam 2016)? Not to mention the overt and covert racial politics of many curricula (UCL Students 2015). But white-racialized also in the historico-discursive sense: there are questions worth asking about the extent to which getting on in academia involves assimilating to colonialist and-or structurally whitened discourses and professional identities (Boakye & Small 2020; Grehoua 2020). The race and gender politics of academia are explored in the Netflix show *The Chair* (2021).

the whole town and also America, in microcosm. The audience, along with Kaepernick, watches as the young Colin navigates (a spatial and territorial figure that Kaepernick often uses in interview) his way through high school.[8] Occasionally, we see Colin in class, but more often we see him moving either between lessons or to-and-from practice. A recurring set for these intersticial movements and moments is a white cloistered courtyard. At other times, we see Colin in a sports arena, the football or baseball field, occasionally the basketball court. Each of these spaces is visibly, physically bounded – by a cloister, a mesh fence, a track and stadium – and each is zoned or subdivided (the pitcher's mound and batter's boxes, the bases; the end zone; and so on). In these spaces, all segments of the high school, Colin forges and sustains and loses friendships, gains and loses status (as a high-school and local sports star), reckons with his sense of self. As Kaepernick himself has put it: 'while I am biracial, I identify as a young Black man' (Fuller, Summers & Jarenwattananon 2023); and it is in those bounded and-or intersticial spaces – the corridor, the courtyard, the sports arena – where, Kaepernick the narrator-teacher tells us, Colin first encountered his Blackness.

'Let me tell you something,' Kaepernick begins Episode 3. 'In *Black Reconstruction*, when writing about the commonalities between working-class Blacks and whites, W.E.B. DuBois wrote':

> [T]he white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and [titles] of courtesy because they were white. [White laborers] were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness (1935: 700).[9]

The passage – voiced by another actor over an illustrative montage – ends, and Kaepernick turns to his audience-class, looks to us once again down and through the barrel of the camera: 'You know what we call that now? Same thing it was then: white privilege.' Having established, in Erving Goffman's terms, a frame and footing for the episode in the words (and represented voice) of DuBois, Kaepernick continues: adopted by and 'growing up with white parents, I moved through life with their audacity

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[8] See CBS (2023), Foster (2023), Fuller, Summers, & Jarenwattananon (2023). Foster (2023) reports second-hand on the CBS (2023) interview.

[9] Quotation amended to reflect the version read in *Colin…*. DuVernay's frequent use of montage is sometimes illustrative or amplificatory, designed to depict the spoken words. She also likes to exploit anachronism between word and image, as in her film *13th* (DuVernay, USA, 2016).

of whiteness. I assumed their privilege was mine. I was in for a rude awakening.'[10] Interestingly, movement here indicates a lack of worldly and self understanding, an educational stasis of sorts; passive, Brownian movement rather than the intentional movement suggested by Kaepernick's preferred word and its derivations, 'navigate.' Where the educational concept of *bildung* (roughly, learning as a process of growing rational autonomy) implies a kind of movement (spiritual or moral growth; progress ('moving forwards')), here it is only when passive movement is arrested and one is rudely awakened, only when we are forced to navigate barriers because we've come up hard against them, that *bildung* (as a kind of puncturing) can happen.[11]

Though obviously spatial, 'moved through life' is, then, subtle in its implications. A less obviously, though equally significant, spatial figure is the oppositional third- and first-person positioning of Colin's parents' privilege and Colin's lack thereof: 'I assumed *their* privilege was *mine*.' Kaepernick delivers this analysis from the detached no-place of the near-whitewashed lecture room, outside the frame of the intradiegetic, Colin-then narrative. Kaepernick understands *now*, distanced by time and space, that he occupied and occupies another space, or occupied and occupies space other*wise*, than his parents. Another montage follows, this a reminder both of the act that made Kaepernick a global figure of antiracist protest and of some of the backlash against it, including then-President Trump's comments, made at a 2017 rally: 'get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired, *he's fired!*'[12]

But these overt acts of racialized aggression are not the show's primary concern. Repeatedly, *Colin in Black and White* stages – unsubtly so as to be unambiguous, didactic – the countless microaggressions young Colin endures:

- The monitoring of Black hair – which is simply one mode of the policing of Black, gendered, Othered bodies – and the labelling, in particular, of cornrows as aggressive: 'you look like a *thug*,' Colin's mother tells him towards the end of the first episode, this as a 'rationalization' against cornrows generally and on the sports field especially. Kaepernick's hair, which has often got the media going, is an important part of Kaepernick's political aesthetics.[13] In this painful scene, Colin's parents act as proxies for his coaches (and their objections to his hair), whose own authority rests on their being educational-institutional agents; and

[10] In Goffman (1974, 1979), the frame is the discursive context, footing the roles of interlocutors in the discourse; or, as Agne (2015) neatly puts it, 'the frame is the name of the game, and footing is how the game is played.'

[11] On *bildung* in educational philosophy, see Biesta (2002).

[12] As well as the episode footage, see Graham (2017).

[13] See Dabiri (2020) on the racial politics of hair; Fairclough (1984) on power in and behind discourse; Alexander (2010), DuVernay (2016), Lubiano (1998) on the policing of Black bodies.

we witness institutional power overflowing its physical boundaries (the school's power asserting itself in the home).

- The hotel manager's distrustful eyes that fix upon Colin and other Black teen athletes as they wait in the lobby, while around them their white peers' aggressive disruptions (their 'play fighting') go unnoticed (Ep.3). Unnoticed not in the sense that the white teens' behaviour happens 'offstage' and out of sight, but in the sense of a non-noticing that is active even as it is tacit: unspoken endorsement of aggressive masculinized behaviour.
- The close policing of Black teen athletes' on-field behaviour, including brief and respectful communication between rivals, during a baseball game, while white teen athletes' overt flouting of conduct rules go unchecked (see Baseball Rules Academy (a), (b), n.d.).

As well as exemplifying so many everyday microaggressions, such moments function microcosmically for the general fact of institutional and structural racism, precisely because they occur within the intersecting institutional-discursive bounds of formal education and sports: their cultures, conventions, and rules, *and* their physical, clearly demarcated spaces. Such moments also dramatize what DuBois (1903) – a reference-point, remember, for the show – called double consciousness: a 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.' DuBois took double consciousness to be characteristic of African American psychosocial experience. 'One ever feels his twoness,' he wrote, 'an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.' The audience, sat alongside Kaepernick, watches as Colin-then is brought up hard against his twoness, as he is made time and again to endure the psychical splitting by which Blackness is called into the world as whiteness's Other, and is thereby born in a moment of, and as, fracture.

In a spirit close to DuBois, Frantz Fanon (1952) theorized the psychical fracture of racialization in grammatical-spatial terms; and where Kaepernick's realization that his parents' caucasity has not transferred to him is a moment of DuBoisian doubleness, the show also stages moments of Fanonesque fracture. When Blackness as Otherness is called up, one sees one's self, Fanon writes, in a 'triple person' (112). To exist triply is to be split by *having*, simultaneously, first-, second-, and third-person consciousness of one's self, and to risk *being* no(o)ne. In the first-person, Fanon was a body in the world: 'I occupied space.' Third-person consciousness is awareness of one's body as if from without, the loss of the ability to move carelessly through the world because one

now becomes acutely aware, as if from without, of 'a real dialectic between my body and the world' (111). In the second-person, Fanon sees himself from without, but, in DuBoisian fashion, through the eyes of those who construct him as Other, from the position of the I who creates and positions Me as a You. A depersonalized gaze: I am now You, the Other held in the gaze of an I with agency, power. This second-person consciousness may find its expression in particular white actors' particular instances of racism, but it is enabled as an everyday phenomenon because it is systemic. This gaze does not 'see' Fanon the person; rather, it inscribes his skin. There is no personal body now, but, rather, 'a racial epidermal schema' (112); the racialized Black body as generic. Fanon finds that he is 'woven [...] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories' (111). Discourse works its violence. 'I am overdetermined from without,' he writes. 'I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*' (116). Fanon is writing not only of individual micro- and macro-aggressive racist acts, but about a psychosocial, structurally white gaze. Just as Fanon writes of being 'fixed' in and by white eyes, notice that all the examples of microaggression listed above involve Colin being fixed and dissected under white-eyed authority, being pre-written (literally *pre-scribed*) 'out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.'

In a scene in episode three, after being subject to an act of racism that is clear and overt, 'micro' only inasmuch as neither physical violence nor overtly racist language is used, Colin looks in disbelief at his white aggressor, a hotel employee, who stands just out of shot, the camera positioning the audience just over the employee's shoulder. In an obvious sense, Colin is a student: this is a story of a summer baseball season during high school. In a more significant sense, such moments of arrest (when easy movement is punctured) are moments of traumatic fracture in which Colin *learns* that he is positioned as Other within a white social imaginary. And as Colin-then looks to the hotel employee and to the camera hovering at her shoulder, he looks 'out' of his narrative frame to his dual audience. We are watching, remember, *with* Kaepernick: watching Kaepernick watching Colin watch himself as he fractures, within the bounds of the intradiegetic narrative (the Colin-then story) into double consciousness and triple personness: at the diegetic level, Kaepernick recalls, remembers, revises his own story as if from a third-person perspective. Fanonesque triple-person fracture inheres in the logic of autobiography, in which subject is also object: we reflect on and experience our self as other to ourself. In such moments as that described above, when Colin-then looks beyond the limits of his own narrative frame, Kaepernick has a third-person (retrospective) view of his own (Fanonesque) second-person splintering.

Colin in Black and White refuses the violence of crude interpretation, the type that assumes a 'real' meaning lies 'beneath,' 'within,' or is 'latent' in the apparent, 'surface,'

or 'manifest' form. As soon as the scene mentioned above ends, Kaepernick, in the third episode's second lecture, glosses it with reference to 'microaggressions: a term coined by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce. Who played football – at Harvard, by the way.' The episode plots a straight line from DuBoisian white privilege to microaggression, the second phenomenon enabled by and an expression of the first. It is no interpretative leap to either DuBois or Pierce, or from one to the other. They are namechecked, explicit reference-points and framing devices for the episode and, more generally, the show. Nor is it a much bigger a leap to Fanon, whom, it has been suggested, was among the Black authors Kaepernick read on his road to activist awakening (Branch 2017; Loggins 2017). We are not being asked to decode Kaepernick's school-days stories as stories that are 'really about' racism. We are told in no uncertain terms that this is what those stories are about. This places the show in an African American artistic tradition, which includes James Baldwin and Toni Morrison among others, of metaphorical, figurative, or interpretative refusal. Interpretative 'mastery' is not given to the audience-reader.[14]

Colin in Black and White will not have lessons for everyone, nor the *same* lessons for everyone. At least two audiences are addressed. The show is *about* and *for* Black and other minoritized persons and peoples, whose experiences and knowledges may be recognized by the show. And then there is the Other(ed) audience, with whom I sit, that may be in need of some schooling. For the show is also about whitened America and the whitened-'westernized' world, and is *addressed* to those of us living relatively close to the relative centres of relative power and-or privilege.

Top Boy

I turn now to *Top Boy*, which, over five seasons, tracks the careers of east-London drug-dealers Dushane and Sully – their initial friend- and partner-ship; the early disintegration of both; their necessary but fractious alliances; their violent deaths. The show first aired on Channel 4 in 2011 and was cancelled after two seasons. Following a revival campaign led by Canadian rapper Drake, *Top Boy* was relaunched on Netflix, and the original seasons were restyled *Top Boy: Summerhouse* (Bennett, UK, 2011–2013), sub-titled for the housing estate which is the show's geographic centre and, in many ways, its leading character. The Channel 4 seasons have an almost hermetic and hyperlocal focus. The geosocial perspective of the Netflix seasons is deliberately broader – until, that is, the very end, when we return to Summerhouse only to see it burn.[15] I'll first consider the show's *mise-en-scène* – the Summerhouse estate – and

[14] For anti-interpretative frameworks, see Campt (2023), Gumbrecht (2003), Sontag (1961).

[15] In what follows, *TBS* indicates the Channel 4 and *TB* the Netflix productions. Numbers indicate season then episode: e.g. *TBS*1.2 is *Top Boy: Summerhouse*, season one, episode two.

the ways in which its depiction plays with coherence and fragmentation, the centred and the marginalized, before sketching three 'student profiles.'

Summerhouse

Each episode of the Channel 4 seasons of *Top Boy* – hereafter, *Summerhouse* – begins with a tracking shot during which day turns to night as the lens's full-circle sweep takes in the whole of the housing estate, hemmed in by London's sprawl. Most of the action in *Summerhouse* takes place on the estate itself, or else in its 'other' places, its interstices and its margins. Characters interact in alleyways, underpasses, out back of the flats where the bins are stored, down sidestreets, around the edges of and behind the market. Summerhouse is a sink estate, off the political radar, and if these intersticial and other places orbit Summerhouse, then they are margin to a margin.

Top Boy generally, *Summerhouse* especially, has a grime sensibility. Indeed, the show draws heavily on the London grime and hip-hop scene for its cast: Kane Robinson/Kano (as Sully), Ashley Walters/Asher D. (as Dushane), Simbiatu Ajikawo/Little Simz (as Shelley), Natalie Athanasiou/Nolay (as Mandy) among them. Like so many grime videos, Summerhouse cuts, collages, and centres east London's interstices and margins. Where grime is, to use Joy White's term, 'hyper-local' – rooted, originally, in particular east-London postcodes, estates, and streets – *Summerhouse*'s aesthetic, and the Summerhouse estate itself, is at once hyper-local *and* hyperreal (Baudrillard).[16]

In the first and second seasons of the Netflix *Top Boy*, we are often beyond London, far beyond east London, farther still beyond Summerhouse. We travel to Ramsgate and Liverpool; we follow characters following the drugs supply chain to and-or from Jamaica, Spain, Morocco. But in *Summerhouse* and the final season of Netflix's *Top Boy*, we are, for the most part, in a small, hermetically sealed world. Summerhouse and its surrounds are not a portrait or representation, not a copy, of an existent place; yet the setting does illicit affective (rather than mimetic or propositional) truths.[17] Simply put: for many, Summerhouse will ring true.[18] Little Simz has said that '[e]very story that's being told in this series, I've witnessed [...] first-hand. Even the character I'm playing, [Shelley,] I know this person in real life' (Fox 2019). But while the hyperreal Summerhouse may ring true for some, nevertheless geographic connection and orientation, and therefore navigation, is hard, maybe impossible. Where *Colin in Black*

[16] See White (2020). For a classic formulation, see Baudrillard's (1994) analysis of Disneyland as American hyperreality.

[17] We might compare Summerhouse to Richard Price's Dempsy, New York (e.g. Price 1992).

[18] This is a convenient but imperfect formulation. Whether visual media could *ever* yield or contain propositional truths is an open question, not least because the analogies we might wish to draw between visual art and language are also imperfect. Addressing that open question is beyond this piece, though Goodman (1974) astutely maps the terrain.

and White enacts interpretative resistance through the didacticism typical of protest literature, *Summerhouse* resists the interpretative violence of an external 'master' gaze through geographic disorientation. The camera slices and joints, dislocates one place from the next; if you are not already an insider to this world, then mapping it – relating one place to another – is a big ask. The style of geographic presentation in the *Summerhouse* seasons – the manner of presentation of places whose lines of connection are outside the frame – is resistant. For the outsider, these disconnected locations cohere as place only by virtue of the characters who know and live in and around them, and who seamlessly navigate and move between them. (In the Netflix seasons, to give an example, the viewer-outsider's inability to map and the character-insiders' expert navigation of Summerhouse is dramatized by Bradders and Samsi, two shotters for the Summerhouse crew who glide on e-scooters as they traffic money and drugs between the streets and a stash-house, discussing the economy and property markets as they go).

Against such a geographic background that resists interpretative violence, or anecdotalization (to recall Fanon), which coheres and is yet fragmented, several characters embody the limitations of formal education and its discursive reach. Somewhere in the *Summerhouse*/*Top Boy* landscape, there is the school.

In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystemic sense, school often occupies a central position in young persons' lives. Yet in *Summerhouse* and *Top Boy*, the school is pushed to the margins. It's always the same schools we see, the local primary or secondary comps. We see them frequently, though for short bursts of time. What goes on at school, for the most part, happens off screen; and relative to Summerhouse and its network of back-alleys and side-streets (Dushane's and Sully's marketplace), the school, which in *Colin in Black and White* is indeed a central location and social hub, feels geo-socially marginal. On those few occasions when we are inside the school, however, as in *Colin in Black and White,* we are not usually in lessons, but rather those intersticial times and spaces: between lessons; before and after school; at teacher-parent conferences; in corridors and lunch halls. In one brief scene, we see the white male teacher who believes his role extends only as far as the school gates; and in several almost as brief scenes spread across just several episodes, the Black female teacher whose care for a young Black boy, Ats, reaches far beyond her job description and, therefore, beyond the school grounds (*TB*1.5). Nevertheless, time and again in *Top Boy*, we witness those who would, could, or should be students emerge just out of the reach or sightlines of the school.

Three Student Profiles: Ra'Nell, Jase, and Stef

What better marker of the ways in which institutional discourse writes itself materially onto and over the body, asserts its claim over the person, than the uniform? In

Summerhouse, teenager Ra'Nell is rarely seen out of uniform (either his school uniform or a football kit), while his friend Gem slowly sheds his uniform as he drops out of school and falls in with Vincent, a local shop-owner and drug-dealer who threatens Gem's life following a dead crop of weed and a drop gone bad (*TBS*2.1, 2.3). In *Summerhouse*'s penultimate episode Ra'Nell, simultaneously trying to protect his friend and teach him how 'to be a man,' marches Gem to Vincent's store and confronts Vincent who beats Ra'Nell to the ground using a tin of food and threatens Gem's life. Outside Vincent's store, a wounded Ra'Nell pushes Gem away and leaves. Their friendship never recovers. In this scene, which takes less than a minute, Ra'Nell is in school uniform, Gem is not (*TBS*2.3). In the final episode, Gem goes to the local football cage to tell Ra'Nell he and his father are leaving London for Ramsgate. Ra'Nell stands inside, Gem outside, the cage, a literal, physical, grid-like barrier (*TBS*2.4). To the extent that he remains within the centres of social-political-institutional discourse – within the compass of the school and such school proxies as the football team – Ra'Nell remains on the margins of Summerhouse. Ra'Nell's story is not written to a close, he just doesn't return for the Netflix seasons. We know, though, that he never joins the Summerhill gang. The implication is that Ra'Nell 'gets out,' which is to say he disappears from the story.

Then there is Jase, for whom school, if he ever went, is a period already far behind him when, in *Summerhouse* (Season 2), he meets Sully. Of all the *Summerhouse*/*Top Boy* characters, Jase is as close as it is possible to get to being entirely outside of institutional discourse, to being sociopolitically invisible. To be minoritized and-or marginalized, such that certain individuals, groups and communities are disenfranchised in a big-P-political sense (economically, politically, legally, juridically), is, as George Yancy (2017) has shown, to be held in the gaze of a dominant discourse that stratifies and hierarchizes: to be subject to systemic marginalization you still have to be 'in' the system. Jase's condition is one of radical abjection more than marginalization. In a cruelly instrumental, sociopolitical sense, he is useless and so invisible; sociopolitically, he does not count because he is not counted: he offers nothing to the sociopolitical system, no kind of use-value or human resource on which the system can feed. To be excluded or marginalized, Jase would first have to be seen. When he appears, Jase knows the Summerhouse interstices better than anyone, yet no one is looking for him until he starts ripping off the Summerhouse crew, snatching 'the food' straight from their hands and vanishing (*TBS*2.2). Sully, the first and only person to see – to recognize – Jase, comes to occupy a borderline position between parent, friend, and teacher-mentor.

Earlier, I suggested that for Kaepernick, *bildung* as process (a process implying movement) only happens at moments of disruption, when we are brought up short and

forced to self-consciousness. But notice that *Colin in Black and White*'s narrative logic presupposes that *bildung* as process has already taken, and continues still to take, place precisely because it is autobiographical: Kaepernick gets to tell his story retrospectively and prospectively, is able to reflect on and bear witness to his lifestory. *Bildung* presupposes narrativity, the possibility of telling a story of a life well (and increasingly better) lived. This is denied Jase until the very end.

Shortly before he's killed in a house fire – 'collateral damage' in a racist, anti-immigrant attack (*TB*1.4) – Jase and Sully go to Ramsgate, where they reconnect with Gem to work a onetime hustle beyond the borders of Summerhouse. In several scenes, we see Sully and Jase at the beach. Sully has never seen open water before (*TB*1.3). Whenever they stand looking out to the horizon, they reflect on and discuss life – what they have and have not done, would and would not like to do. No accident that these moments of shared confessional introspection take place against the polysemous backdrop of the ocean, its 'vague and oppressive wonder,' as Conrad (1899) put it: beauty and sublimity in equal measure; the possibility of an expanded horizon, the impossibility of ever reaching it; the promise of free movement, of journeying, and the threat of being lost to the sea's vastness. Given that *Top Boy* is also about trying to beat capitalism at its own game, it's worth noting, too, that while the sea may symbolize freedom of spirit, it may, as a means of travel and trade, also represent the colonialist-capitalist ideal of market freedom (something also seen and felt in Conrad).

During one such moment, Jase tells Sully that his one wish, other than possessing superpowers, is to see Arsenal play (*TB*1.3). Sully laughs, shakes his head, cannot believe Jase's imagination reaches only so far, that this is his horizon. He smiles, shrugs: 'A'ight, it's done.' Jase is briefly wide-eyed in disbelief: 'No.' Sully assures him; Jase laughs and looks away, perhaps with his first-ever vision of his future. Sully fixes his gaze on his friend-cum-ward-cum-pupil. Sully's momentary look of happiness turns to sadness; he stares at Jase, says nothing for close to ten seconds. An episode later, Sully stands back and looks on, encouraging, cajoling, and gently mocking Jase who plays in the shallows catching crabs (*TB*1.4).

In such moments, where looking is depicted, the mentor-teacher's gaze is neither violent nor resistant, but is rather a (seemingly) small act of love in which one's own life is enriched by one's obligations to the other one beholds. Sully and Jase's relationship enacts a Levinasian ethics, weird-spun and grime-accented:[19] each is given moral shape and purpose by virtue of their relationship with and obligation to the other. Sully and Jase exist far beyond, or outside, the discursive reach and gaze of the school and formal

[19] On Levinasian ethics in educational philosophy, see Todd (2003).

education; yet it's a teacher-student or, better given their closeness, mentor-mentee relationship that emerges *between* them. The fact that their power dynamic positions Sully as the teacher-mentor doesn't mean that Jase is without agency; indeed, it's only thanks to Jase that Sully learns, if briefly, to become a teacher-mentor. Each becomes himself because he recognizes he is recognized by a significant other. This is where gaze can be an enabling, and not only a constraining, concept and force. With Sully and Jase, the gaze is reciprocal recognition. It opens a moral space for personhood: he-who-would-be-pupil and he-who-would-be-teacher, each given to himself by and in the eyes of the other. What takes a couple-hundred words to spell out (as here) is articulated on screen in moments – those moments in which the teacher and pupil, mentor and mentee, are depicted looking.

Finally, we turn to the Tovell brothers, Stef, Aaron, and Jamie (*TB*1 onwards). Stef and Aaron are, respectively, secondary-school and university students, Jamie a gangster who turned to the road after their parents' deaths made him his brothers' legal guardian, but who does not want that life for his brothers. Jamie regularly insists on the importance of education, aiming especially to impress this upon Stef. Aaron needs no lectures: whenever he appears, he's nearly always studying; he's on track for a first-class degree and has no desire for the road ('he ain't like us man, fam,' says Jamie to his lieutenant Kit, in front of Aaron. 'Different breed, so I'm fuckin' proud of him'; he hugs Aaron (*TB*2.1)). Stef is presented as less self-assured. He looks up to Jamie as to no one else, but despite Jamie's influence, Stef begins to drift from school after the death of his friend, Ats. He develops a new friendship with Tia, who lives between the cracks of the education and care systems. At the end of Netflix season two, Sully murders Jamie in front of Stef at the Tovells' home. In the narrative gap between Seasons 2 and 3, Aaron finishes university, moves away, and we don't see him again. Perhaps, like Ra'Nell, he 'gets out' but Stef is left behind, living in a group home for young adults. In the first episode of Netflix season three, Stef is seen back in uniform and heading to school. Climbing the school steps, Stef sees Sully, who stands outside the school's gates as he drops his daughter off. Stef turns back and forces his way against the tide of arriving students. He doesn't return to school.

Like Ra'Nell in the *Summerhouse* episodes, Stef in the first Netflix season is seldom out of uniform. Once again, the visible mark of the education system and its reach; reminders of schooling *taking* place, within and beyond the school site. In the second Netflix season, as Stef and Tia become close, Stef is seen in uniform minus his tie, and eventually out of uniform altogether (*TB*2.2, 2.8). After Stef turns back on the school steps, he sheds the uniform and he and school are done. There's no side-story of the school's attempt to 'win' Stef back or to 'save' him. Like Jamie, Stef is now outside

of educational discourse, beyond its field of vision, and the school site is once again marginal to *Top Boy*'s landscape.

But this does not mean that learning ends, nor that Stef no longer feels the need for care, community, mentorship. Stef's situation is tragic, he grieves for his parents and his brothers. The paradoxical structure of grief is that it is the presence of absence – we feel the absence of the ones we grieve. But Stef's condition is never as abject as Jase's, at least to the extent that Stef is never unseen. After walking away from school, Stef falls in with some of Jamie's crew. He's befriended by Sy, who loved Jamie as a brother, quickly develops a bond with Stef, and comes to occupy a social and emotional space that, in a faint echo of Sully and Jase's relationship, is somewhere between friend, brother, teacher. The dynamics of their relationship is first established when Sy notices Stef at the gym; the scene dwells on Sy taking Stef through the technicalities of the bench press (*TB*3.2). In a later episode, Sy teaches Stef how to shoot (*TB*3.4). Though these lessons are geared towards acts of masculinist violence, their depiction is oddly intimate and tender – both weightlifting and shooting require teacher and student to be physically close, perhaps even to touch. Briefly, partially, temporarily, physical and emotional proximity dilute the thickness of Stef's grief.

Though Stef's is a more substantive story than Jase's, inasmuch as Stef's gets more screen-time, his and Sy's relationship is less developed than Jase and Sully's; less formative, too. Sully is haunted by Jase's death; it is the event that sets the tone and course for Sully's trajectory, it is his horizon. (When, finally, Stef confronts Sully, stares at him down the barrel of a gun and asks him 'How does it feel?', Sully replies, simply: 'To be honest, Stefan, feeling left me a long time ago' (*TB*3.6)). Though everything points towards it being genuine, Sy and Stef's friendship-cum-mentorship is never the centre of moral gravity that Jase and Sully's is, never *the* relationship that gives shape and meaning, each person to the other. Anyone who falls into a teacher-carer-mentor role to Stef will only ever be a partial and poor substitute for Jamie. Sully, by contrast, takes up a role for and to Jase that Jase has never known before. Sy and Stef never have the horizon-moments shared by Sully and Jase. Sy cares for Stef, but his perspective is near-sighted: he can show Stef how to get by on the road as an end in itself. In this sense, he can offer to *school* Stef – to inculcate him into a political-legal shadow system, which he tries to do in honour of Jamie, the irony being that this is precisely what Jamie didn't want for Stef. Were he around to witness Sy's schooling Stef, Jamie would almost certainly have punished Sy.[20] Where Sy can offer to school Stef

[20] With thanks, as so often, to Lewis Richmond for this observation, and for a comment that brought about this piece's final sentence.

in a narrow sense, Sully strives to *educate* Jase – to expand his horizon, to lead him out (as per the etymology of *educate* (OE, n.d.)).

Postscript

Colin in Black and White dramatizes the violence of a sociopolitical system of which the school is both a literal part and symbolic shorthand ('The System' in microcosm). Though the school fixes Colin in its gaze and, in doing so, refuses to see him, the show's complex narrative logic enacts resistance and refusal: Colin-then and Kaepernick-now both look back, refusing to be unseen. *Top Boy* also enacts a politics of refusal, but one that positions its actors as radically outside, beyond the system. Rather than staging the sociopolitical violence of a mass education system that attempts to contain, inculcate, incarcerate (spiritually), *Top Boy* dramatizes the limitations and failures of school and schooling's reach. It stages, too, the alternative educational relationships – the teacher-student or mentor-mentee dynamics – that in the absence of school and in a kind of discursive blind-spot, emerge as radically, though unconventionally, ethical. What these shows have in common and what separates them comes down, finally, to a prepositional difference, prepositions being, of course, markers of spatiotemporal relation: held in schooling's gaze, Colin is excluded *by* the system *in* which he is held, while the likes of Stef and Jase are excluded *from* it altogether.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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