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 **Małgorzata Myk**

University of Lodz

 **Mark Tardi**

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Introduction

Conceptualizing “Literary and Visual Extremities” in the fall of 2022, we were aiming for a broad range of engagements with the notion of extremity that our call for papers originally framed chiefly in literary and philosophical terms. In particular, we were inviting literary scholars to submit essays responding to Catherine Malabou’s urgent call for a “reorientation of literature” along the lines of her sense of plasticity as the newly emergent neurobiological scheme of thought contextualized in neurobiological research.¹ For Malabou, such a necessary reorientation would entail a paradigm shift away from the one she found in Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist thinking about literature toward her own radical proposition to reinvestigate it in materialist terms as an unthinkable post-traumatic space that writing must confront in new ways. Malabou’s phrase “the dusk of writing” eloquently marked that shift, signaling the twilight of the textual domain and that contemporary writing began to emerge as a practice *in extremis*. The sense of extremity underlying Malabou’s philosophical proposition must be approached as something more than just a pretext for a critique of present-day literary production oblivious to its own material implications. For the philosopher, writing from a post-traumatic space is a necessary point of departure for redrawing well-trodden literary pathways and grasping the psychopolitical pressures of present-day experience, defined by such traumatizing, extreme aspects of contemporary reality as colonialism, racism, terrorism, fascism, wars, capitalism, climate catastrophe, or the current AI crisis.

¹ See Malabou (81).

One remarkable example of such a renegotiation of extremity that served as a cue in our work on this issue has been the special feature “Extreme Texts,” published in 2020 in *Jacket2* magazine, curated by the Tamil American conceptual poet, scholar and editor Divya Victor. In her preface to “Extreme Texts,” Victor emphasized the shifting meaning of the word “extreme,” visible in the rhetoric accompanying its use in the public domain, including the word’s proximity to “extremism,” in Trump’s America at that time: “I observed that ‘extreme’ has come to mean a way of delimiting the lives of certain people and not others under oligarchic states.” Curating the “Extreme Texts” feature shortly after returning to the US from Singapore, where she had been living for several years as an academic on a work visa and where she gave birth to her daughter, Victor found herself back in America “at a moment when it seemed that a majority of Americans had acquiesced to live, normally, under extreme conditions, with denuded civil rights, attenuated freedoms of press, increasing inequality of wages, and diminishing access to medical care, and under misogynist, transphobic, and supremacist policies. . . . [and] marked by fury over Trump’s ‘Muslim ban.’” Only a few years later, her acclaimed book *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021) brought a powerful poetic reckoning with the extremity of post-9/11 reality and its impact on the lives of America’s South Asian citizens that in Victor’s work continues to be enacted as writing in extremis, continuously poised at the edge, or curb, both figuratively and through investigation of the intersection of psychogeography and geopolitics.

Struck by Victor’s incisive argument, the insights offered in the essays included in her “Extreme Texts” feature, and having had our own experiences with an “unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain [which tends] to produce disorientation, even estrangement, by radically altering geometries of attention” (Retallack 1), we were prompted to offer a follow-up to the discussion about extremity. The aim was to rethink extremity during an online international conference devoted to this highly resonant concept. The event was hosted by the Department of North American Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz in June 2021 during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, and has subsequently resulted in “Literary and Visual Extremities,” the collection of articles presented to readers now—in November 2023. It is worth adding that our editorial process was taking place when the pandemic was still unfolding and the issue started to materialize when Poland was facing the reality of the sharp escalation of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine. Over this entire turbulent period, we have had many opportunities to reflect on the abruptly shifting shapes of extremity as a defining quality of contemporary times that continues unabated, yet demands urgent

attention and constant reconsideration. When the reader receives this issue, will the war in Ukraine still be going on? Will media attention still be preoccupied with the extremity of the rising impact and expansion of AI technologies? Will the latter even be considered an extremity at the end of 2023? Today, the unbridgeable yet overlapping realities of the ongoing war and unbridled development of new technologies constitute an ominous arc of extreme circumstances, whose future course and transformation cannot be predicted or controlled any more. Perhaps every reflection devoted to the concept of extremity cannot have a very long life span, yet for this very reason the term invites a more sustained engagement that keeps us alert to what unfolds for us as being the most striking, unsettling, destructive, oppressive or enervating.

The essays that follow offer a varied platform for thinking about the notion of extremity in contemporary writing and other artistic practices, reclaiming the term's complexity and expanding its critical potential beyond the word's reductively negative connotations. Our contributors zero in on textual and art practices that have foregrounded the changing meaning of extremity, pointing to the need for raising the stakes of the debate about extreme phenomena by inviting more radical approaches. As Mieke Bal insisted during her keynote lecture at the 2017 Annual American Comparative Literature Association Conference in Utrecht, the words "radical" and "radicalization" must be saved from the discursive grip of mass media and politics in order to make these two terms usable again for art and literature. Along similar lines, in her keynote lecture presented during the 2022 conference, titled "Poetry's Refusal to Be Obituary: Witnessing Mass Death Events in 21st-century American Poetry," discussing Douglas Kearney's book *Sho* (Wave Books, 2021), Victor argued that extremity has been largely overtaken and misappropriated by the overarching force of the media spectacle. These scholars' work urges us to pay closer attention to the concept's current uses and misuses as well as its ideological entanglements. Today, the notion of extremity should be critically parsed and reclaimed to serve the purpose of diagnosing the continuing escalation of present-day social and political problems.

Among the essays included in "Literary and Visual Extremities," five sections cohered, which revealed a preoccupation with environments and phenomena variously impacted or transfigured by conditions or states of extremity. Respectively, the authors who contributed to these sections have addressed texts or images engaging with extreme aspects of such elements of the current material and conceptual landscape as borders, ecologies, limits, forms, and memory. To begin, extreme borders are mapped out in Dorota Golańska and Małgorzata Myk's texts, where artistic and literary practices emerge as effective means of interrogating the political as well as personal

repercussions of the post-9/11 war on terror in the US. Golańska's essay titled "Negotiating Interior Frontiers: Lara Haddad's *A Question of History* (2015–16)" is a thorough analysis of contemporary US-based Syrian artist Lara Haddad's series of photographs *A Question of History* (2015–16), which serves as a critical practice effectively destabilizing and renegotiating the figuration of "interior borders"—a term derived from the work of Ann Stoler via Étienne Balibar's thought—and which becomes useful for (re)defining the extremity of experience of Muslims whose lives have been criminalized despite their refugee status. Approaching Haddad's intimate, minimalist aesthetics through the lens of Malabou's sense of destructive plasticity, Golańska reads the artist's work as a complex critique of US-based Muslims' disorienting experience of "the always-shifting self-identifications, (non)belongings, implications, and victimizations" (21). Małgorzata Myk's essay "Duration of the Archive: Soundscapes of Extreme Witnessing in Divya Victor's *Curb*" focuses on Victor's 2021 poetry collection *Curb*, where everyday shared spaces and landmarks such as sidewalks and curbs are figured as extreme borders that delimit the lives of the South-Asian diaspora in the post-9/11 US. Myk examines the ways in which the poet's reconstruction of the archive of anti-South Asian violence is further amplified and extended through her attention to soundscapes that draw out unheard durations from the archival material, augmenting it by amplifying the lyric mode that Victor's radical conceptual poetics of witness reconfigures to account for the extremity of her South Asian kith's oppression.

The subsequent "Extreme Ecologies" section focuses on conceptual developments in poetic language and its current rearticulations offered in response to the extremity and imminence of the climate catastrophe. Paulina Ambroży's essay "The Posthuman Body as an EcoGothic Wasteland in Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* and Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic*" is a wide-angle, comprehensive examination of the contemporary North American posthuman lyric form and its environmentally-oriented metaphors, which Ambroży additionally situates against the backdrop of the eco-Gothic mode, adopting a dual perspective that helps her flesh out the limits of the human and identify a beyond for non-human agency. In her insightful reading, the scholar demonstrates how Cobb and Dickinson's poetic discourses of toxicity in their contemporary wasteland poems successfully renegotiate the melancholia underlying T. S. Eliot's influential modernist paradigm of wasteland poetics. In Gi 'Taek Ryoo's "Radical Ecopoetics: The Apocalyptic Vision of Jorie Graham's *Sea Change*," the author convincingly analyzes the implications of rereading Graham's 2008 ecologically-inflected poetry collection *Sea Change* with a focus on the "affective dimension of experimental forms of language" which, as he argues, offers an enactment of "experiential encounter with the environmental crisis" rather than it

being another representation or deconstruction (94). According to Ryoo, Graham's poetry mobilizes and radically transforms our sensorium to produce new modes of engagement with the material world. In Ryoo's reading of Graham's poetry, her poetics generate sites of interliving with non-human others through staging the encounters that enable a reckoning with our complicity in the extremity of environmental destruction. The essay "Clark Coolidge's *The Land of All Time: An Affectively Restless Eco-poem*," co-authored by Elina Siltanen and João Paulo Guimarães, is a timely reminder not to let despair prevail as the only response to the ecological crisis. The authors' robust reading of Clark Coolidge's improvisatory, disjunctive poetry of indeterminacy shows how this poet's writing of "vibrancy, speed, and flow" engages in harnessing and complicating the affective landscape of the poem through a dynamic method of "extreme wordiness" in order to move beyond environmental despondency (109). Adopting the lenses of affect theory and ecocriticism, Siltanen and Guimarães argue that Coolidge's work operates at the intersection of nature and culture, making a "complex restless affect" fundamental for establishing radical forms of awareness and attention in poetic writing (120).

Attention to the presence and persistence of limits as well as the imperative to destabilize and unsettle them informs the "Limits" section of this issue, featuring the contributions of Hal Coase and Jacek Partyka. Coase's essay "Delimit / De-limit: Barbara Guest at Kandinsky's Window" offers a *tour de force* reading of Guest's poem "The View from Kandinsky's Window" from her 1989 collection *Fair Realism* alongside Kandinsky's own theories of form and abstraction. Coase sees Guest's crucial contribution to "a renewal of the historic avant-garde" aesthetics as a practice enacted through the poem's reappraisal of the value of Kandinsky's artistic practice, criticized for its failure to conform to rigid boundaries of stylistic purity (139). Coase identifies in Guest's poetics an insistence on interrogating and undoing the fixity of limits underlying the formalist debates of her time as well as the weak modernist gesture of reorienting the avant-garde theory as a "set of decentered, provisional, and heterogenous practices" potentially constructive of new feminist theorizations of the avant-garde (127). Jacek Partyka's essay "'What I lack is myself': The Fluid Text and the Dialogic Subjectivity in Susan Howe's *Debths*" sees the limit as directly related to the figures of transgression and extremity and explores its contradictory potential in the avant-garde poetics of Susan Howe, simultaneously gesturing to the writing of Victor, Joyce, Borges, Dworkin, Bakhtin, and others to trace its unnerving presence. Scrutinizing the limit's groundwork in Howe's poetry as the dynamics repeatedly echoed in a tripartite structure of "obligation," "trespass," and "demise," Partyka sets it in motion to reflect on the ways

in which Howe's writing tries to unsettle the poet's subjectivity as always appropriative, complicit, and extreme. Partyka's sense of the limit emerges here as irreducibly porous, relational and dialogic.

Opening the "Extreme Forms" section, the essay of Tomasz Sawczuk "Plasticity and the Poetics of Inside-Out Inversion in Emmett Williams and Roman Stańczak" is a close engagement with Catherine Malabou's philosophy of plasticity and the possibility of its direct application in renegotiating the material boundaries between the contemporary horizons of textuality, visuality, and politics. Sawczuk's analyses of Emmett Williams's concrete poetry and Polish artist Roman Stańczak's sculptures conceptualized as inverted everyday objects probe deeply into Malabou's argument on the twilight of writing and her long-standing preoccupation with fundamental plasticity of form. As Sawczuk shows, Williams and Stańczak both lend themselves to plastic reading and redraw the lines of their disciplinary fields. They situate their artistic practices outside the textual regime of representation and beyond the hold of aesthetics and operate in the material, metamorphic domain of plastic forms without sacrificing the political dimension of their work. Extremities of the digital form are investigated throughout Cameron Barrows's essay "HTML Texts and the Dawn of Asemic Digital Literature: Exploring Dennis Cooper's Ideas," where Cooper's HTML novels and short stories, figured with GIFs rather than glyphs, become "found fragments or artefacts of digital life" that call for a new digital hermeneutics (180). Emphasizing HTML literature's relation to twentieth century avant-garde and asemic traditions and gesturing toward Malabou's remarks on the relationship between topography and writing in the rapidly changing spaces of the digital realm, Barrows argues that Cooper's HTML texts and his related theories expand our notion of what constitutes the digital age today as well as modify its radical temporality.

Our fifth and final section, devoted to "Memory in Extremis," features Paola Trimarco's essay "The Extremities of Literature: Traumatic Memory in Two Novels by Kazuo Ishiguro" and Anna Bendrat's essay "'How Do You Know Who You Are?': *Marjorie Prime* on Envisioning Humanity Through the Faculty of AI-Powered Memory as Reconstructive Tissue." Focusing on the theme of traumatic memory in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000), Trimarco proposes to view these two narratives through the neurobiological lens of Malabou's sense of *neuroliterature*. The author suggests that the neurobiological perspective on wounds caused by trauma proves more generative than the more common psychological approaches to Ishiguro's writing. In particular, Trimarco uses Malabou's perspective to address the motif of traumatic memories of war and loss found in both novels, arguing that neurobiology enables

a plastic reading of these texts and offers deeper insights into the material dimension of traumatic experiences. Anna Bendrat's timely contribution addresses Jordan Harrison's play *Marjorie Prime*, which predates present-day extreme concerns regarding the expansion and further advancement of AI technologies. In Bendrat's analysis, Harrison emerges as a playwright who shows the potential ethical consequences of the impact of AI in the case of technology-assisted memory reactivation in dementia patients by weighing their benefits and problems. The author's reflections bring into focus the play's portrayal of the complex nature of memory in terms of "the plastic, and thus reconstructive, character of this foundational human faculty" and primarily in relation to new technologies and their impact on our individual lives as well as relationships (210).

Taken together, the essays comprising "Literary and Visual Extremities" offer a dynamic lens on Catherine Malabou's "reorientation of literature" and visual art, micro- and macroscopic inspections of the myriad forms of extremity—via borders, ecologies, limits, forms, and memory—that pervade the everyday, redefining its meaning and expanding its critical potential beyond purely negative connotations. In his powerful 1965 book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where Thomas Merton was thinking through the most extreme questions of his time—the threat of nuclear annihilation, the immorality of the Vietnam War, the fight for civil rights, and the expansion of imagined American ideals—he wrote: "What is the conventionally accepted American myth? Is this myth still alive, or has it expired and become an evasion? Is the present crisis—in race relations, delinquency, etc., a judgment of our public daydream?" (34). Six decades later, Merton's questions are not only relevant but have proliferated, extending far beyond America's borders and having encompassed new ecologies and taxonomies between the human and non-human. The kind of ethical urgency Merton endorsed has been taken up by Divya Victor and numerous others, and continues into the essays in this volume. As we navigate our increasingly unpredictable future, marked by conflicts and war, staggering technological advancements and environmental crises, the essays collected here serve as a testament to the ongoing need for critical engagement with extremity, highlighting the vital role it plays in understanding and responding to the challenges of our time.

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EXTREME BORDERS

 **Dorota Golańska**

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Negotiating Interior Frontiers: Lara Haddad's *A Question of History* (2015–16)

ABSTRACT

Bringing together insights originating in law studies and art analysis, this article approaches the work of the US-based Syrian artist Lara Haddad through the figuration of “interior frontiers,” exposing how both “interior bonds” and “internal borders” tended to shape legal regulations introduced in the US in the aftermath of 9/11 for the purpose of conducting “the global war on terror.” Referring to the concept of “plasticity,” the article examines the intimate (dis)identifications experienced by the artist in the context of the politically saturated cultural discourses on violence which emerged from the post-9/11 spatialities of (inter)national law. The article argues that politically engaged art offers a means to affectively connect with the personal ways of coping with the persistent visceral presence of structural violence, shedding light on how political protocols and cultural representations impinge upon the individual experiences of many Muslims residing inside and outside the US territory. Opening established meanings to new interpretations, such art contributes to the process of revising dominant oppressive significations, creating room for critical contestation and increased transcultural understanding.

Keywords: Syrian refugees in the US, interior frontiers, torture, plasticity, artistic self-portraits, (dis)identification, Lara Haddad.

INTRODUCTION

Situated at the intersection of law and art studies, this article examines the work of Lara Haddad, an artist who—due to the eruption of war in Syria, her country of origin—relocated to the US in 2012.¹ My reading of the selected prints from her project *A Question of History* (2015–16)² draws on the figuration of “interior frontiers” (Balibar, *La crainte des masses*; *Masses, Classes, Ideas*; Stoler), indicating how both “interior bonds” and “internal borders” sit at the roots of several legal regulations introduced in the context of the “global war on terror”; it also employs the concept of “plasticity” (Malabou, *The New Wounded*) to reveal how “interior frontiers” are intimately negotiated and engaged with by the artist.

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The article argues that politically informed art such as Haddad’s can effectively convey the complex extremities constituting the everyday experiences of many Muslims (residing inside and outside the US territory), and emerged in the post-9/11 context from the complicated spatialities of (inter)national law. Produced shortly before the official nomination of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate, yet within the political mood of xenophobic and nationalist discourses that eventually brought him into office, Haddad’s work helps us to engage with an expanded understanding of the term “extreme” as applied to the intimate, ambivalent experience of (non)belonging in a country which criminalizes Muslim refugees, yet—as in Haddad’s particular case—allows for survival and temporary stabilization, away from the ongoing ravages of war. In my view, in such a situation, artistic practice becomes for Haddad a space of negotiating the extremities of living under forms of duress that tend to go unregistered, while providing her with a means of coping with the persistent visceral presence of structural violence and ongoing exclusion. This kind of art, the article maintains, can create spaces for increased understanding and relatedness, offering insight into how (inter)national politics impinge upon personal experiences and intimate (dis)identifications, while simultaneously opening up the well-established meanings to critical interrogation.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Lara Haddad for allowing me to develop my own reading and interpretation of her artwork presented in this text. I also thank her for giving her permission to include the pieces from her project *A Question of History* in this article.

² The project includes 7 prints on aluminum (5 of which are self-portraits), 2 prints on fleece blankets, and a pile of travel documents.

CONTEXT

On 27 January 2017, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order No. 138802017: Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, known as the “Muslim ban,” suspending the entry of foreign nationals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Syria for a period of 90 days as well as suspending the United States’ refugee admissions programme for a period of 120 days. The Order also cut refugee admission numbers in half, and indefinitely suspended the admission of Syrian refugees (cf. Wadhia 1484). According to Trump, the idea behind the ban was to keep out “radical Islamic terrorists” (cf. Shear and Cooper), assuming that the nationals of Syria entering the US as refugees would remain a threat to the security of the nation. As a result of massive criticism by lawyers, NGOs, and journalists (cf. Ayoub and Beydoun), indicating that the order constituted a violation of a clause in the US Constitution prohibiting the favouring of one religion over another (Estrada et al. 3446), the order was suspended on 3 February 2017, while its reinstatement was rejected two days later by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco (Estrada et al. 3446).

The Order was quickly replaced with another one, signed on 6 March 2017, which dropped the indefinite ban on entrants from Syria, rescinded the ban on Iraqis, and spelled out several exceptions, including lawful permanent residents, those paroled or admitted into the US, those admitted to travel, dual nationals of a country travelling on a diplomatic visa, and those granted refugee-related relief (Wadhia 1486). Again, as a result of challenges it received in federal courts, on 24 September 2017, the Order was replaced with a presidential proclamation introducing a third version of the ban, indefinitely blocking the entry of certain individuals from Iran, Libya, Chad, North Korea, Syria, Somalia, Venezuela, and Yemen. Even though two lower court rulings partially blocked the ban, the Supreme Court decided to uphold it, and it went into effect on 26 June 2018 (Estrada et al. 3446). Thus, after a series of tweaks, the “Muslim ban” was eventually implemented, complicating the situation of residents of and visitors to the US coming from the countries listed in the regulation.³ The introduction of the “Muslim ban” was accompanied with a regular slashing of the refugee admissions cap—“from [an] Obama-era high of 110,000 refugees for [the] fiscal year 2017 to a low of only 18,000 refugees for [the] fiscal year 2019” (Hodson 268)—which testified to the unprecedented occurrence of the anti-Muslim, anti-refugee nexus on the US national stage (Hodson 269), resulting in the criminalization of both newly arriving refugees and those who had already been admitted to the US.

³ The “Muslim Ban” was officially revoked on 20 January 2021 by President Joe Biden Jr. For details, see Proclamation on Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to The United States.

The above-described events must be read in a broader sociopolitical and legal context. One dimension of this is the so-called “Islamophobia industry,” which has a long history in the US, dating back to such crises as “the OPEC oil embargo (1973–1974), the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–1981), and the Rushdie Affair (1988–1989)” (Hodson 268; see also Kumar; Beydoun). Islamophobic rhetoric intensified in the US after the 9/11 attacks, contributing to a surge in the demonization of Muslims in the US (cf. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Puar and Rai). As Margaret Hodson explains, there are two crucial players in the Islamophobia industry in the US—ACT for America and the Center for Security Policy—whose activities add to the spreading of the anti-refugee sentiment in the nation. Operating both at the grassroots level and by lobbying state legislatures and Congress, since 2010 the two organizations have managed to persuade 14 states to enact anti-Sharia legislation while 201 anti-Sharia law bills have been introduced across 43 states, even though no attempts had ever been made in the US at passing any Sharia-based regulations (Hodson 270). Hodson claims that “[i]n justifying the Muslim ban, Trump follow[ed] the lead of Act for America and CSP in projecting standard Islamophobic fears of terrorism and civilization jihad onto the Muslim refugees specifically and U.S. Refugee Admission Program more generally” (274). All of this testifies to the current scale of Islamophobia in the US and the visible attempt at its institutionalization.

Another dimension of the context in which the anti-Muslim regulations have been implemented relates to a change in the national and religious profile of the refugees arriving to the US. Since the early 2000s, the US has started accepting a larger number of refugees from predominantly Muslim countries, partly owing to the sustained counterinsurgency wars in which the country has been involved. The war in Syria substantially added to this phenomenon. Thus, the presidential policy of slashing the refugee admission cap clearly coincided with the growing number of refugees from the Middle East region, and especially Syria, fleeing the atrocities of war and political violence. This produced a situation in which—through manipulative operations of the discourse on securitization (cf. Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde; Wæver; Vuori; Kumar; Neal)—already vulnerable groups were exposed to further discrimination and violence, experiencing exclusion related to their religious or ethnic identity as well as to their national origins.

INTERIOR FRONTIERS

Haddad’s self-portraits included in the project *A Question of History* evoke representations already widely circulated in popular media discourses and associated with the contested “global war on terror” proclaimed by the

George W. Bush administration in the direct aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Instead of simply repeating the well-recognizable meanings, however, these artistic representations function simultaneously within several symbolic registers, activating broad semantic maps and producing layered understandings. They refer the spectator to the complex debates that erupted in the post-9/11 climate—tackling political torture, Islamophobia, sustained counterinsurgency wars, and anti-Muslim regulations—yet without offering any straightforward interpretations.

In my view, Haddad's project succeeds in conveying the complexity of the intimate process of plastic, superfluous, and never completely accomplished (dis)identifications, being a part of the experience of many dislocated people, who are forced to negotiate—often excruciatingly—their sense of belonging in new places and new contexts. The concept of “interior frontiers” (Balibar, *La crainte des masses; Masses, Classes, Ideas*; Stoler)⁴ serves as an effective lens to capture the multilevel symbolic operations of Haddad's artwork as well as its functioning within the changing sociopolitical and legal circumstances. As Ann L. Stoler explains, “interior frontiers” do not refer solely to inside and outside of the nation; rather, rooted in the idea of cultural affinity (or “interior bonds”), they “*mark distinctions among the good citizen, the sub-citizen, and the non-citizen, those with a place vs. those who are superfluous and have no place, citizen vs. subject, refugee, migrant*” (xvii; italics in the original). Interior frontiers remain fragile sites of struggle, often operating as divisions which can be “silently and violently enforced” (xvii). As Stoler—following Étienne Balibar—underlines, they “enclose, imprison, and put in touch” (7; see also Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas* 63), becoming internal to both the person and polity; this quality testifies to the concept's diagnostic capacities and its opening to political effects (Stoler 8).

A critical employment of the figuration of “interior frontiers” to approach Haddad's artistic work enables a broadened understanding of the extremities of the always-shifting self-identifications, (non)belongings, implications, and victimizations as experienced by many Muslim people in the post-9/11 US, a context significantly shaped by the exclusionary political discourses as well as increasingly restrictive and manipulatively enforced legal protocols. As Stoler explains: “With intangible sensibilities and immeasurable measure, interior frontiers are affective zones as well, where feeling (experienced as fear, humiliation, threat, longing, or shame) is indexical of political positioning in the making” (22). As my analysis demonstrates, Haddad's work well exemplifies the complex nature not only of how interior frontiers are delineated and imposed, but also of how they are experienced and felt.

⁴ The concept of “interior frontiers,” reanimated by Étienne Balibar in the 1990s, was originally conceived by Johan Gottlieb Fichte in the early nineteenth century.

TORTURE

Haddad's *Reenactment—Part 1* (Fig. 1), one of the prints in *A Question of History*, displays the figure of the artist dressed in a long, white robe, standing on a cardboard box, barefoot, with her hands out to both sides, and with a sombre, incredulous look directed at the camera. Another picture, *Reenactment—Part 2* (Fig. 2), portrays the standing artist dressed in a jumper and jeans and wearing a pair of moccasins. In her right hand she is holding a leash, unattached to any object; her contemplative look remains fixed on the other end of this unusual prop.

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Fig. 1. Lara Haddad, *Reenactment—Part 1*, 2015–16. Transfer print on aluminium, 24" x 19.2". Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Lara Haddad, *Reenactment—Part 2*, 2015–16. Transfer print on aluminium, 24” x 19.2”. Courtesy of the artist.

Although seemingly innocent in form and composition, and modest, even minimalist, as far as the artistic means necessary for their production are concerned, in the post-9/11 imaginary landscape, these visual representations of a young Muslim woman, newly arrived in the US, immediately lose their innocuous tint. The two self-portraits clearly position themselves within the well-recognizable panorama of images associated with the culture of torture, systematic surveillance, and ruthless persecution of those considered as terror suspects and deprived of their basic rights. Such a culture both emerged from and

itself co-constituted a varied constellation of antiterrorist practices undertaken, both lawfully and unlawfully, in different parts of the world against various state and non-state actors. Consolidated in the US in the aftermath of the devastating 9/11 attacks on the WTC and Pentagon, it has subsequently gained significant visibility across popular media (Adams; Athey), stimulating political debates about the ethical dimension of the means employed as part of the state-sponsored violent policies mobilized against those who figured as a potential threat to the security of the American nation. Given this political and cultural context, Haddad's self-portraits are reminiscent of the disturbing pictures of the brutally abused prisoners, considered to be terror suspects, humiliated by US guards in extraterritorial military bases and detention centres, such as Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Bagram and Kandahar in Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.⁵ The afterlife of these terrifying images in literature, film, art, and activism testifies to the complex entanglement of political discourses and cultural representations in the post-9/11 context (cf. Adams; see also Eroukhmanoff).

But the cultural iconosphere related to the politics of torture and violence in the aftermath of 9/11 is not limited to the images of abused terror suspects undergoing coercive interrogations in US detention centres. It remains equally pervaded with much more diversified representations of violence and atrocity, including those performed by the representatives of the groups against which the US-led counterinsurgency wars have been waged. *Execution* (Fig. 3), another print in Haddad's series, portrays the artist wearing a black t-shirt and—in a theatrical, staged gesture, with her left hand stretched to the front—carrying half of a pineapple, held up high to the camera, with an aim to clearly display the object to the viewer. Her face still and emotionless, the woman is looking directly into the object-glass, capturing and overwhelming the spectator with her focused, dispassionate gaze. Simple in form, even inconspicuous, the composition of the picture again re-enacts scenes associated with the post-9/11 culture of violence, this time, however, drawing attention to the ferocities perpetrated by the jihadist extremists.

The terrifying recordings of beheadings—standing for what Lisa J. Campbell calls “the modern day version of the spiked head” (605) as well as embodying “terrorizing rituals with theatrical overtones” (609)—have been disseminated by terrorist groups in an attempt at spreading fear within Western societies. Despite the long history of ritual beheadings in different

⁵ The pictures to which Haddad's project refers were taken in 2004 by guards involved in practicing torture on the bodies of terror suspects detained in US Army-governed Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

geographical contexts (cf. Campbell),⁶ these videotaped executions have become an integral component of the 21st-century culture of fear and abhorrence, adding impetus to the policy of justifying many highly controversial means of coercion employed against individuals suspected of being involved in terrorist activities. The presence of videotaped beheadings across a wide array of media has also contributed considerably to the increasing demonization of Muslims through a discourse which clearly conflates *all* Islam with the terrorism perpetrated by *a few* Islamists, and which stresses, as Alex Adams underlines, “the irreconcilability of Islam with the secular modernity of the West,” dehumanizing Muslims “so that perpetrating torture on them seems like less of a crime” (16; see also Butler).



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Fig. 3. Lara Haddad, *Execution*, 2015–16. Transfer print on aluminium, 24” x 19.2”. Courtesy of the artist.

⁶ Campbell reconstructs a history of beheadings in different regions ranging from the Middle East, through Europe, to the Far East. As she explains, in many geographical contexts, beheadings are not extraordinary. Writes Campbell: “State-run beheadings are used to punish criminals and date far back into history. Today only a handful of nation-states authorize beheadings as capital punishment: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen and Qatar. Saudi Arabia is the only country to actively practice public beheadings. Iran only beheads on rare occasions, and Yemen and Qatar are currently not conducting them” (590–600).

By bringing together a series of self-portraits representing a woman being a part of practices of violence, either as victim or victimizer, Haddad seems to situate her work in the context of broader discussions on political torture. Her artwork exposes how these debates tend to juxtapose the performances of “civilized” representatives of Western culture versus those of “uncivilized” Muslims, especially by differentiating between the distinctive natures of violent activities in which they are all involved.

From the perspective of law, political torture—especially if enacted with the authorization of a democratic state—figures as an exceptionally contested terrain (cf. Lazreg; Rejali). The 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) defines torture as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, . . . is intentionally inflicted on a person,” including acts when “such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity” (part 1, article 1). However, regulations introduced in late 2001 and throughout 2002 by the Bush administration in the context of “a state of exception” tended to render some forms of torture—through manipulative mobilization of selected legal protocols, some of which were clearly colonial in nature (cf. Gregory; Kaplan)—into sanctionable acts. For instance, the practice of the externalization of US detention centres had the function of allowing flexibility in using torture against terror suspects by formally placing these institutions outside US jurisdiction,⁷ thus turning them into something that Amy Kaplan describes as “a legal black hole, a legal limbo, a prison beyond the law” (831).⁸ In such a situation, making use of “contorted legal geo-graphing” (Gregory 416), the abused prisoners incarcerated outside the US could not benefit from the protection of the US legal system,⁹ while the latter was partly released

⁷ In 1950, in *Johnson v. Eisentrager*, when prisoners captured in China by the US Army, militarily tried, and transported to the American-occupied part of Germany claimed that their trial, conviction, and imprisonment violated Articles I and III of the Fifth Amendment, other provisions of the Constitution, laws of the United States, and provisions of the Geneva Convention, the US Supreme Court ruled that “a nonresident enemy alien has no access to our courts in wartime. Pp. 339 U.S. 768–777” (“*Johnson v. Eisentrager*, 339 U.S. 763 (1950)”).

⁸ In her study of the history of Guantánamo as situated in the context of US imperial policy, Amy Kaplan argues that “the legal space of Guantánamo today has been shaped and remains haunted by its imperial history,” a perspective which helps to explain why it “has become an ambiguous space both inside and outside different legal systems” (833). Similar argumentation is offered by Derek Gregory.

⁹ In June 2004, the Supreme Court ruled in *Rasul v. Bush* that federal courts could hear *habeas corpus* petitions from those imprisoned at Guantánamo, and—as a result—the transfers of detainees to this facility were halted. But, as Gregory explains, even since the *Rasul v. Bush* decision, prisoners at other extraterritorial US Army-governed premises

from the accountability for violent developments taking place in these premises (cf. Kaplan 851). Such a ruling blurred—perhaps intentionally—the border between the “inside” and the “outside” of US jurisdiction, while simultaneously consolidating the boundary between the subject of the nation under threat (i.e. those who belong within “interior bonds”) and the threatening others (i.e. those excluded by “internal borders”), the latter positioned either within or without the nation.

The White House worked intensely to set aside the Geneva Convention and redefine the captured fighters as “unlawful combatants”—a category that, in Kaplan’s words, “erodes the distinctions among citizens and aliens, immigrants and criminals, prisoners and detainees, terrorists and refugees” (853). Instead of treating them as prisoners of war (POWs) (Robertson 532; see also Joynt), which would require their handling in compliance with international regulations, the official policy established that “the humane treatment of prisoners in the war on terror was optional” (Gourevitch and Morris 48). As not formally associated with any state, and not wearing any uniforms or official insignia while being captured, the detainees were not considered to be POWs and could thus claim neither protection nor adequate treatment under the Convention. Since they were not imprisoned within US territory, their right to challenge their detention as well as the possibility of filing a writ of *habeas corpus* were not operative. Such regulations made their bodies—situated beyond the internal borders and excluded from the interior bonds—available to illegal violence. As far as acceptable means of interrogation are concerned, an opinion from the Department of Justice, delivered in the summer of 2002 after a formal request from the White House had been placed, stated that “only ‘the most extreme acts’ qualify as torture, and they must be committed with the ‘precise objective’ of inflicting pain ‘equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death’” (Gourevitch and Morris 48). In light of this interpretation, such forms of torture as hooding (evoking disorientation due to sensory deprivation), waterboarding (simulated drowning), or forced nudity and sexual taunting or assault—extensively practiced by guards in extraterritorial US Army-led prisons—did not formally count as political torture.

With such a contorted understanding of torture, so-called “clean torture” (Rejali 415)—or non-scarring torture techniques leaving no lasting, visible traces on prisoners’ bodies, a form of coercion much preferred by democratic states (Rejali 410)—is in the dominant discourse

“have no habeas rights; they are not allowed to appear before the military panels reviewing their continued imprisonment; they have no right to hear the allegations against them; and they have been denied access to lawyers” (419).

juxtaposed against the extreme violence practiced by jihadist fighters, with beheadings being the most extreme embodiment of their inhumane cruelty and ruthlessness. Such discursive tactics contribute to the delineation and subsequent sharpening of a fundamental differentiation between the acts of torture performed by US troops in an attempt to protect the nation and the violent acts that are represented as committed out of pure hatred and encouraged by zealous religiosity. Given such framing of these instances of violence, the acts of atrocity performed against the dehumanized, shamed, and sexually humiliated bodies of terror suspects (Puar, “On ‘Torture’”) are redefined in terms of necessity, even survival, in the face of a potential terrorist threat these bodies might pose for the American people. As far as discursive representation of the experience of the US troops/citizens is concerned, this repositioning signals a significant shift from language of perpetration to that of (hypothetical) victimhood and enduring trauma (cf. Abu El-Haj). Such a move fuels Islamophobia, sanctioning war waged in national rather than humanitarian terms.

Despite being backed with legal regulations, the discursive process of delineating borders between “us” and “them,” “right” and “wrong,” and “acceptable” and “unacceptable” violence remains paradoxical. The partial and selective legalization of political torture understood as a measure to prevent more ferocious forms of violence practiced by Islamist extremists—if nevertheless morally ambiguous—puts the solutions developed by the ad-hoc architects of the US legal system in a proximity to those whose activities are to be countered by the very scheme, and with which the implementation of manipulative legal developments is rhetorically justified. In fact, the delineation of distinction between the US citizens and terror suspects rests on a partial erasure of the experiential difference between the practices of violence in which both sides are involved. In this process, the demarcation of differences resulting in the demonization of *all* Muslims justifies the rapprochement as far as the violent performances on their bodies are concerned. At the same time, the space for political and moral critique becomes dramatically narrowed, both in the discourse and its attendant practices.

PLASTICITY

In a somewhat provocative gesture, by placing the different representations of torture associated with the “global war on terror” within the same series of self-portraits, Haddad seems to deliberately blur the differences between these allegedly dissimilar renderings of acts of violence. Indistinguishable in style, form, and composition, produced in the same aesthetic convention,

and with the use of identical artistic techniques, the prints function as a coherent whole commenting on the political developments in the post-9/11 context and the cultural discourses that emerged around these devastating events. Monochromatic, featuring a figure of the same woman situated against a blank background, and in the company of a very limited number of props, Haddad's self-portraits seem to purposefully avoid the dilution of the aesthetic language, in order not to distract the attention of the spectator from her staged rehearsal of the already widely recognizable images of violence.

Nevertheless, Haddad's re-enactments remain intentionally incomplete, trickily positioning themselves in opposition to the titles that the artist attributes to these works. Through their aesthetic minimalism, and due to a strategy of using a very limited collection of supports necessary for her performances, the artist's representations succeed in both mimicking the original frames and revising, even mocking, them at the same time. Thus, by opening the well-recognizable meanings to processes of substantial erosion, Haddad's works modify the semantic maps that these visual conventions usually activate, dislocating the representations' original meanings and inviting critical contestation. This contributes to the implosion of simplified discursive polarizations weaponized for the purpose of justifying "the global war on terror."

The artist's self-portraits function within at least two—to a certain extent contradictory—visual registers. While mimicking their convention and composition, the pictures simultaneously function as sort of negatives of the infamous originals. In *Reenactment—Part 1*, Haddad reverses the colours (her robe is white) and the gender of the pictured terror suspect (as a Muslim female, she is discursively positioned as one who must be "saved" by the US troops rather than as one who is violently abused by them); her face is uncovered and displays a concrete identity (while the victim in the original framing remained anonymous). She actively looks back into the camera, instead of her figure solely being available to the spectator's gaze. In *Reenactment—Part 2*, Haddad is dressed like a civilian, and the leash that she holds is not attached to anything or anyone (the victimized prisoner, present in the original frame, is not included in the artist's rehearsal). Through reference to her gender, as much as her status as a US resident, she puts herself in the position of a woman-victimizer, humiliating male prisoners, defining herself as an oppressor, perhaps even a traitor, of her own cultural identity held together by interior bonds. Eventually, in *Execution*, she again breaks with the visual convention of the original videos, exposing her face as the perpetrator (always covered in the original videotaped accounts), wearing just a simple t-shirt (instead of arms and heavy equipment), and—in a gesture of sad, devastating mockery—displaying a portion of a fruit rather than a decapitated head.

Through these modest, albeit significant, modifications, the artist is capable of opening new interpretative planes, partly purifying the original shots from the ideologically shaped cultural values and making them available to new affiliations. While artistically engaging with visual frames that have become iconic for the culture of torture, surveillance, and persecution, Haddad manages to put these well-known representational conventions under scrutiny, making them present and absent at the same time. As she explains: “I am beginning to distill new values and beliefs from the remnants of a social construct that I don’t adhere to anymore,” with an aim “to uproot fears, self-censorship and self-discipline that this system planted in me” (10).

The minimalism of artistic means mobilized to produce *A Question of History* enables an exposition of the diversity of sociopolitical associations that her project puts in motion. But it also seems to uncover the dramatic extremities of intimately experienced (dis)identifications. Consisting of a series of self-portraits, her art directly engages her body, functioning as a plastic, living memory machine, actively processing the information and inputs, re-enacting the cultural clichés, while striving to live normally under the extreme conditions of ongoing violence, persistently impinging on the artist on an everyday basis. Haddad writes:

Through my work, I am unpacking the fragments of my identity. . . . People may choose to see me as a war victim or a perpetrator. Whenever I speak, I confirm that I am the “other.” In a space of uncertainty, I might not be either, yet a very small change in my circumstances would have made me one or the other. (10)

Moving between the extreme positions of victim on the one hand and victimizer on the other, the locations partly blurred but also partly sustained through the discourse reasserting “interior frontiers,” the artist—somewhat unwillingly—implicates herself in the complex economy of legacies of political violence (cf. Rothberg), alluding to the difficulties of situating herself within the tangled landscapes of formal and informal post-9/11 anti-Muslim developments.

Immersed in the plethora of contradictory cultural significations, Haddad reclaims her body and reintegrates it into the process of metamorphous culturo-material, plastic becomings, or a constant negotiation of the intimately experienced *territory* of the “interior frontier.” As Catherine Malabou elaborates, such plasticity must be understood “as a form’s ability to be deformed without dissolving and thereby to persist throughout its various mutations, to resist modification, and to be always liable to emerge anew in its initial state” (*The New Wounded* 58). Malabou also points to

“the series of transformations” as something “that can always ‘be annulled’ so that this ‘unique form’ can reappear” (*The New Wounded* 58). Thus, “[p]recisely and paradoxically, plasticity characterizes both the lability and the permanence of this form” (Malabou, *The New Wounded* 58). It seems that Haddad’s work rests on such an understanding or intimate experience of plastic metamorphoses. It embodies a parade of self-annulling identifications, a constant migration between the oppositional poles of culturally sustained polarizations, and a shifting dislocation of intimate subjectivities. Through her art, Haddad thus engages in a process of self-effacement and re-emergence in a new—yet the same—form, or an ongoing practice of creating dissonances and noises resulting from the violent clashing of visual conventions.

Through a series of self-portraits, the artist strives to create a fiction of herself, a fragile “expression of the traumatized psyche” (Malabou, “What is Neuro-Literature?” 81). Such plasticity may be a result of rapture, an accident (of war, violence, migration) which damages one’s subjectivity and from which one emerges as an “unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past” (Malabou, *The Ontology* 2), a transformation that leaves one “dumb and disoriented” (Malabou, *The Ontology* viii). A series of self-portraits, capturing intimate experiences of the artist herself, seems to signal the extremities of the process of identifying with the re-enacted positions while simultaneously placing these identifications under scrutiny. The attempts at denying and rectifying them, or constantly confusing oneself with their contradictory contents, expose the vulnerability and fictionality of such self-positionings. The portrayed person “becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers herself,” a person “in a state of emergency, without foundation, bareback, sockless” (Malabou, *The Ontology* 6).

By physically putting herself in the positions already defined for her in the available discourse, albeit personally experienced as not hers at all, and by undoing their content and lessening their overload (Foucault 23), the artist seems to incessantly interrogate her belonging and how it is affected by the politics of the day. In such a context, Haddad’s project, disclosing the complexity of positionality, seems to suggest a means of survival in a political reality which complicates, even destroys, notions of subjectivity, and which remains marked by accumulative traumas of structural exclusions, dislocations, and violence. It also alludes to the process of negotiating the extreme conditions of dwelling in the zone of inbetweenness, under a constant pressure of having to “name” oneself, or of running the risk of being externally (mis)recognized. In the idiom of “interior frontiers,” this process refers, in Stoler’s words, to “how states harness individuals’ affective ties, marshaling distinctions that make up who they imagine

themselves to be, need to be to secure presence and dwelling, what they need to master to know they belong in their surroundings, and not least what they need to master in themselves” (23). Through the imposition of “interior frontiers,” in a territory in which the distinction between what is “interior” and what is “internal” remains loose, people are shaped into specific “political subjects by the dispositifs of governance” (Stoler 23).

CONCLUSIONS

Reinterpretations of legal regulations in the post-9/11 US, as discussed earlier in this article, consisted of defining new, reasserting old, and eroding some of the (invisible) borders structuring not only the US but also global society. The contorted redefinition of the geographical territorializing of US jurisdiction paralleled the selective application of legal protocols to particular individuals and, in particular situations, redefining the political contours of cultural (non)belonging. The different versions of the “Muslim ban” in fact rearticulated—in a slightly modified form—the same strategy of criminalizing certain groups of individuals based on their ethnic/religious identity and representing them as a potential threat to the integrity of the American nation. Those whose bodies had once been available to illegal forms of violence have now again been exposed to actions of violence. Such a policy translated into a growing conflation of the figure of the refugee and that of the criminal, further increasing the vulnerability of people at risk. As Stoler explains, for those “hugging a border’s edges and excluded from its protection, as much as for those seeking security and refuge in its sheltered space” (8), thus understood interior frontiers create conditions “that affect up close their ‘being’ in as much they are subject to being in a physical, legal, and psychic space that is neither ‘this nor that’” (22; see also Balibar, *La crainte des masses* 383). Engaging with these problematic delineations, Haddad’s *A Question of History* probes the politically saturated discursive frames through which violence is approached and how it happens to be weaponized for the purpose of advancing the political “interests” of the nation.

By positioning herself differently within the discursively established locations—the “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence” (Butler 1)—Haddad, through plastic (dis)identifications, succeeds at interrupting these normative schemes and opening them to subsequent annulation. Aware of the fact that representation should be understood as “a moral problem with political consequences” (Athney 14), the artist opts for a more condensed means for engaging her audiences. Inviting affective

affiliations, critical (mis)recognitions, and inventive interrogations, rather than offering straightforward messages and outspoken interpretations, Haddad's work avoids playing according to the state's oppressive rules, instead mobilizing new spaces for creative questioning. At the same time, however, her art may offer an insight into how certain political mechanisms work and how their effects are intimately negotiated. It can therefore serve as a powerful means to expose conditions of political and personal extremity defined through interior bonds and internal borders, as well as to represent "lives lived under the duress of an extreme made everyday" (Victor).

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Duration of the Archive: Soundscapes of Extreme Witnessing in Divya Victor's *Curb*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significance of soundscapes in the Tamil American poet Divya Victor's reconstruction of the archive of anti-South Asian violence in her acclaimed poetry collection *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021). Being a continuation of the poet's investigation of the limits of conceptual and "documental" poetics (Michael Leong), advanced in her *Natural Subjects*, *UNSUB* and *Kith*, *Curb* appropriates public and personal records to critique discrimination against the South Asian community in America's post-9/11 political landscape. Victor's poetics enact extreme witnessing, re-establishing the archive's unheard durations that her modality of the lyric upholds, and recovering locutions of the Indian diaspora eroded or erased by anti-immigrant and anti-Asian racism. Tracing the dynamics of location and locution at the sites of violent events as well as their barely audible frequencies registered in the sequence "Frequency (Alka's Testimony)," I argue that the archive's duration in *Curb* is extended by forms of "sonic agency" (Brandon LaBelle). I further show how, through the poetic work of hearing and sounding (including such techniques as echolocation and ventriloquy), Victor creates a simultaneously critical and lyrical space akin to auditory experience where the text's multiple durational vectors throw into sharp relief the lives "curbed," diminished, or destroyed by wounding, fear, and trauma, testifying to the extremity of the very act of witnessing. Finally, focusing on opacity as a fundamental quality of the archive, I also turn to Carolyn Chen's concrete sound compositions and Amarnath Ravva's assemblages that traverse *Curb*, accompanying the poet in collaborative hearing of the archive's spatial, temporal, and sonic dynamics.

Keywords: archive, duration, conceptual poetry, documental poetics, extreme witnessing, lyric, anti-South Asian violence, sound, soundscapes, sonic agency.

“Air is forced out of the lungs up the throat to the larynx where it causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound. The metamorphosis from sound to intelligible word requires
(a) the lip, tongue and jaw all working together.
(b) a mother tongue.
(c) the overseer’s whip.
(d) all of the above or none.”
(Philip 33)

“What makes inconvenience into an event, and not just a state, is the architecture of duration.”
(Berlant 6)

“When any writer is operating in the duration of ‘post’ in the wake of any catastrophe, we have a responsibility to observe how our relationship to this duration stains the materials, the composition, the methods, and the very nest in which our dreams work to revise the day’s drafts.”
(Victor, “I Had to Grow a New Tongue”)

“This wound sound is the sound of the poetics of ventriloquy.”
(Victor, “Cicadas in the Mouth”)

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POETICS OF EXTREME WITNESSING: LISTENING FOR THE ARCHIVE’S SOUNDSCAPE

In the Tamil American poet Divya Victor’s conceptual writing, scholarship, as well as curatorial and editorial activity, preoccupation with the lyric’s role in upholding and augmenting the archive’s duration entails a direct, concrete engagement with extremity as immanent to the poetry of witness genre. In her conversation with Michael Nardone, Victor comments on this aspect of her engagement with contemporary US reality as “writing from and within the periphery,” explaining that

writing in the margins has been a way of resisting or responding to the dominant narrative. Writing on the edge is where inversion happens. That is important for *Curb*, which is a book that examines the edges of domestic and public spaces as battlefields. The edge, however clear-cut and sharp, is the most ambiguous space: on the body, at an ecological zone, in built environments. (“Tracking the Traffic”)

At the same time, curbs demarcate physical boundaries in the urban landscape that constitutes shared public space, reconceiving the notion

of any boundary as a “common border” from both sides of which the neighbors casually greet each other, watch their own and their neighbor’s children (*Curb* 5). The awareness of writing at the limit, edge, curb, margin, periphery, or extremity informs Victor’s poetry of witness in significant ways, giving it social immediacy and political urgency, as well as an imperative to address questions of colonial history, distance, scale, movement and duration in contemporary poetics more broadly. As a key term in this essay, extreme witnessing helps capture the radical quality of Victor’s conceptual writing as preoccupied with some of the most drastic, yet not always immediately graspable aspects of the immigrant experience in the present-day US.

Reflecting on the difficulty of curating an archive of citizenship and belonging, the late American scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant writes in their posthumously published *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022):

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It requires thinking about a whole range of impacts and intensities that may or may not achieve significance, consciousness, politics, or clarity. It also requires thinking about how the vertical hierarchies of privilege capture and recast the tone of ordinary social frictions to naturalize, weaponize, and calcify a self-interested defensive/projective dynamic. To get at this material requires tracking patterns and historicizing the means through which we are trained to live inside many genres of the brush of the world. Citizenship, social membership, belonging, being a neighbor or a regular, being the conveyor of bodily dynamics are some of these genres, but many of the familiar dings are so nonnarrative that they’re hard to archive, even in concepts like gesture, because we’re talking about actions that dissolve the fantasy that the impersonal is distinct from the personal, the intimate. (8)

Making concrete Berlant’s theoretical reflection underlying the archive’s social and intimate dimensions, *Curb* unfolds as a streetwise book that has been “made to witness” the horrific events that resulted in the deaths of four South Asian men: Balbir Singh Sodhi from Mesa, Arizona; Navroze Mody from Jersey City, New Jersey; Srinivas Kuchibhotla from Olathe, Kansas; and Sunando Sen from Queens, New York (Victor, *Curb* n.pag.). Their names and deaths, listed as “irreducible facts” on the unnumbered page of *Curb* following the book’s contents, will be remembered as only several among many other anonymous victims of the anti-South Asian violence that has been escalating in the post-9/11 United States. Telling the stories of South Asian Americans who have been mistreated, assaulted, or killed, either as a result of misrecognitions, or due to suspicions of domestic terrorism, *Curb* transforms the lyric, conventionally focused

on self-expression and individual voice, into a poetic mode preoccupied with their irreducibly social entanglement, even as it manages to carve out a space for intimacy and grief. As I will demonstrate further through close analysis of poems from Victor's book, her writing documents and registers acts of hostility and aggression, refusing to provide comforting answers and upholding the archive through staging confrontations between the lyrical mode and flat dehumanizing discourses, bringing the reader closer to documented events. Resonating both within *Curb's* boundaries and without, Victor's writing creates durations invested in bridging its conceptual (critical, documental) and lyrical (intimate, affective) capacities in ways that mobilize its potential for expanding the concept of witnessing to account for present-day instances of witnessing *in extremis*.

Victor's poetics of extreme witnessing is investigated here as an outstanding example of the turn in poetry that Michael Leong aptly defines as "documental" in his recent study *Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry* (2020). Leong examines the crucial work of poets who "cite mostly publicly available texts in order to return them, rhetorically transformed, to the public sphere" to convincingly argue that documental poetics performs crucial social work (3). In his account, "reconstruction through a practice of textual resocialization; that is, through a citation, re-citation, even recitation, of what has been filed away" becomes a practice through which "pre-existing documentation" is treated "as a shared resource whose manipulation might propose the reconstruction of the social order" (7). Taking into account both Victor's work with the available records and her refiguration of the lyric form, I situate *Curb* as a text invested in re-establishing, upholding, and projecting forward the archive's unheard durations. Exploring the significance of the concept of duration in *Curb* as a vehicle of spatial-temporal as well as sonic complexity, I turn to Brandon LaBelle's *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (2018) and his sense of "sonic agency," sensitive to postcolonial contexts and defined as "a means for enabling new conceptualizations of the public sphere and expressions of emancipatory practices—to consider how particular subjects and bodies, individuals and collectivities creatively negotiate systems of domination, gaining momentum and guidance through listening and being heard, sounding and unsounding particular acoustics of assembly and resistance" (4). LaBelle specifies four sonic figures, "the invisible [also referred to as the acousmatic]," "the overheard," "the itinerant," and "the weak," which resonate with *Curb's* focus on what LaBelle terms "unlikely publics," situated "on the edge of appearance" (1). In his account, their unlikely status results from being unseen, or "being beyond the face," yet recognized "through a concentrated appeal to the listening sense," being overheard or misheard

in the world's global networks, subject to lyrical "intensities of listening" complicated by transience, migrancy, homelessness, and movement, or struggling to uphold sound uttered "according to a condition of weakness" (33, 94, 127). The critic listens out for

this sound that relates us to the not-yet-apparent. A gathering of listeners, in the squares, or in the classrooms and market places, the backrooms and storefronts, may perform to create a gap, a duration drawn out, detouring the flows of normative actions, of declarations and decrees, with a persistent intensity—a nagging quietude, possibly: this act of *doing listening*, together; and by gathering attention it may also create an image: the image of the listener as one who *enacts* attention or consideration and, in doing so, nurtures the condition of mindful engagement. (161, emphases in the original)

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In my reading of *Curb*, LaBelle's speculative account of sonic dynamics becomes a productive backdrop for grasping an expanded field of soundscapes that one encounters in Victor's poetics. Sharing a conceptual affinity with LaBelle's sonic agency, *Curb's* soundscapes rely on spatial-temporal-sonic durations drawn out through (re)constructions of ambient environments whereby the poet enacts her social critique. Situated at the intersection of currently burgeoning studies of documentary poetry and sound studies, my reading of *Curb* shows how Victor's poetics critically expand and lyrically reconstruct soundscapes of extreme witnessing accompanying fatal events that continue to threaten lives of her South Asian *kith*, the word denoting closest relatives that has gained strong resonance in the poet's work.

Originally published as an artist's book designed to resemble a foldable travel map, Victor's poems were accompanied by rubbings made directly from sidewalks and curbs. In the trade paperback edition, some pages have their upper-right corners marked with the exact coordinates of the violent events' locations that can be tracked with a navigation application. Evocative of "affective geology," defined by scholar Dana Luciano as "a turning of the necessarily speculative work of geology into a form of aesthetic and sensory experience" (Roudeau 2), Victor's method of documenting these places does not simply turn them into traceable sites of violent assaults disturbingly wedged into the fabric of the present; rather, she stages her own and the reader's encounters with displaced or erased bodies at the exact locations of oppression. Such affective encounters are framed in *Curb* as milestones, related to the migrant bodies impacted by the psychic pressure connected with displacement and permanently marked by oppression, yet remaining perpetually on the move and marking distances measured by the entire colonial history of people's movement:

“the tension and displacement of a body in / memories of having traversed, of having been moved, of having / been so utterly moveable” (*Curb* 64). Such spatial-temporal dynamics is explored in the “Milestones” section of the book, where the people’s movements of the colonial past strongly resonate for the present-day traveler, even when she takes an Uber to nearby destinations. The series of “Milestone” poems, documenting the poet’s Uber rides to poetry readings and university classes, brings home the awareness of movement’s irreducible embodiment, its entanglement with technology, as well as the urgent need to build continuity between past and present immigrant experiences. The poet insists on foregrounding the body’s role in tracking distance, movement, and memory as crucial markers of colonial history. The displaced body becomes a marker of the archive’s duration, within which the realities of location and locution are entwined. The archive’s “contested records,” to use Leong’s term, are appropriated in Victor’s writing to gain better focus on concrete instances of extreme witnessing as embodied actions (im)mobilized by sound as much as they are (im)mobilized by word or image, and operating as such both for the poet and reader as implied witnesses-listeners of the poems’ durations.

As a conceptual text attentive to soundscapes, moreover, *Curb* presents a challenge for Leong’s claim that in twenty-first century documental poetry “we are frequently seeing a new literality, . . . a rejection of verse’s rhythms and sonorous musicalities” (110). In *Curb*, however, the reader encounters extended poetic sequences that make rhythm and sonority paramount to the book’s expansive sonic landscape. In the section “Hedges,” for instance, devoted to the birth of Victor’s daughter and sounding a critique of the official documentation related to reporting a birth abroad to US immigration, the poems’ rhythmic intensity hinges on interweaving transliterated lines from a popular Tamil lullaby, or *thaalatu*, which, as the poet explains in the text’s endnotes, means “tongue rhythm” or “tongue rocking” (142):

were the parents held by the law?

FS-240

did they love in the same language?

DS-1350

they first lift

serosa from serosa

arouse all the roses, prick each thorn

hum *sub rosa*

a song known to someone born
before you

aari ro ari raro

aari ro ari raro

aararo ari ra ro

(8-9, emphases in the original)

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The conceptual make-up of sonic elements and structures found in the collection moves beyond familiar prosodic patterns conventionally encountered in poetic writing. Victor’s book expands the reader’s idea of what might constitute prosody in lyric poetry by exploring the musicality of traditional forms such as songs, lullabies, or, as we can see elsewhere in “Hedges,” evoking the devotional practice of rhythmic recitation of God’s names. *Curb* recognizes these musical elements’ communal, familial value and incorporates them into experimentation with the shape and sound of documents and found materials refigured in the poems. Building on Michel Serres’s idea of “common tangency” of the body and world, *Curb*’s robust sonorousness takes into account the embodied quality of sound and voice production as a prerequisite for drawing out and upholding durations of archival soundscapes and radically reinventing the lyric convention (80).

Commemorating the lives lost as a result of anti-South Asian violence, *Curb* focuses on trauma and psychic pressure resulting from the knowledge and awareness of life-threatening situations impacting Indian-Americans and Indian immigrants who navigate across the shared borders of sidewalks and lawns as friends, loved ones, close relatives, and neighbors. Words of the poet’s mother, included at the beginning of the book, powerfully capture the fear of anti-South Asian violence in Trump’s America: “yes; I am / afraid all / the time; all the places are all / the same to me; all / of us are all the same to all / of them; this is all / that matters; all / of us don’t matter at all” (1). Serving as a powerful opening of *Curb*, the citation signals the text’s decolonial orientation, situating the mother’s words as insistence on the on-going scrutiny of coloniality’s persistence in modernity. Her emphasis on the appearance of uniformity in both the surrounding landscape and social architecture and the constant fear of being misrecognized as an individual who might constitute a threat to public safety are exacerbated by the feelings of insignificance and unreadability. The poet’s insistence on mapping specific sites of wounding as well as identifying, recognizing, and telling the reader both about the

victims and targets of violence must be seen as a response to the mother's fear of being misrecognized and her sense of being utterly lost in the suburban grid-like landscape. The women's words echo the archive's fundamental opacity captured by Édouard Glissant's famous lines from his *Poetics of Relation*: "There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied, or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing" (111). While Glissant's reflection on opacity suggests indistinct presence in the visual domain, the reader additionally discovers in *Curb* emphasis on the many ways in which the victims remain unheard or misheard, making LaBelle's reflection on sonic agency and his concept of "the overheard" relevant to the discussion of the text: "The productive forcefulness of the overheard is one that exposes us within a scene of alterity: a figure, a voice, a sudden assemblage by which subjectivity is interrupted or unsettled" (70). Overhearing in the sense of interrupting and unsettling becomes a crucial strategy in *Curb*, where Victor foregrounds the problem of indistinctness in relation to hearing and listening, showing the repercussions of her kith's presence and visibility in the public domain and, consequently, their position within the regime of visibility (location) as significantly complicated by their troubled sonic agency (locution).

In *Curb*, close attention to exact locations of anti-South Asian oppression aims at figuring extreme witnessing in direct relation to locution, which makes interrelated questions of the movement of immigrants and diasporic time central to the poet's sense of the archive and its duration. As the scholar Julietta Singh observes in her book *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018), it is Franz Fanon's seminal work, particularly the first chapter of his *Black Skin, White Masks* "The Negro and Language," where Fanon directly relates the notion of locution to location, pointing to, as Singh puts it, "the arduous labor of the speaker who endures a civilization's 'weight'" (70). Deeply preoccupied with trauma, such work constitutes the ground of *Curb* and Victor's poetic labor more broadly, evocative of Sujaya Dhanvantari's question whether colonial trauma is "a spectral force at work in new psychic wounds" (337). Like Victor's earlier works *UNSUB* and *Natural Subjects*, both of which examine the limits of citizenship and imaginary belonging, or *Kith*, which unsettles the nationalist idea of India, *Curb* attends to the ways in which the entanglement of location and locution shows witnessing as embodied labor that emerges as situated *and* endowed with particular sonic agency, expanding protocols of documental poetics. Such work is visible in *Curb*'s section "Locution / Location," which lyrically enacts historical changes in social attitudes

toward pronouncing words in ways that deviate from the standard US model. The poem's repetition of the word "haitch," which in American English has been more often spelled as "aitch," and pronounced without the "h" sound, weaves in the less commonly used "haitch" as a refrain evocative of a great-grandmother's singing to her great-granddaughter, bridging the generational, geographical, and linguistic gaps between and within each of them through repetition of non-standard "haitch" with the letter "h" insistently materialized and reclaimed in the soundscape produced by the lyric. Remarking on how Southeast Asian immigrants have been expected to neutralize their accent and adhere to standard pronunciation in the notes to the poem, Victor sees this pressure in hegemonic and neoliberal terms "as part of the service industry's commitment to providing monolingual Americans with an emotionally secure and trustworthy consumer experience" (*Curb* 150). The lyric's emphasis on upholding continuity of family ties and the shared language they carry stands in stark contrast to the anxiety provoked by their particular use of words and sounds. The physical presence of "h" drawn out in the poem impacts duration and movement ("taut and long"; "a letter the length of a coast, the width of a gull's caw" [*Curb* 47]), sounding a critique of linguistic norms that exposes language itself as an embattled domain always already shot through with racism and classism rather than designed for emotional comfort or physical safety.

In her 2014 *Leslie Scalapino Memorial Lecture in 21st Century Poetics*, titled "Cicadas in the Mouth," Victor recounts her personal struggles of having been repeatedly corrected and coerced to speak the way a speaker of standard American English is expected to sound. It is in these experiences that Victor's poetics of lyric appropriation originates: "a poetics of the inappropriate tongue is also a poetics of the appropriated tongue—one that borrows other people's tongues, tries them on for size, pilfers, loots, happily assimilates, or courageously tests in the live flesh through ventriloquy" ("Cicadas in the Mouth"). She further explains the function of ventriloquy performance in her poetry as follows:

What becomes really obvious is how little of *us* there is in our speech. And this absence is unbearable. . . . What is heard is *loqui* (speech) + *ventri* (through the belly)—speech through the belly. This is a poetics that draws a tension between speaking from the gut, the absolute figure for sincerity and intention—one "spills one's guts"—and speaking another's language.

A tension marks the acts of ventriloquy that, in all these recent instances, show the poet mouthing belated documents to witness violent and catastrophic events into legible forms in illegible bodies. This tension

marks a refusal to be transparent on stage. These are acts that witness legible forms of discourse through suddenly illegible or confrontational bodies. These are live rehearsals of sensory exchange—a confession of what it feels like to utter alien discourses out loud. This is a recitation that tests what words can and cannot be said before you are escorted off the stage—sequined shibboleths that we have trained with—language competency exams in discourses that we both create and are constituted by. ¿Dónde está *el baño*? *Vous êtes-vous plu ici*? आप कहाँ से (आए) हैं? This is the cicada's innards running back into your own. Abiding alienation. (“Cicadas in the Mouth,” emphases in the original)

In *Curb*, Victor seeks to refigure the archive out of official documents, forms, and public records that she sees as “dead,” and whose presence in her work shows the inhuman scale of interpellating, marking, misrecognizing, misidentifying, and murdering entire groups of citizens as much as it tries to preserve their individual names and memory as fathers, mothers, sisters, spouses, and neighbors (“Solidarity”). To do so, Victor complicates the relation between the intimate, personal mode of expression such as the lyric and the public documental mode. In her poetry, these two modes inform and transform one another; the lyric is freed from the illusion of the singularity of voice and its supposedly autonomous, private observation of reality, while the documental poem is traversed by the lyrical mode to return the records from the official domain to the public world, in line with Leong’s definition of documental poetics as invested in reconstituting the social. Dismantling constructions of diasporic subjectivity, however, entails both the necessary frustration of the reader’s hope for transparency or easy assimilation and the author’s realization of her own complicity in the oppression with the victims of which she feels compelled to empathize. To address the problem of complicity, *Curb* also raises the issue of colorism that continues to shape racial dynamics in the US and that the poet approaches as “the moral work of acknowledging anti-blackness in South Asian communities” (“Solidarity”). As Victor points out in her conversation with Caleb Beckwith, she chooses “a poetics of racialized experience that remains inassimilable for both marked and unmarked audiences, and this has often meant withholding pleasure, divesting the audience of its pursuit of happiness” (Beckwith).

The poems’ intimate tone does not fall into conventionally lyrical notes; rather, Victor considerably complicates her reinvented lyric’s resonance to capture the ambivalence of addressing public issues and living one’s life as a South Asian American citizen and a mother-to-be. In this respect, the sequence “Threshold” is particularly striking, where the poet juxtaposes the difficulty of integrating the experience of

pregnancy and the urgency of constant observation of external reality, recursively emphasizing in the poems harrowing news about the murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla, who was misrecognized as an illegal immigrant from Iran and shot by a white supremacist. Both the speaker's fear for her unborn child's safety and her physical reaction to reading the news about the shooting show the need for an extreme degree of vigilance and produce unbearable psychic pressure. The poem sequence frames the speaker's constantly displaced perception of internal and external reality not just in terms of reading words on newspaper pages, but also, much more viscerally, in terms of the body's reaction and the way the speaker's hearing is affected:

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When I read the news
of the shooting, this belly
plumed into an apse—it distended
upward, a balloon hollow
but leaden, these lungs lifted
here—this diaphragm fled, bore through
a tent made of ligament
& rope. *The billow screeched*
in these ears, pulled here—these legs apart
these toes went numb & cold. The ground
beneath me collapsed, turned to dunes
& the sand quickened. Here—this belly
carrying those pounds of flesh
began to take flight
(*Curb* 53–54, emphasis mine)

The phrase “the billow screeched / in these ears” communicates the extremity of discomfort caused by a particularly unpleasant sonic sensation. “The billow,” signifying a large mass of steam or air producing pressure, pushes outward and emits a screeching sound, becoming a powerful image of the body gathering strength to take flight. Further in the sequence, references to hearing emerge as closely aligned to the notion of sonic agency: “When I read the news / of the shooting, these ears rang / the phone-lines of the dead” (57). The ringing heard in one's ears changes in the poem into the ears that ring; a sudden reversal of sonic agency that in the poem is seen as enabling the speaker's communication with those who no longer live. The imagery related to ears and hearing, prominent in the entire collection, returns in the closing section of the sequence: “her sweet ear flung & clinging / to a parapet. & at that cleft / for the first time, I saw / —here— / her as mine & then, hearing canons / sung in double-time / I knew being mine / would clip her life” (57–58). In these lines,

the homophonous proximity of words such as “ear,” “hearing,” “here,” and “her” (as well as of “flung,” “clinging,” “cleft,” “cannon,” and “clip”) creates a sonic intensity that points to the poet’s extreme witnessing of horrifying reverberation of the shootings as acutely perceived soundscapes that become sites of hearing *in extremis*, experienced within and without the speaker’s and her unborn daughter’s bodies at once.

Discussing her writing in terms of “conceptualist autopoiesis,” Victor explains her process as “emptying already existing forms onto durations that are unavailable in their original iterations” (Place). Similarly material understanding of form, crucial in investigating the archive’s duration also in the spatial and temporal sense, can be found in French philosopher Catherine Malabou’s influential inquiry into how the form lives through and beyond the event of its own deconstruction, presented in her *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*. Victor’s complex conceptualism involves temporal refigurations that hinge on appropriations of depersonalized bureaucratic templates, or, using more casual language, bringing to life lifeless documents. In *Curb*’s section “Petitions (For an Alien Relative),” the poet rewrites official immigration forms used by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, transforming them into prose poems that lyrically refigure the dehumanizing racism of immigration procedures designed to contain relatives as designated “aliens,” mobilizing durations that recontextualize their stories and show these persons as closest family members and loved ones, cherished for all their habits, quirks, and idiosyncrasies; as one’s kith whose lives depend on the procedures that *Curb* critiques:

SECOND PETITION

A.

Use this form if you are a citizen or lawful permanent resident (LPR) of the United States who needs to establish your relationship to an eligible relative who wishes to immigrate to the United States.

Write here, if you know this place as home, about a beloved whose skin you cannot live without; whose fingers know why the jasmine bushes will not flourish in your backyard in El Sobrante, why your batter sours too late, why no amount of sugar will make your tea sweet, why your front yard is scattered with pinions, why all mail arrives like a bird strike to the fuselage (the dotterels dawdling & then shredding the turbines); whose letters you fold & unfold until the creases give way & you put the pieces back together on the dining table—to make a map for a country made of vein & sinew with hands pulled clean of wedding bands & raw rice, a map for a country of two.

(41, emphasis in the original)

LAST PETITION**(or, USCIS FORM I-130 Spring Night Pastoral for Alien Relatives)**

Ma, remember when we waded
 into the form-field & pulled pussy willow
 with inky palms, flicked buckeyes
 into checklist boxes
 swung on drop-down menus
 like banyan branches, cut terraces
 into the small print marshes, dragged
 yoked highlighters through, roved through the footnotes
 as you roamed unthreshed paddy,
 & we—*yes, I remember, we*
parceled our family
into placeholders
that September,
& huddled in the warmth of an archive
set on fire
 (44, emphases in the original)

In “Last Petition,” a poem drawing on the pastoral convention, bureaucratic format of immigrant forms is unsettled by references to elements of natural landscape and memories of a family gathering during which they sit by the burning archive. Such linguistically inventive lyrical appropriations of official documents and forms effect an alternative modality of the lyric that refigures the impersonal and alienating bureaucratic activity of documenting persons as an intimate yet simultaneously public mode of writing. As such, the poems also become a reckoning with the tremendous affective cost of “minor feelings,” explained in Cathy Park Hong’s recent work as “the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one’s perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed” (Hong 55).

HEARING EXTREME WITNESSING: “FREQUENCY (ALKA’S TESTIMONY)”

Beginning this section of *Curb*, Victor factually recasts the 2010 violent group assault on Dr. Divyendu Sinha, who was attacked near his own house while taking a walk with his wife and beaten into a coma. The brief note on Sinha’s death includes facts about his profession, which involved work with life-support technologies. The note’s factual detail related to the assault and to Sinha’s job places particular emphasis on its personal and public consequences: a loss of individual life as well as a loss that the man’s death

causes to the community of those whose lives he can no longer save. The opening poem offers several available definitions of the word “frequency.” Victor presents the term’s rich etymology, initially pointing to its immediate associations with technology, connecting this aspect of the word with Sinha’s job. She then ventures deeper into its original Latin meaning of crowding, or gathering of people, gesturing toward the South Asian community that suffers an increased rate of violent attacks. The scientific vocabulary used in the poem sounds impersonal notes of technological jargon that shows extreme distance between Sinha’s dedication to saving lives, predicated on his trust in life-sustaining technology, and the horrifying reality in which his own life ended after he was brutally attacked and fatally beaten. What follows is a sequence of poems that continue to explore the notion of frequency in the context of the ambience of the courtroom where Sinha’s wife Alka’s testimony took place.

Victor poetically reconstructs the courtroom’s ambient environment during the wife’s testimony as sonic background to an audio file with Sinha’s greeting left on the answering machine also used as evidence during the hearing. Alka asks the judge’s permission to play the file with her late husband’s voice and their brief exchange is cited by Victor, becoming evidence in its own right evoked in the scope of the poem. The judge initially does not hear, or fails to understand the woman’s request due to its indistinct articulation. It is only after Alka rephrases the question, using properly impersonal language, that official permission is granted. The sequence of ten poems that follow is a lyrically refigured transcript of courtroom ambience that appropriates the noises produced by moving, lifting, dropping, and flipping various small objects against different surfaces:

SEQUENCE 5

- f* A hollow, sharp, & bent note of feedback from a distant source (above witness)
- f* A distant click (from left of witness) of camera shutter or snap of thin plastic
- f* The wispy slide of two or three fingers over a page
- f* The flipping or counting of a series of thin sheets of paper folded towards each other in a deliberate, slow succession (to left of witness)
- f* A cluster of thin & metallic crumpling sounds—a cold or crisp page being turned, lifting into still air & then settling on a podium (stapled stacks in humid rooms clatter less)
(*Curb* 122)

The poem's *tour de force* reconstruction of the soundscape accompanying activities mechanically performed in the courtroom hinges on the spatial dynamics of the "hollow, sharp" notes produced by objects and their shifting positions with respect to the stationary witness. The objects' unsettling animacy ("a cold / or crisp page being turned, lifting into still air & then / settling on the podium") is amplified and contrasted with the virtual absence of any details about the body of the witness at the scene staged in the poem, which brings home realization of the extremity of Alka's objectification during her testimony.

Other evoked sounds include breathing, clicks of the camera shutter, as well as crackling or static sounds audible in the answering machine recording before Sinha's voice can be finally heard. Victor figures the soundscape as a dehumanizing backdrop against which a person's voice must be recovered: "[t]he drone of static in a recording prior to the presence / of a human voice" and "[t]he hum enveloping the flesh of a human voice / recording" (119). Furthermore, by foregrounding the ambience surrounding Sinha's recorded greeting as well as Alka's live voice, the sequence simultaneously registers, augments and extends the duration of the actual testimony that lasted only eight minutes. Evocative of the question asked by Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis in *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of this World* as to how "we listen for the form that deforms itself in the name of deep noise" (48), Victor's conceptual poetry seeks to investigate such speculative inquiry along concrete lines by listening out for durational frequencies in negative space and lyrically modifying dehumanizing forms of transmission. *Curb* exposes and lyrically amplifies institutionally sanctioned misrecognitions and dismissals by retrieving silenced or unheard voices from the drone of static.

In his review of Victor's *Natural Subjects* aptly titled "Expression Concrète," Felix Bernstein discusses her poetry's sonic "contrarian" trajectory as "a new form of opacity" that "qualitatively represses certain kinds of authentic vocalicity in order to produce objects of study and concentration that remain always polyvocalizable and musical, no matter how legalistic, speculative, communicative, confessional, pastiche, banal, and doctrinal their content may appear." Heard along these lines, the concrète assemblage of courtroom ambient sound in "Frequency (Alka's Testimony)" merits further analysis in relation to the work of Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen (mentioned by Victor in her conversation with Beckwith) on non-human objects, and Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman's concept of forensic aesthetics, the intersection of which helps to better situate objects themselves as witnesses and offer additional context for Victor's poetics of extreme witnessing. Luciano and Chen foreground questions of

objectification and dehumanization not as a way to dissolve the boundary between the human and the non-human, but to see “how those categories rub on, and against, each other, generating friction and leakage” (Luciano and Chen 186). In *Curb*, such material rubbing reverberates in the soundscape staged in the poem sequence “Frequency (Alka’s Testimony),” where the sounds produced by non-human objects offer the sonic backdrop of the poems’ critique of the dehumanizing environment of the courtroom space. In Keenan and Weizman’s study, the concept of forensic aesthetics focuses on the role of objects *as* witnesses in forensic procedures, which, as I will further show, sheds light on the poem sequence. As they argue, forensic procedures often entail aesthetic operations, showing that the process of establishing facts “depends on a delicate aesthetic balance, on new images made possible by new technologies, not only changing in front of our very eyes, but changing our very eyes—affecting the way that we can see and comprehend things” (23). In “Frequency (Alka’s Testimony),” Victor’s poetic enactment of courtroom ambience mobilizes the lyric mode to bring into sharper focus dehumanizing procedures that constitute the reality of South Asian people’s lives in America, drowning out their voices even in these situations when they stand before the law and demand a hearing.

Victor’s lyrical appropriation of courtroom ambience creates an environment where it is possible to *hear* Alka’s testimony in ways that bring out and thus recover what has been lost in the official court proceeding. Poetic reconstruction out of sounds produced by non-human objects, such as pencils, pens, paper sheets, camera shutters, plastic items, or metal clips enveloping Alka’s words and Singha’s recorded greeting function as witnesses that reclaim the victim’s human voice that the judge, despite his authority, has been unable to hear. In an interview with Andy Fitch, Victor explained her sense of the relationship between location and locution in the following way:

I like to think about “situating” as an echolocating act. I write to emit sound, and the environment of the poem returns this sound to my ear, triangulating my location within an imagined community I belong to (“kith”). This compositional act becomes a co-constituted environment, where the poetic line is the azimuth—a way of imagining a direction towards a place where kith lives, rather than a geographic residence in itself. (“A Home in My Ears”)

Echolocating human voices in the deep noise of dehumanizing political regimes and technologies becomes a crucial aspect of Victor’s poetics, tapping into Glissant’s idea of *écho-monde* (English: echo-world), aptly explained by LaBelle as “an ecology of the senses and of the sensible; of errant subjects and oral mosaics, diversal positions and poetic

knowledge” (102). Victor’s lyrical reconstruction of courtroom ambience investigated throughout this section can be construed as a force field, filled with what LaBelle refers to as “‘sonic objects,’ whose density, texture, and frequency appeal to the deep listener” (33). In the last section, I examine the contributions of Carolyn Chen and Amarnath Ravva, the artists who collaborated with Victor on extending *Curb*’s archival durations toward deep listening.

DIASPORIC TIME’S DEEP NOISE: CAROLYN CHEN AND AMARNATH RAVVA’S ENGAGEMENTS WITH *CURB*

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To augment *Curb*’s resonance, Victor has created a companion webspace where her poems’ durations are projected alongside and through the work of other writers and artists who have been collaborating with the poet on intensifying the collection’s impact beyond its pages and toward other artistic domains and media. Two particularly notable collaborations that I briefly discuss in this concluding section of the essay have been contributed by artists Carolyn Chen and Amarnath Ravva. Chen, a composer and sound artist based in Los Angeles, has created sound assemblages for several poems from *Curb*, including a piece for “Frequency (Alka’s Testimony)” composed as “a musique concrète montage assembled from snippets of foley library impact sounds and non-verbal ‘room sound’ sections” of Alka Sinha’s recorded court testimony (*Curb* Webspace). Chen also created sound effects for “Curb 4,” a poem commemorating the death of print-shop owner and immigrant Sunando Sen, pushed under a rushing subway train by a woman who later admitted that she had hated Hindus and Muslims since the events of 9/11. Chen’s composition contains elongated and variously modified sounds of the rapidly approaching train that concatenate the words and significantly extend the poem’s duration, expanding the text’s lyric modality and reconstituting interrupted diasporic temporality within and without the poem’s boundaries. Performing the poem with Chen’s composition, Victor initially recites the text’s word segments at a normal pace, but later her reading accelerates and intensifies as if in an effort to prevent her voice from being muffled by the repeatedly played rumble of the train’s arrival. The poem’s performance registers the extremity and shock of Sen’s horrific, senseless death, making it impossible to assimilate the event. Another assemblage, inspired by *Curb*’s poem sequence “Threshold,” analyzed earlier, captures the pregnant speaker’s reaction after hearing the news of Srinivas Kuchibhotla’s shooting. Adding another layer to her

powerful interpretation of the poem, the composer has also integrated a recording of her own daughter's heartbeat into the piece. Incidentally, this work was composed when Chen herself was moving into the third trimester of pregnancy, just like Victor at the time of writing the poem.

Amarnath Ravva, an experimental author living in California, has created a series of visual collages including Google satellite imagery and video that expand *Curb's* emphasis on duration by rendering temporal aspects of the "Milestones" section of the book. As we learn from the brief description of Ravva's contribution included in *Curb's* webpage, his pieces reflect on the societal habit of situating an event through police-like tracking of the body's exact coordinates, drawing chalk contours around it, and documenting the site with photos. For Ravva, these procedural activities show how we collectively choose to mask reality through supposedly ordinary shared gestures. His collages, preoccupied with exact locations as much as historical and geographical distance, combine satellite views of the static suburban grid of East Lansing, Michigan, with embedded video overlays projecting images of the Kaveri river in India with its rustling greenery, sun-lit rocky banks, falling rain, with only occasionally transpiring sound effects. Seen through the prism of *Curb's* poems, the feral, dynamic images of the river superimposed on the static, parceled land become largely silent meditative nature-culture objects contrapuntally related to *Curb* that create an immersive environment of the archive's near and far sites of displacement. Evocative of Victor's lyrical refigurations of official documents typically void of signs of life, Ravva's assemblages throw into relief Victor's sense of diasporic time and its projective durations. Pointing to pervasiveness of surveillance technologies in contemporary landscape through unsettling imagery generated by digital satellite maps, punctuated by superimposed footage with images and sounds related to nature and weather phenomena (river, trees, rocks, rain), Ravva's work also reflects on the procedures of monitoring immigrants' movements in urban environments and on their bodies' emplacement against which "the wedging body creates a space, insisting on mattering" (Victor, *Curb* 61). Victor begins one of the readings of *Curb's* "Milestones" section by telling the story of the South Asian immigrant and community activist Kala Bagai, a crucial figure in the history of the South Asian diaspora in the US, then performs her own work to the visual accompaniment of Ravva's assemblages ("C__P__Time"). The poet's performance brings into sharp focus spatial, temporal, and sonic dynamics of diasporic time and generates unheard durations drawn out through direct engagement with archival material and the life narrative of the entire Bagai family. Identifying many of her poetics' sonic elements in her own family narratives, Victor recalls that they always belonged to the voices of her closest relatives:

My parents would gather up slivers of language, vocal gestures, chipping events from the boulder of the past and placing them in front of me like intricate miniatures. From this method of storytelling, I came to understand polyphony; from the repetition and variation of these stories, I understood improvisation, syncopation, citation; from the grand and ambient churn of the train's wheels, I learned rhythm; from my father's voice, I learned of the work of my own tongue as a teller of stories. ("Strangers")

In her poetry, soundscapes perform the work of establishing locutionary modalities that prevent the events' erasure from their original sites even as their original formats are transformed in the process, projecting forward the archive's historical, cultural, political, economic, ethical, and affective implications. *Curb's* attention to the durational aspect of the archive relies on iterations that expose constructions of voice through strikingly complex polyphony underlying witnessing in the present-day conflicted ambience defined by extremities of deep noise and concrete sound.

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EXTREME ECOLOGIES

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The Posthuman Body as an EcoGothic Wasteland in Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* and Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic*

ABSTRACT

The focus of my inquiry are environmentally inflected metaphors and discourses of toxicity which inform the contemporary North American posthuman lyric. This provisional generic category of the posthuman lyric has been inspired by the recent shift from an anthropocentric understanding of lyric subjectivities to a biocentric perspective which repositions human epistemologies in relation to more-than-human matter. The posthuman angle questions the concept of the sovereign human self, stressing transversal ontologies, open to inter-agential exchanges, diverse biosemiotic processes and communication loops. My primary interest is in poetic representations of the human body as a transversal, toxic, catastrophe- and death-haunted wasteland. The volumes chosen to problematize those processes are Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* (2016), an elegiac meditation on the dying human species and anthropogenic change, and Adam Dickinson's *Anatomic* (2018), which probes the leaky perimeters of the chemical self using an electronic microscope and burden tests of the poet's own bodily tissues. The posthumanist angle which informs the analyses is supplemented with an ecoGothic one, as both critical paradigms can be seen as interrogatory discourses which probe human fears and hopes concerning the "edge of the human" and the recognition of non-human agency. Within the ecoGothic framework, nature is seen as "a contested site"—a "space of crisis," where human and non-human ecologies interact and co-produce meaning. This double lens will be used for the study of posthuman imaginaries and Anthropocene affects employed by Dickinson and Cobb.

Keywords: posthuman lyric, ecoGothic, biosemiosis, transcorporeality, wasteland.

INTRODUCTION: THE POSTHUMAN LYRIC AND ECOGOTHIC BODIES

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As observed by Tom J. Hillard in his study of 19th-century American ecoGothic, the new materialist turn in the humanities foregrounds the inseparability of the environment from the body. Within this framework, the body is a transversal onto-epistemological continuum in which various agencies and semiotic processes, including non-human ones, interact and communicate (27). Similarly, in her seminal monograph *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo speaks of the necessity of reimagining human corporeality as “a trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). However, the full realization of the interconnectedness comes at a certain price, as Hillard argues, and it can be as liberating as it is terrifying. Alaimo does not explore the fear factor in her own inquiry, but, as further pointed out by Hillard, she does acknowledge “the immediacy and potency of all that the ostensibly bounded, human subject would like to disavow” (Alaimo 4). Indeed, if humans are no longer “the center of things, but nodes in a decentered network” (Weinstock, “Anthropocene” 19), the sense of danger and vulnerability increases, and the human conception of subjectivity is displaced by a “a messier (gothic) territory of matter” (Edwards et al. xviii).

The ecoGothic return of the repressed and the attendant ambiguous affects will be central to my own interrogation of the trans-corporeal subjects and non-human agencies in the two selected volumes of North American poetry. The ecocritical and posthumanist philosophical frameworks informing my analysis includes the ecoGothic perspective, within which, as noted by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, “all of us are already uncanny ecoGothic subjects, traversed by the automaticity of our nonhuman origins and affectivity” (12):

The indistinction of the human and nonhuman and the agency of the nonhuman environment become determining forces on and in the human world, determining forces that are largely disavowed as humans strive to conceive of themselves as conscious, rational, and volitional selves. The shaping force of the human’s immanent nonhuman origins and of the agentic nonhuman world—disavowed, repressed, denied—can always be counted on to return with a haunting and uncanny force in the Ecogothic. (Keetley and Sivils 12)

Seeking to conceptualize the tenets of ecoGothic as a form of critical praxis, rather than a separate genre, the Italian critic David Del Principe emphasizes its corporeal focus: “the EcoGothic examines the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman,

posthuman, or hybrid—through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation or environmental and species identity” (1). Thus, the ecoGothic view offers “a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (Del Principe 2). The scholar argues further that the contemporary breach between human and more-than-human ontologies stems from “the periods of seismic, industrial, mechanical, or technological growth that radically destabilized conceptions of non/human identity” (2). Andrew Smith and William Hughes supplement Del Principe’s angle by pointing out that ecocritical thought and the Gothic can be seen as interrogatory discourses which problematize human fears concerning the “edge of the human” and non-human agency. Within the ecoGothic framework, nature is seen as “a contested site”—a “space of crisis,” where human and non-human ecologies interact and co-produce meaning (Smith and Hughes 2–3).

This lens seems especially fitting for the study of the corporeal self in the poetry of the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (Keller 1).¹ I wish to look at the human body as an ecoGothic “space of crisis”—a transversal, toxic, catastrophe- and death-haunted landscape. My contention is that what emerges from the encounter between the posthuman lyric and ecoGothic concerns is the contemporary wasteland poem, in which many ecological anxieties, affects and questions are foregrounded and creatively interrogated. What I am specifically interested in are environmentally inflected metaphors and discourses of toxicity. Both the wasteland and the toxic body can be considered near-metaphors, since they exist at once as material realities and productive interrogatory tropes. Thus, the wasteland poem, as conceptualized here, is a variant of “the crisis poem,” perhaps best exemplified by T. S. Eliot’s modernist classic itself, in which the poet recognizes the limitations of the existing epistemologies, along with the inadequacy of the inherited forms of expression, in confrontation with the ruined or disappearing world.

Significantly for my inquiry, *The Waste Land* begins with a death of nature: as observed by Barry Spurr, it is “mediated through the reversal of the reverdie tradition in poetry, wherein springtime (April) is portrayed as the annual period of fertile renewal” (57). A series of interconnected deaths follows (Spurr 57), and the poem “unfolds in sites of crisis that

¹ The term was coined by Lynn Keller in her monograph *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (2017). Keller explains that she formulated it “to provide a term, distinct from the label for the geological era that may have begun centuries ago” and to stress “the awareness that humans have come to be the dominant force affecting planetary systems” (1).

are themselves *in extremis*” (McIntire 179). The landscape is gradually decomposed through images of sterility, desolation, human and urban decay, and disintegrating forms, including “the rattle of the bones,” the river’s “broken tent,” a scavenging rat “dragging its slimy belly,” and the unburied corpses (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 42–43). The all-pervading mood is one of despair and melancholy—“The nymphs are departed” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 42), and with them a hope for the solace of pastoral nature and its restorative powers. Eliot’s wastelanders are disconnected spectres, walking and empty corpses, “neither living nor dead” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 38); Western mythologies no longer hold, becoming part of the detritus.

Also in an environmental sense, the post-war world has become “a stony rubbish,” a lifeless, parched desert, where “the dead tree gives no shelter . . . [a]nd the dry stone no sound of water” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 38). As noted by Gabrielle McIntire, Eliot’s vision is deeply ecocritical, as the poet “consistently shows sensitivities to fragile or degraded environments” (178). The dominant settings of the poem are “ones of topographical and environmental extremes (the polluted cityscape and the desert),” with very few places of refuge, such as hyacinth gardens, riverscapes and the briefly mentioned wilderness (McIntire 186). “In *The Waste Land*,” the critic argues further on, Eliot

simultaneously renders the postwar world as quasi-apocalyptic and replete with personal, political, spiritual, and cultural problems that threaten to unravel all meaning. In suggesting that ecological crises accompany these other problems of early twentieth-century modernity, Eliot pushes us to consider the analogies between compromised environmental exteriors and a complex range of similarly polluted interior states. (178)

The polluted and spiritually “dry” interior is evoked also by the recurrent figures of void in another of Eliot’s most celebrated poems.

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless. (T. S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men” 56)

The hauntological trope of “hollow,” “empty,” “stuffed men” with “dried voices” whispering inaudible and meaningless communications (“The Hollow Men” 56) further reveals Eliot’s ecoGothic sensibility.

The spatial trope of the desert in *The Waste Land* is indicative of a post-apocalyptic emptiness; however, for the modernist poet the desert in its mythical dimension also articulates a dystopian desire for the “still point”—an urge to arrest the world’s chaos and its apocalyptic darkness, for, as Wallace Stevens points out in “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the desert is a blank canvas, where “nothing must stand between you and the shapes you take” (183). Thus, the horrors informing Eliot’s poetic wastelands are balanced with a desire of such a tropological and metaphysical “still point,” reconciling opposites and shielding the human consciousness from the entropy of “broken images.” The attendant realization informing Eliot’s quest for a new version of the absolute is that its fulfilment equals death—“the final meeting,” where shapes no longer take on form, the colours fade, the life force is “paralysed,” and “gesture” remains “without motion” (Eliot, “The Hollow Men” 56).

A more poignant version of the modernist wasteland poem, resonating strongly with Allison Cobb’s penchant for the grotesque, is Wallace Stevens’s “The Man on the Dump,” with its central ecologically flavoured line—“the dump is full / Of images” (201). Like that of Eliot, Stevens’s wasteland imagery connects the existential, the metapoetic and the environmental condition. And yet, where Eliot’s imagery strives towards a form of blankness, hollowing, and erasure, Stevens probes the material and the metaphysical detritus as a living ecology which is subject to decay. The poet-philosopher is here positioned within the landscape of abject urban trash and aesthetic debris, on a literal and symbolic dump, among broken Romantic tropes and rubbish, including “the mattresses of the dead, / Bottles, pots, shoes and grass” (203). In search of renewal, clarity and self-knowledge, Stevens provocatively recycles the excessively pastoral tropes of nature, “the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew” (202) and intertwines them with the “unpoetic” and haunted consumerist wasteland, consisting of very specific, humdrum objects such as “old tin cans,” “lard pails,” or “the wrapper on the can of pears” (201–02). For Stevens, the dump becomes compost where “[o]ne feels the purifying change” (202) and where the imagination can re-engage with the real world and its material processes. Man is, however, still at the centre of this change, and the individual imagination asserts its power over the (im)material dislocations, anthropogenic detritus and contingent ecologies. Considering poetic representations of waste, Lawrence Buell argues that Stevens’s dump is predominantly “a symbolic location,” a “repository of used-up images”; in short, that the poem fails to address environmental issues (664). However, the poet’s preoccupation with the materiality of objects and spaces, their irreducible thingness, paves the way for Cobb’s and Dickinson’s poetics of waste and their ecocentric interrogations of transcorporeal matter.

As observed by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures*,

[m]atter, the vast stuff of the world and of ourselves, has been subdivided into manageable “bits” or flattened into a “blank slate” for human inscription. The environment has been drained of its blood, its lively creatures, its interactions and relations—in short, all that is recognizable as “nature”—in order that it become a mere empty space, an “uncontested ground,” for human “development.” (1–2)

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In my article, I wish to investigate ecoGothic tropes and wasteland imagery within the contemporary posthuman lyric, which offers a counter-narrative to such emptying and flattening representations of non-human matter and man’s ecological inscriptions. In dialogue with the modernist wasteland poem—which is predominantly anthropocentric in its themes, spatiotemporalities, and attitudes—my focus will be the trope of the body-as-multispecies-crowd and the trope of the body-as-wasteland, as exemplified in two volumes that mobilize a number of non-anthropocentric perspectives, heeding Alaimo’s call for “more potent, more complex understandings of materiality” (2) and different interrogations of “the material substance of the self” (3). What I hope to demonstrate is that Dickinson’s and Cobb’s interrogatory poetics, operating at the intersections of poetry, autobiography and science, offer a fresh approach to the contemporary sense of an ending.

The provisional generic category of the posthuman lyric, which I shall use throughout, has been inspired by the recent shift from an anthropocentric understanding of lyric subjectivities to a biocentric perspective, which repositions human epistemologies in relation to more-than-human matter. The posthuman angle unsettles the concept of the sovereign human self, stressing transversal ontologies, open to inter-agential exchanges, diverse biosemiotic processes and communication loops. To illustrate those processes, I have selected Allison Cobb’s *After We All Died* (2016)—an elegiac meditation on the dying human species which shifts between the human and the non-human point of view and includes the perspective of various species and organisms, including cancer cells—and Adam Dickinson’s *Anatomic* (2018), in which the poet probes the leaky perimeters of the chemical self, turning an electronic microscope and burden tests on his own bodily tissues. The problems to be considered in the analysis include the positioning of the human body within the poems’ conceptual framework as well as the dominant tropes, exploring the porous boundaries between the human and the non-human. As will be argued in my reading of a few selected poems, both authors problematize the threat of self-extinction, the return of the bio-chemical repressed, and

the felt and lingering ecological catastrophe. To interrogate the extreme limits of the self and a sense of an ending, both authors deploy ecoGothic spatiotemporal tropes of spectral and abject bodies, permeable thresholds, dark mirrors, as well as decaying and apocalypse-haunted wastelands. These tropes often convey ecoGothic affects such as curiosity, paralysis, anxiety, paranoia, fear, and horror.

Naturally, it must be noted that Cobb and Dickinson belong to different cultural and literary traditions (American and Canadian, respectively), and their ecoGothic imaginaries are shaped by diverse social, geopolitical, and aesthetic legacies. Such ecoGothic categories as the wilderness, the frontier, and the Native as the colonial Other bind the histories of the two countries, but the national and colonial ideologies differ in many ways. As noted by Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte, “Gothic tropes have emerged in Canadian literature as integral to the postcolonial interrogation of national identity constructs and dominant representational practices” (x). Among the multiple functions of Gothic modalities in Canadian writing, the critics include “convey[ing] experiences of ambivalence and/or split subjectivity resulting from the inherent incommensurability of conflicted subject positions that have emerged from a colonial context and persisted into the present” (xi). During the formation of the nation-state, Gothic was often used in Canada “to textualize a form of white history that cast colonized or invaded peoples and the colonial landscape as a ghostly or monstrous threat to the civilized (white) world” (xi), hence the recurrent tropes of the personified wilderness, “haunted” by “the spirit of savagery” (xii). Invoking Margaret Atwood’s notion of survival in the wilderness, which structures the Canadian settler experience and the emergent culture, Shoshanna Ganz similarly points out the ecoGothic trope of nature as “the ever-present and fearful monster seeking to swallow human beings whole” (88). On the other hand, however, Canada, similarly to the USA, was considered by some as too pragmatic and “too new for ghosts” (Susanna Moodie qtd. in Sugars and Turcotte xiii), a land without history and thus devoid of the right conditions for the emergence of the monstrous and the supernatural (Sugars and Turcotte xii–xiii). The affects that accompanied those ambivalent engagements with the Gothic ranged from fear, sublime pathos and paranoia—stemming from what Northrop Frye dubbed the “garrison mentality” (qtd. in Sugars and Turcotte) of the settler-invader faced with “the unsettled wilderness” (xii)—through guilt over “the illegitimate appropriation of Native lands” and the status of a colony that is itself a colonizer (xiv), to the traumatic alienation, forgetfulness and confusion resulting from the perpetual state of “internal and external disquiet” (Sugars and Turcotte xvi). Similarly,

Justin D. Edwards contends in *Gothic Canada* that the disquiet stems from the ecoGothic desire to “eradicate unsettledness and settling down at the cost of other cultures and nations” (xx).

In an essay on the frontier Gothic, Kevin Corstorphine points to a similar mixture of idealism, denial and horror in the American variety of the genre, whose roots he considers inherently dystopian: “In the search for a new Eden, this wilderness becomes a source of both idealism and anxiety” (120). Citing numerous studies of American attitudes towards the nature/culture divide—including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Roderick Frazier Nash, Frederick Jackson Turner, Marianne Noble and Allan Lloyd-Smith—the scholar traces the shifting and historically contingent meaning of the word *wilderness*, emphasizing the anthropocentric anxieties at its heart, for *the wild* was used to denote “the place of wild beasts,” the uncultivated land, and all kinds of “creatures not under the control of man” (121). Significantly for my study of the unbound posthuman body, this loss of control involved the human beings themselves and could be extended both onto the wider body-politic and the individual human body-as-wilderness.

In the same essay, based on Teresa A. Goddu’s revision of the American Gothic canon, Corstorphine considers yet another context that is crucial to my analysis. Engaging with established ahistorical readings, Goddu argues that “[t]he Gothic’s connection to American history is difficult to identify precisely because of the national and critical myths that America and its literature *have* no history” (9). The critic dismantles this notion by uncovering, in early American Gothic writing, a repressed historicity in the form of the “Indian, demonized as a devil, and the wilderness, turned into a bloody landscape, not only to replace but exceed their British [Gothic] types” (Goddu 72, qtd. in Corstorphine 123). The American variety of the Gothic deals with “specific sites of historical haunting, most notably slavery” (Goddu 10). Indeed, as shown by Goddu, the dislocation from history and orientation towards the future and progress is a convenient and dangerous illusion, an ecoGothically charged myth that served to keep the national conscience clean, and to hide both the rapacious exploitation of the land and the colonial structures of power. As noted by Allison Cobb, “[w]e are the inheritors of a violent, exploitative culture. We live in a nation built on genocide, slavery, and the ethos of maximum exploitation of resources” (Cobb and Davids). The purported “absence” of the past and the rejection of pre-colonial cultures as either non-existent or always already doomed excluded Native Americans and African Americans from the category of humanity, also justifying the policies of environmental injustice, racial othering, as well as the uprooting, brutalization, and extermination of Indigenous and African peoples. Thus, uncanny Gothic

bodies, ghosts, animals, and monsters in the North American tradition must be read within those geohistorical trajectories, dystopian Western ideologies, and conceptualizations of nature, since they problematize the destructive economies and imaginaries shaping the relationship between humans and their surroundings.

Such, then, are the contexts that underlie Cobb's and Dickinson's interrogations of the borders between human bodies and non-human matter. Both poets employ the scientific understanding of the corporeal and ecological condition of humanity to reengage with what Edwards et al. call "the environmentally repressed" (xii). As mentioned above, ecoGothic should also be viewed as an aesthetic response in a time of crisis—it addresses "the particular terror of unsettlement" (Iurcotte 76), be it geopolitical, ontological, epistemological, psychological or aesthetic. As I argue further, the ecoGothic tropes and transgressive forms in their poetry serve as reactions to a state of personal as well as ecological emergency and unsettlement.

THE OVERCROWDED SELF IN THE BIOCHEMICAL WASTELAND: ADAM DICKINSON'S *ANATOMIC*

Dickinson's *Anatomic* is an experimental volume, created at the intersection of poetry and science. It is based on medical burden tests² to which the poet's own body was subjected for a period of two years. Using blood, urine, faeces, saliva tests and electroscopic imaging, Dickinson seeks to grasp the outer perimeters of his corporeal self. His quest is for a legible and truer story, a more comprehensive dissection and autographing of the self. What he discovers underneath the epidermis, however, is not an Eliotesque void, arrested motion and dry whimper, but a rich, noisy biosemiotic world—a leaky inscape, swarming with life and transversal metabolic scripts, often illegible and independent of the speaker's will:

I wear multinational companies in my flesh. But I also wear symbiotic and parasitic relationships with countless nonhumans who insist for their own reasons on making me human. I want to know the stories of

² As Stacy Alaimo explains in *Bodily Matters*, body burden is "a measure of one's cumulative exposure to dangerous substances" (97). Burden tests involve sampling tissues and fluids and mapping causal genes for rare metabolic traits and disorders. Lee et al. provide a more detailed definition: "[B]urden tests collapse rare variants in a genetic region into a single burden variable and then regress the phenotype on the burden variable to test for the cumulative effects of rare variants in the region" (224).

these chemicals, metals, and organisms that compose me. I am an event, a site within which the industrial powers and evolutionary pressures of my time come to write. I am a spectacular and horrifying crowd. How can I read me? How can I write me? (Dickinson 9)³

This overcrowded self is thus not only writing and reading itself, but is being written and read by countless and somewhat spectral “nonhuman others” that keep hijacking, questioning and unsealing the boundaries of the corporeal tissues. In Dickinson’s poems, hormones “conjugate the subject,” white cells constantly signal to invisible adversaries, and the tongue becomes an unreadable map, while fats are the new subconscious, storing the poet’s biochemical pasts. Indeed, *Anatomic* may serve as an illustration of Keetley and Sivils’ broader observation that

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[f]rom the conventional image of the maiden in the ruined castle, imperiled by secrets that almost always turn out to be familial, by strangers that almost always turn out to be human, the ecogothic turns to the inevitability of humans intertwined with their natural environment—to humans surrounded, interpenetrated, and sometimes stalked by a nonhuman with an agentic force that challenges humans’ own vaunted ability to shape. (7)

In Dickinson’s book, the repressed biochemical scripts of the transversal body return with a vengeance, manifesting their uncontrollable, spectral powers of communication, but also posing a threat to the anthropocentric conceptions of the bounded self. The agentic but ungraspable force of enzymes—described by the poet as “the unmanned messianism of hormones” (40) whose “signal slips undetected” (24)—translates also into a discontinuous mashup of discourses which comprise autobiographical confessions, scientific terms, technical vocabularies, and work-in-progress photographs. The microscopic imaging, which I have discussed elsewhere (see Ambroży “The Post-Human Lyric”), further contributes to the questioning of the inner/outer boundaries, as exemplified by uncanny electronic enhancements of the poet’s urine and sweat particles. Resembling extra-terrestrial terrains and dim caverns lit in crimson chiaroscuro, the images possess an illegible abstract quality and evoke a hauntingly sombre mood.

What interests me in Dickinson’s engagement with the tropes of spectral haunting, stalking and interpenetration, are the ecoGothic affects expressed in the confessional “I am a spectacular and horrifying crowd,”

³ All quotations from Adam Dickinson’s volume *Anatomic* (The Coach House, 2018) are used with the permission of the Author and the Publisher.

namely the combination of curiosity and horror upon confronting the body as a toxic site, vulnerable to “chemical trespass” (Alaimo 83). The anatomic peering into the molecular sublime is somewhat reminiscent of Ishmael’s peering into the depths of the ocean in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—the compulsive quest for self-knowledge exposes biochemical vortices rather than Cartesian truths, returning the bodily uncanny that both fascinates and horrifies the poet. Interestingly, the metabolically ghosted body appears as “this hopeful monster” (Dickinson 24) and “a survivor,” with an incredible adaptive capacity and an equally strong power of self-annihilation:

One part of you,
as an act of survival,
starts eating another part. This is a membranous decision

in which the crowd,
having mistaken
its periphery, resembles
its prey
(22)

What both frightens and fascinates the speaker is the growing sense of lost control over the actions and processes of the body: “My greatest fear is to be helpless, vulnerable, incommensurately scaled to my torment,” the speaker confesses in the poignantly titled “Scale” (94). In this ever “inter-signalling kingdom,” “[c]ommands spread / horizontally / in a crowd,” and the “executive force” (94–95) may be located everywhere and nowhere. The anxiety which stems from the ever contingent, open peripheries of the self-as-crowd comes to the fore in the piece called “Circulation.” Here the central image is that of the liquifying body which succumbs to proliferating microbic spectres: “If they worked together, the microbes could eat us in a few days. Our bodies would blacken, liquify, and run into the streets” (54). This potential liquefaction, which turns the body into amorphous black slime, is a serious threat to the integrity of the human subject, as it exposes the futility of our attempts at policing human ontologies. In fact, slime is a frequent trope of abject horror—“it is a revenge of matter, which seeks to swallow the known and bounded world into its own amorphousness,” as Kelly Hurley observes in *The Gothic Body* (38). In Dickinson’s book, the lack of contour is reflected on the level of language, which thickens in denser prose pieces, breaking down and rarefying into molecular cascades of words, thus imitating unpredictable microbiotic dis-articulations as well as hormonal rhythms:

cense
cents
scents
scene

cite
cyte
sight
site (Dickinson 78)

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As noted by Xavier Aldana Reyes, in his essay on Gothic affects, “the purpose of the gothic is to scare, disturb, disgust” (16–17), and the accompanying psychosomatic reactions towards the Gothic object include confusion, paranoia and emotional paralysis. Those affects inform Dickinson’s anatomic project, as shown in the following passage from the poet’s medical diary, incorporated into the volume:

When the results started to arrive, I felt tense. A door was about to open into a mailroom filled with incommunicable antibodies strung from a bare wire. I read them quickly not wanting to let my eyes linger on anything alarming. When I came across a chemical that measured among the top percentiles, I panicked. I felt sick. Cortisone dripped. Death comes like a letter that folds its recipients. (Dickinson 30)

Interestingly, as Dickinson discovers, the posthuman anxiety is “a form of auto-immunity” (54), at once alienating the conscious self from the enzymatic wilderness of the body and enfolding it within its menacing communications. The extreme reactions, both physiological and emotional, enhanced by the overlapping scientific and emotional vocabularies, draw from the repertoire of Gothic affects—terror, which, as Ann Radcliffe claimed in her essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826), “awakens the faculties to a high degree of life,” and the more visceral horror, which “contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them” (403). Thus, the enzymatic hauntings result in a similar affective tension between heightened self-vision and disabling fear and panic. This leads to an existential trauma—here implied also by the recurrent Gothic trope of the “open door,” which exposes the vulnerability of our “imagined” (Dickinson 42) human contours and protective shields: “The doors I locked, and locked again, opened behind my back” (68), observes the speaker, grappling with the unboundedness of his life story, overexposed by medical surveillance and ghostly cohabitants. Similarly, in “Circulation,” the discomfort with the “stopmotion ponds” of microbes on the poet’s hands results in the obsessive handwashing—another gesture of separation which strips the epidermic barrier of its protective layer—the hands are sanitized to the point

of sterility (54). As noted by Laura R. Kremmel, “the gothic imagination unsettles the notion of the sanitized, isolated corpse at the core of human exceptionalism” (272). Dickinson’s Gothic tropes and affects expose the biochemical feedback loops which threatened the “sanitized” conception of the human self. The body sealed off from “the intra-active”⁴ assemblages of microbes becomes a besieged fort with an illusory sense of safety.

The posthuman perspective expands the temporalities of the poet’s biochemical inscape. In the introduction to *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Keetley and Sivils observe that the ecoGothic “casts its net still further back than does the gothic into the era of prehistory, into our prehuman (and nonhuman) origins” (5). In *Anatomic*, the cells become attentive “scriveners” in the biochemical “archives”—storing memories to which the poet has no access, and which connect him to the pre-conscious biographical past and its indeterminate symbiotic ecologies. “In the prehistory of the gut, / getting off this planet / means getting someone else / to take the wheel” (Dickinson 44), the speaker observes in “Shotgun, Called It.” The ecoGothic temporality also informs the following poem, dedicated to polychlorinated biphenyls:

When my mother’s breasts were building my brain, her milk sent me a postcard from the postwar boom. The message was scrambled. Proprietary. Windborne elsewhere’s outfall spikes. Face-swirled factories with disjunctive hair loss. Heat-wave skin. Malignant neoplasms of indefinite dose. Headquartered in the subtext were inscrutable companies conflicted with interest, like urban forests or chlorine, sending people to work under crumbling narrative arcs. (Dickinson 34)

Those broadening spatio-temporal vistas reach beyond the personal history of the poet and embrace the less definite Anthropocene temporalities and spatial scales, marked by “recursive scripts where industrial innovations find their way back into the metabolic messaging systems of the biological bodies that have created them” (Dickinson 31). The narrative arcs of the poet’s life indeed “crumble,” as the body’s absorptive membranes are “ghost-written” (Dickinson 34) and contaminated by post-war environmental residues, including carcinogenic pollutants, inherited from his mother’s body. Those crumbling scripts belong to the Gothic mode’s “negative aesthetics,” as formulated by Fred Botting, who argues that Gothic texts are defined by “an absence of the light associated with sense, security and knowledge” (1–2). This hesitant condition is captured in Dickinson’s poems through the trope of lamps in the bodily archive which uncover

⁴ The term “intra-active” used by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Half-Way* refers to “the mutual constitution of entangled species” (33).

the terrifying site of the “burglarized flesh”: “The guy who brings his own lamp to the archives is not fucking around. The guy who finds his archive filled with lamps is terrified of his burglarized flesh. The lights were on the whole time” (53). The corporeal self—overexposed by the alienating light of the microscopic gaze—paradoxically loses “its sense of cumulative contour” (53), calling for a different mode of auto-biographing.

The transversal aspect of Dickinson’s ecoGothic inheritance is captured also in poems addressing Canada’s colonial past and the continuing socioecological impact of racial injustice. In the prose poem “The People of Grassy Don’t Have a Mercury Problem, They Have a Drinking Problem,” the author evokes the history of “one of Canada’s worst environmental disasters” (Porter), namely the poisoning of Northwestern Ontario’s English-Wabigoon River system which runs through the territory of the Grassy Narrows First Nation. A local paper company’s dumping of tons of mercury into the river in the 1960s and 70s affected the health and economy of three generations of the Ojibwe peoples. According to Jody Porter, author of the CBC documentary *Children of the Poisoned River*, ninety percent of the population suffered from neurological effects and many people died because of related health problems or suicide. The most recent tests of the water show that the problem has not been solved and that the community continues to struggle with the lethal consequences of chemical dumping.

Dickinson engages with the transgenerational catastrophe which haunts Grassy Narrows, foregrounding the toxic discourse about the disaster. The “talk,” like the lethal mercury in the river rapids, spills over the discursive field, downplaying the socioecological injustice and the suffering of the victims:

There was talk that the waters were not polluted, and if they were polluted, then the company was not responsible. There was talk that nothing escaped from the plant, and if anything did escape, the company did not know it was harmful. There was talk that bodies were not actually poisoned, and if they were poisoned it was because of what goes into them, the weekends in Kenora, the altered dream-states that break into leaf in this culture, but culture urine and vomit in the streets of that culture. (Dickinson 65)

The repetition of words and of entire structures (“there was talk of making a national park to solve the problem . . . There was talk of the problem . . . There was talk that the waters were not polluted”), negations (“They were *no longer* themselves,” “the company *did not* know”), hedging and modalities (“*if anything* did escape,” “*if they were* poisoned,” “which *seemed*

heartbreaking and unnecessary”) (65, emphasis mine) are hijacked by the poet from biased media coverage as rhetorical tools of environmental neo-imperialism that takes over the land and the bodies, colonizing the language and the minds. The discourse serves to dilute the causation, the economic privilege and the agency of the polluters, and to dehumanize the victims. The Grassy Narrows community becomes “the problem-people” who are “spread onto maps folded into animal shapes on long car trips through the wilderness” (65). Represented either as abstract tourist attractions, points on the map, catering to the whites’ utopian nostalgia for true wilderness, or as drunkards and drug addicts whose perspective can be conveniently dismissed as unreliable, they are no longer victims but are seen as an uncontained, wild, and abject ecoGothic menace (65).

In “Toxic Discourse,” Lawrence Buell observes that “self-identified victims of environmental illness” are often “[left] oscillating between implacable rage and uncertainty,” as the legal and scientific complexity of an investigation in such cases often results in the failure of ecojustice (660). The insidious solipsistic “talk,” as shown by Dickinson, does not belong to the Indigenous people—they are deprived of voice and disempowered by the legalese and probabilities of science, and left with the risk and harm whose sources are difficult to prove. Significantly, Dickinson recognizes his own situatedness as the economically and socially privileged white settler and a “talker” haunted by the ecoGothic guilt: “And here I have it in my blood talking, a settler methylated by the privilege afforded by the problem’s extremities shaking with poorly connected dreams” (65). The vague language, as exposed by the poem’s reductive rhetoric, is poignantly disconnected from the absolute reality of the chemical contamination and the resultant deaths of the people in Grassy Narrows. There is no real sense of culpability behind those conditional “ifs” of the media coverage, and the speaker’s “poorly connected dreams” further signal the rapture in the collective horizon of environmental future. Dickinson seems also to address the limits of compassion from a position of privilege and distance, drawing our attention to the gap between the abstract quality of liberal guilt and the horrifically real “slow violence” (Nixon) of ecological damage. The bizarre spectrality of the official rhetoric reproduces neo-colonial oppression, along with its semiotic networks of power, and shows how language can cynically “relocate” chemical waste to the space of the Other. It points to the mistreatment of the victims as a residue of the settler’s historical necropolitics⁵ which saw Indigenous people as vanishing, doomed to death, or as ghosts. The Indigenous bodies represented as an abstraction, the abject and ghostly Other, are juxtaposed in the poem with

⁵ I am using the term “necropolitics” after Achille Mbembe (11–40).

an urge to really “touch” the problem: “the problem could be touched and when touched it would grab back like the rapids in that river” (Dickinson 65). Both the “touch”—ironically resonating with the pastoral mythologies of “untouched” wilderness—and the ecoGothic “grip” of the river are curiously ambiguous tropes. On the one hand, they recognize the material agency of the wounded ecosystem, its revenant toxicity, ready to return the rapacious “grab” (Dickinson 65) and strike back with a vengeance. On the other hand, what they also imply is the need to abandon the vantage point of a distant aseptic spectator which creates boundaries and objectifies the Indigenous peoples and more-than-human matter. The shift from the specular to the haptic is an attempt to reconceptualize the geography of the self as part of the increasingly vulnerable, scarred and toxic body of the land, but the violence of the river’s response seems significant. “The touch” cannot be trusted, for it extends into historical time, forever haunted by past transgressions, pervasive environmental racism, centuries of exploitation, the white settlers’ acquiescence as chemical consumers, and economic abuse of the land. The dream of a stable connection and intimacy, as pointed out by Jonathan Kertzer, “when shared by some and imposed others . . . can be obsessive and therefore monstrous” (119). Dickinson stresses the potential monstrosity of the universalizing discourses of toxicity which disregard socioeconomic difference and usurp the right to speak from the position of the victim. Using repetition, self-reflexively linked to the speaking subject in the final line, the poet points to the limits of imagination and lyric intervention as a mode of ecological connection: “All this talking and I am beginning to repeat myself. Myself” (65). Repetition is the stuff of Gothic dreams and nightmares—a figure of stubborn spectrality which unsettles stable identities, creating an interval of difference, of the uncanny, which renders the self vulnerable to further divisions and displacements. For Dickinson, the awareness of the enmeshment of bodies and ecologies enhances the spectrality of the inviolate self—after all, the Western subject is the product of the Anthropocene and its environmental violence.

If “the Anthropocene is a waking nightmare,” as Rune Graulund proposes (45), Dickinson’s *Anatomic* does not offer a safe refuge from it; rather, it wakes us into a higher degree of self-consciousness regarding our socioecological and ontological entanglements in environmental damage. Dickinson’s aesthetic artifice and various experiential and conceptual paradigms create a rich discursive-material sphere which destabilizes the cohesive self on multiple levels. The poetic anatomy of the posthuman body proves that we are “an array of bodies,” “an agentic assemblage” (Bennett 121), with multiple spectral actants and processes. Man is no longer presiding God-like over the posthuman dump, as in Stevens’s wasteland poem, but is the center of its pathological socioeconomic

metabolism reaching back to the deep ecological past and into the deep future. In Dickinson's volume, the fragile reassertions of "Myself" are intertwined with the constant recognition of the body's transformative relations with ecoOthers, be it human species, hormones, microbes, widespread radioactive waste or invisible microplastics. In Stacy Alaimo's apt words, "we inhabit a corporeality that is never disconnected from our environment . . . we are permeable, emergent beings, reliant upon the others within and outside our porous borders" (156).

LESSONS IN MORTALITY: ALLISON COBB'S *AFTER WE ALL DIED*

Like *Anatomic*, Allison Cobb's *After We All Died* underscores the interconnections between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Formally, the book is also unsettlingly complex, as the poet shifts between various onto-epistemological perspectives and agencies, including those of the doomed human and animal species, invasive organisms, such as rats or ants, but also microbes, cancer cells and plastic pollutants. To tackle various kinds of an ending and multiple and interconnected threats of death—"global death, species death, even our own deaths,"⁶ as the poet admits in an interview with Christy Davids—alternative idioms need to be invented, capable of showing the entangled discursive and biological bodies and their shared vulnerability vis-à-vis the impending anthropogenic disaster.

The equally significant personal angle, as aptly argued by Joshua Schuster in his essay "Elegy after Allison Cobb's *After We All Died*," reveals the gendered and ethnic implications of her gaze, "lay[ing] bare her own archly situated viewpoint." In the poet's own words, "I filter the world through my own white, female, queer, worker drone, non-reproductive being" (Cobb, *After* 51). However, the poet often switches to the collective "we," as in "Ark," where the idea of god is a joint feat of the human imagination: "god we created / all without form and void" (Cobb, *After* 5). The apostrophic "you" plays a role as well, for example in "I made this," where the speaker directly addresses the listener to create a sense of complicity in the crimes against the environment: "You know how it is, *mon clown*" (Cobb, *After* 11), or in "I forgive you," in which the addressee is the speaker's flailing and mortal body. Each pronoun establishes a different relation and shows the self as a complex interface, where numerous others intersect and come into contact. As the poet contends, "[w]e *want* to be

⁶ All quotations from interviews with Allison Cobb as well as her volume *After We All Died* (2016) are used with the permission of the Author.

in relation, and we need to be—we wouldn't survive without others. It seems like being human is figuring out how to exist at that interface of self and other" (Cobb and Davids). In an interview with Brian Teare, the poet elaborates on her understanding of that relation:

Our global-scale crises of pollution, disease, and nuclear threat ask us to understand the reality that we are not individuals, but that we are networks and ecosystems—like trees, and fungus, and coral—enmeshed and interdependent, linked in time and space with all else. Proceeding from this knowing makes much of our contemporary culture and its waste feel . . . obscene, which is a word that originally meant "something that bodes ill, foreboding." (Cobb and Teare)

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As with the multi-generic composition of *Anatomic*, Cobb hybridizes her discourse, employing elements of prose, poetry, autobiography, and scientific essay. In prose pieces, she engages with historical and scientific research, for example on the survival of cancer cells in superorganisms or the development of nuclear weapons, which leads to all kinds of questions, including that of ethical responsibility in science as well as exploitation of vulnerable bodies in biochemical research.⁷ Equally vital for her project are autobiographical elements, linking the poet and her body directly with scientific experiments, such as nuclear bomb tests and deployments, and the resultant radioactive pollution, which had a great impact on the local and global environment. Significantly, Cobb was born and raised in Los Alamos, or "Lost Almost," as Cobb's father jokingly labelled the city, named after the cottonwoods—"a tree that means / water in the desert" (Cobb, *After* 80). This city in New Mexico was selected for the Atomic Research Laboratory, which developed the first atomic bomb and the first thermonuclear-fusion/hydrogen bomb ("Los Alamos, New Mexico"). "My town"—the speaker reflects in "The Poem of Force"—"holds / some of the planet's most / dangerous substances that kill / by moving invisibly through cells and scrambling the atoms that make up flesh and bone" (Cobb, *After* 74). Her father, a physicist, worked in one of the military research labs as "Director of Threat Reduction" (37), and was personally involved in the nuclear research which led to the testing and production of bombs. As the poet confesses in the diaristic piece "Sentences, August, 2014," "[e]very breath I drew from

⁷ She investigates, among others, the biopharmaceutical research conducted on the cancerous cells of Henrietta Lacks, who was "the descendent of white plantation owners in Virginia and black female slaves" (Cobb *After*, 63) and who died of cervical cancer after a series of failed radioactive treatments. Her cells were then extracted from her body and replicated in labs across the world for further experimentation and research, including developing vaccines and testing the effects of nuclear radiation. Lack's family has not been made part of the huge profit generated from the research (Cobb *After*, 63).

birth canal to about age 22 was made possible by nuclear war” (38). As in the case of Dickinson, who used his own body for mapping his relationships to the multispecies Other, Cobb’s interest in cancer is also deeply personal (38): radioactive and chemical waste, one of the chief environmental causes of cancer, has been an integral part of her childhood surroundings and life story. The author, at risk herself as “a non-reproductive woman,” a witness to the suffering of many women in her life, confronts the disease as follows: “I am thinking of the women cancer has killed, leaving raw pain trails through the lives of people I love: Alicia’s best friend, Paul’s mother, Ethan’s mother, Carol’s mother, Jill’s mother, Deborah’s sister, Kathy, Stacy, Julie, my aunt Diana, Leslie, Lesley” (53). This sense that her own body, autobiography and family history are coextensive with the environment and “embedded in a much bigger, weightier history” (Cobb and Davids), which includes the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, echoes Adam Dickinson’s interrogations of the nuclear residue and toxic chemicals in his mother’s breast milk, and his own engagement with environmental injustice as the legacy of Canadian colonial history. As pointed out by Keetley and Sivils, “in the traditional Gothic, the past returns usually as ‘the sins of the fathers’” (4); in the ecoGothic, in turn, those sins extend beyond the personal to the transgenerational and global biocultural scale.

Generically unstable, and—like *Anatomic*—designed to break down the increasingly untenable “substance of the self” (Alaimo 8), Cobb’s book offers a confusion of tones—the elegiac, embittered, sorrowful, angry, compassionate, and melancholic are counterbalanced with the comic, ironic and hopeful. Cobb reflects on this instability as her way of avoiding “anticipatory mourning,” the debilitating atmosphere of “doom and gloom,” haunting the environmental debates today:

There is an almost melancholic, romantic tone that can happen, and there can be a kind of pleasurable charge in that, which I find a bit disturbing—as if we can get caught up in enjoying our own self-hatred and guilt, and get pulled into that morass. I am in that too—certainly, I feel those instincts—but I wanted to try to move beyond them. (Cobb and Davids)

In “You were born,” the poet addresses directly that convenient melancholy that “let us who are wealthy in the West / relax into our sadness about the end / of all the stuff we destroyed without knowing or trying” (Cobb, *After* 99). Thus, the uneasy and shifting affects belong to her way of “staying with the trouble,” to borrow from Donna Haraway, rather than surrendering agency and succumbing to what Paul K. Saint-Amour describes as an “anticipatory mourning, a mourning in advance of loss” (25). “Staying

with the trouble,” however, “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 1).

Like Dickinson, Cobb continuously questions the human-centred narrative arc, but her explorations of transcorporeal posthuman wastelands reach even further. Whereas Dickinson’s biochemical autographing relies predominantly on the notion of the corporeal, breathing and conscious self, even if its psychosomatic boundaries ultimately prove contingent and illusory, Cobb sees the body as “owned already” (Cobb, *After* 30)—a ghost that is watching its own funeral but cannot quite understand that it is dead (28). The poet admits to “her ongoing obsession with compost: disparate elements brought together, mixed up, grotesque, delightful, unsettling. A way to grapple with mortality that turns it into something else” (Cobb and Tatarsky). This obsession echoes Haraway’s engagement with the issue of material decomposition in *Staying with the Trouble*, where it is considered integral to our understanding of sympoietic relations between human and more-than-human matter. Reflecting on her affiliation with posthumanist philosophers, Haraway proposes:

We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding. (97)

Although Cobb recognizes this “sympoietic tangling” in her work, her focus is extended to posthumanist residues of substances and bodies that will not decompose, but thrive in their “monstrous endurance,” often beyond human life (Cobb and Tatarsky). “You are only a skin / bag for your microbiome, my clown friend,” “a human meat car [for bacteria] to get around in it,” the speaker observes in “I made this” (Cobb, *After* 8). In one of the pieces, the poet adopts the vantage point of a cancer cell writing its elegy for the dying human race and the fading world. The poem, as the speaker admits, is a failure:

There is
no other poem but this one, a heap
of broken images where the sun beats
on the dead trees and the dry stone gives
no sound of water, only failure, from Latin “to trip,
dupe, deceive” (100)

Clearly in conversation with *The Waste Land*, Cobb evokes Eliot's bleak apocalyptic landscape, drawing our attention to the failure of an anthropocentric vision that treats nature as background to, and objective correlative for, human suffering. The survivor of Cobb's failing world is not the spectral Fisher King, but the immortal and ever-replicating cancer cell: "regular cells have a life span—they die after a certain number of divisions—but cancer cells don't. If they didn't kill off their host, cancer cells could keep going, they live forever" (62), the speaker informs us in a section ominously called "Sentences," and it is this ghostly resilience that fuels the book's ecoGothic imaginary. Cobb thus offers us a peculiar non-anthropocentric song of mourning that forces the reader to reflect on the ecological doom of the Earth and the human species. The opening poem, titled "I forgive you," is a darkly humorous backward glance:

I forgive you fingers. I forgive you wrists and palms. I forgive you web of veins, the nameless knuckles, twenty-seven bones, the nails and moons below. . . . I forgive you cells, all one hundred trillion, the inner ocean that has ebbed and flowed across three million years. I forgive you every part performing all the intricate and simple tasks that make this mass alive. I forgive you all for already having died. (1–2)

Like Dickinson, then, Cobb adopts an anatomic perspective, listing and mourning every part of the body, as she interrogates biosemiotic and transgressive powers of cancerous cells, but her choice of the posthumous perspective is significant. In this "mock-blazon" (Schuster), the degeneration of individual organs and cells gains an ecoGothic dimension, for this "inner ocean that has ebbed and flowed across three million years" is curiously unbound, enmeshed with the non-human environment and implicated in the fading "pulse" of the world (Cobb, *After* 26). In *After We All Died*, "the implacable 'inheritance' in time, an unforgiving return of the past in the present" (Keetley and Sivils 4), characteristic for traditional Gothic temporalities, does not fit within the human space- and timescale; rather, like "hyperobjects," the past is both local and "non-local" and stretches across millennia and into an unpredictable future (Morton 46). Referencing Timothy Morton, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock argues that "hyperobjects—including climate, genetics, capitalism, and the ocean—end the world for the protagonists; this is sometimes in the literal sense of overwhelming them and forcing them into an intimate relationship with their own mortality and other times in the sense of undoing the notion of 'world' as a coherent, unified concept" ("Hyperobjects" 203). Cobb's figure of the "ocean of cells," interconnected with the larger processes of genetic evolution and environmental change, signals such an "undoing,"

along with the need to establish new human-non-human ontologies which would acknowledge both the dissolution of legible boundaries and the limits of our traditional frameworks of mortality.

In “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” Roy Scranton offers valuable insight into such necessary intimacy with death, which, as pointed out by Stephen Collis (see “Nursing the Machine That Killed Us”), can also illumine Cobb’s project:

For humanity to survive in the Anthropocene, we need to learn to live with and through the end of our current civilization. . . . The rub now is that we have to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization. . . . The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality. (Scranton)

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In Cobb’s book, as Collis persuasively argues in his review of the volume, the apocalypse has already happened, and yet the poem does not offer any consolation or easy way out, even if there is, in this elegy, a deep sense of tenderness for the dying planet. “What the book does,” the critic observes further on, “is accept the premise that the threshold has been crossed, and for all intents and purposes, the human project is done. Now the postmortem can begin” (Collis). Since we have all died already, Cobb’s gift of death is a ghost-written manuscript, a radical Gothic narrative about the living dead—the enduring adaptive cancer cells, infinite and bizarrely transcendental plastics, ultra-resilient ants and rats, omnipresent nuclear and industrial pollution that make up the “deep future” of the planet. “I lived to haunt you,” the zombie-cell confesses in “The Things You Loved” (Cobb, *After* 20), as it enumerates various man-made toxins and endocrine disruptors that impact the human DNA and cause cancer. Those are “the things” that the humans, as “king[s] of all creatures,” loved so much that we have allowed them to change our internal and external ecosystems, fusing the bodily and the environmental catastrophes:

hold this and think
 the thing you love
 the most what you most want
 inside you, mixed in
 with excrement in fifteen
 thousand years when someone digs it up. Think
 the thing you loved so much
 you conjured it in labs to live inside the flesh of every animal to saturate
 your own well-fatted flanks, king
 of all the creatures. So these

must be the names for things you loved
so much you peed on all the earth
and all its living things which you then ate
to concentrate its thickest dose inside
your pearl-white fat and rearrange your
DNA and gene expression: aldrin, dieldrin, DDT, mirex, toxaphene, and
TCDD. Heptachlor, hexa
-chlorobenzene, and the PCBs nestle in your
genes with you and chlordecone and the hexa
-chorocyclohexanes. The mark
of all you loved. (21)

As noted by Maged Zaher, Cobb “will make us confront the ways we manufacture and encounter death: cancer, bombs, atomic bombs.” In “I made this,” the speaker addresses the human species as “a skin bag for [its] microbiome” (Cobb, *After* 9), drawing transversal linkages between the geopolitical and the microbiotic colonization of lands and bodies. In an interview concerning her most recent book, *Plastic: An Autobiography* (2021), Cobb recognizes her own complicity in the process: “I continue to dwell entangled in the contradictions and complicities of living as a privileged person in a settler colonialist system that profits off of consume-and-dispose violence” (Cobb and Tatarsky). As also noted by Dickinson, who similarly interrogates the bioaccumulation of “military, industrial, and agricultural history” in his own fat cells (31), this “slow violence” of anthropogenic frameworks translates into cultural practices which threaten human and planetary matter—the fat-based Western diet, the consumerist lifestyle producing omnipresent microplastics and waste, radioactive residue in soil and water, petrochemical toxins used as softeners in cosmetics and packaging which affect metabolisms and genes. They are “the ecological uncanny” (Edwards et al. xiii), slipping out of human control and collapsing the boundaries between bodies and habitats.

In the second poem in *After We All Died*, poignantly titled “Ark,” the body itself becomes the precarious titular vessel, drifting on the “sea of zombie *haute coo*” (5). However, characteristically for ecoGothic sensibilities, the locality and the bodies merge, and their future is not survival, since there is no protective container for the flesh which has “nursed the machine that killed us,” as the speaker states in “After We All Died” (107). Contradicting the consolatory and proleptic discourses of apocalyptic literature, Cobb replaces the eschatological fatality of Mankind’s End with a cold look at the failed and dangerous ethics of metaphysical transcendence: “Certain people believed themselves alive. They built arks to save themselves and their favorite TV couples. . . . But like the ship in Coleridge’s poem, the boats only filled up with corpses”

(106). The posthuman ark is a ghost ship steered by a decomposing corpse, drifting on a “slimy sea” towards a landscape of death without redemption. Resonating with Dickinson’s abject image of black liquefaction, Cobb’s slime trope captures similar fears about transversal corporeality under constant threat of phenomenological dissolution.

“This is our death,” announces the speaker in the final lines of the titular poem. “We share it, we who come after the future. . . . The task of such selves is not to live. It is to refuse all the terms of this death into which we were birthed. Maybe then, learning to be dead, something can live” (Cobb, *After* 107). Thus, learning to be dead becomes a crucial challenge, involving a recognition of the violence of human-centred perceptions which underlie our approaches to the environment. “You god / we chemists” (5), the speaker admits in “Ark,” evoking the biblical creation myth, but rewriting it from a biocentric angle:

god we created
all without
form and void—the sea
Of zombie *haute*
coo—here comes all
the flesh you ever ate
in living form with eyes
to look you back (Cobb, *After* 5)

As noted by Karen Barad in her essay “No Small Matter,” the void

is not the background against which something appears but an active, constitutive part of every “thing.” As such, even the smallest bits of matter—for example, electrons, infinitesimal point particles with no dimensions, no structure—are haunted by, indeed, constituted by, the indeterminate wanderings of an infinity of possible configurations of spacetime mattering in their specificity. Matter is spectral, haunted by all im/possible wanderings, an infinite multiplicity of histories present/absent in the indeterminacy of time-being. (G113)⁸

In keeping with Barad’s reflections, the biblical *ex nihilo*—the formless void—takes on animal flesh in Cobb’s apocalyptic elegy. The monstrously reproducing cancer flesh is a constitutive part of “spacetime mattering”—

⁸ The quote comes from *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (edited by Anna Tsing et al., 2017), which is divided into two intertwined parts, titled, respectively, “Ghosts on a Damaged Planet” and “Monsters on a Damaged Planet.” The numbering of the pages reflects that structural split, with the capital letters G (for ghosts) and M (for monsters) before each page number, marking the respective thematic section of the monograph.

the im/possible spectral matter that “looks back” and “devours back” with a powerful and vitalist agency, returning the gift of death inscribed in its own origin. “When was it that everything first died? Maybe it was when humans first made their way to new territory lacking human predators” (Cobb, *After* 106), the speaker speculates in the final poem. The multiple answers to that grim inquiry take us across the deep history of anthropogenic change, revealing man’s predatory relation to the environment: “a what-I-want’ lens on the world,” as Cobb describes it (105). The environmental is always also personal here: “The truth is banal: I started out dead, a girl-thing, white to the root, borne up by the race spoils of total war and the blast force of nuclear love. I give birth to this death and I am it, and you, and you, and you—” (107).

Tracing the etymology of the word “poison,” the speaker notes that it comes from the German word for “gift” (15), via “the Greek *dosis* for dose—a giving” (15). As if in accord with the aporetic value of “poison-as-gift,” whereby the gift is “this death [we] are in,” the affective tone of the book becomes complicated, oscillating between expressions of love and fear, humour and horror, anger and apathy, cold irony and tenderness. What Cobb’s ecoGothic wasteland shares with Dickinson’s metabolic quest is the Gothic affect of anxiety that spreads over and infects the entire discursive structure with lingering epistemic and emotional unease.

CONCLUSION

In my concluding remarks, I wish to return to Eliot’s trope of the “hollow men” and their ghostly whispers as they try to dwell, zombie-like, in the modernist waste land. What I have tried to evidence in my inquiry is that the posthuman lyric rewrites Eliot’s Gothic melancholia and his spectral imagination from more-than-human perspectives. The contemporary wasteland poem, as exemplified by Cobb and Dickinson, engages with the environmental uncanny, which comes both from within and from without, unsealing the borders of the sovereign self and questioning the universal ideal of the human. Like its modernist predecessor, it interrogates the existential crisis coextensive with the anthropogenic degradation of the material world. The tropological framework of the poem borrows from the Gothic imaginary to unsettle the human-centered spatiotemporalities and uncover the natureculture’s ecological hauntings. The contemporary wastelanders are malleable biological bodies, hyperobjects, sympoietically linked to multispecies ecoOthers, planetary metabolisms, and interconnected habitats. They do not preside over the wasted landscape, nor are they capable of finding

refuge in the recycled mythologies of a pastoral wilderness, as the invisible toxic substances flow through their bodies and minds.

We are living in what Nils Bubandt aptly calls “the spectral moment”—“a time of undecidability” (Bubandt G128), which calls for more radical modes of attention and a non-escapist and non-fatalistic engagement with the world’s impending waste and ruin. As aptly put by Haraway, “[w]e—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response” (18). Suspicious of their anthropocentric and ethically charged situatedness, both Dickinson and Cobb confront their readers with unbound posthuman environments, vibrant materialities, multi-species habitats, whose communications are often illegible, unnoticed and unchanneled, but resilient, valid and entangled with our own. Stacy Alaimo argues that the “more-than-human world” is never “an empty space,” but “a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” (2). As shown by the poems, the bodies’ symbiotic and sympoietic liaisons may be vulnerable, but their indeterminacy and reactivity to the slightest shifts in the ecosystems bring new and productive assemblages of meaning and feeling. Jane Bennett proposes that we should view “the inflection of matter” as “vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluent” (328). The posthuman uncanny spectrality seems to reflect that conviction, as implied by Cobb and Dickinson, for it lies not so much in the hollowness and absence of flesh and voices, which dominated Eliot’s imaginary, but in their overabundance: in the latent semiotic energies and their hidden scripts. As observed by Tsing et al.,

[w]e live on a human-damaged planet, contaminated by industrial pollution and losing more species every year—seemingly without possibilities for cleanup or replacement. Our continued survival demands that we learn something about how best to live and die within the entanglements we have. We need both senses of monstrosity: entanglement as life and as danger. (M4)

Edwards et al. similarly argue that “[t]o live in the Anthropocene is to recognize that transgression, excess and monstrosity are no longer anomalies in human life but inextricable parts of it” (xi). Both Dickinson and Cobb work to acknowledge that the corporeal self is a fragile, damaged and biochemically haunted environment whose boundaries are nevertheless strongly enmeshed in other forms and structures of vibrant and resilient matter. As Cobb admits, it is “opened to the gaps, and the cracks and all that flows through them” (*After* 69). This collaborative

vulnerability of all life forms calls for broader emotional registers than environmental grief, lament, or nostalgia. “In our post-utopian moment,” as Evelyn Reilly contends in “Environmental Dreamscapes and Ecopoetic Grief,” “maybe there’s still a way to wake to a kind of sober hopefulness, even if colored by our pre-dawn apocalyptic fears, something which has probably been our animal task since the beginning of the species.” Borrowing complex and often contradictory Gothic affects, such as curiosity, fear, terror, horror, anger and disgust, the poets retain that “sober hopefulness,” while teaching us how to be dead so that “something can live” (Cobb, *After* 107).

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Radical Eco-poetics: The Apocalyptic Vision of Jorie Graham's *Sea Change*

ABSTRACT

Jorie Graham's *Sea Change* (2008) addresses the environmental crisis engendered by climate change, sending us a dire warning of the end of humanity by featuring an apocalyptic world. *Sea Change* gives a poetic voice to the dynamics of climate change by embodying the catastrophe in linguistic forms and thus enabling us to experience the ecological crisis. For Graham, poetic imagination is an act of physical or bodily engagement as it brings together linguistic and emotional factors into an embodied performance. This paper explores the affective dimension of Graham's experimental poetry to demonstrate how her radical eco-poetics allows us to (re)engage with the material world, and how it changes our perceptual and sensorial registers to awaken our sense of interconnectedness with nonhuman others.

Keywords: Jorie Graham, *Sea Change*, apocalypse, eco-poetics, emotion, lyric.

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the new millennium, we found ourselves abruptly (yet not unexpectedly) confronting the end of the world. The ecological harms caused by humans pose a significant threat to our survival, and it is the environmental exploitations induced by human avarice that would bring the world to an end. Jorie Graham's *Sea Change* (2008) addresses the issue of irreversible climate change, with the purpose of awakening the public to environmental crises such as species extinction, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere, melting ice caps, and rising sea levels. This highly acclaimed collection of poems transmits a dire warning of the end of humanity by featuring an apocalyptic world, in which, as Graham writes in *Sea Change*, "there are sounds the planet will make, even / if there is no one to hear them" ("No Long Way Round," *Sea Change* 56). Graham investigates experimental forms of language to convey anthropogenic environmental destruction and evoke feelings of human complicity, dread, and hopelessness.

Graham's apocalypse is grounded in Bill McKibben's sense of crises, in *The End of Nature* (1989), that we can no longer find "nature" or wilderness untouched by human activities. According to McKibben, nature has been vanquished because there now is no remaining part of the world independent from and untainted by the human race. In 2000, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer proclaimed that we have now entered a new geological epoch called the "Anthropocene," when the earth's environment is transformed and shaped by humans rather than vice versa (17). These stunning proclamations, together with the documentary of former US Vice President Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), greatly raised public awareness of global warming, pressing America to think of the causes and moral obligations of climate change. The US was then one of the largest contributors to climate change in terms of per capita carbon emissions that generate greenhouse gas effects. This ecological crisis was accelerated by the market mechanism of production and consumption and has had a particular bearing on the emergence of America as a global economic power in the twentieth century.

However, the US refused climate change negotiations and disavowed environmental responsibility.¹ As Kari M. Norgaard observes, "even though a large majority of Americans believe global warming is occurring and is a serious problem, a sense of urgency is lacking" because they assume

¹ In May 2001, US President George W. Bush publicly denied climate change and pulled out of the Kyoto protocol on the basis that the latter did not serve America's economic interests. According to Chakrabarty, "then-President George W. Bush even quipped that he was going to 'fight the greenhouse effect with the White House effect'" (199).

that climate change occurs somewhere in a distant place and sometime in a deferrable future (194). Any events or issues “outside the cultural sphere of attention” are often considered “‘unimportant’ and ‘unreal,’ ‘inaccessible’ not ‘close to home’” (Norgaard 116). Global-level climate change remains less important than local- or national-level environmental issues. Norgaard calls this phenomenon “socially organized denial,” which prescribes a “sense of knowing and not knowing, of having information but not thinking about it in their everyday lives” (9, 4). The notions of what to consider and what to ignore are socially constructed and eventually become “norms of emotion” (Norgaard 9), which often creates enormous psychological blocks for taking immediate, necessary actions.

It is within these socio-political contexts of the early twenty-first century that Graham’s *Sea Change* was written. While nature and environmental themes are pervasive from Graham’s first collection, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), onward, her poetry has been placed squarely in the realm of poststructuralism or postmodernism because of her ongoing experiments with language. Unlike Graham’s other earlier collections, however, *Sea Change* has enjoyed a number of ecological analyses as it stands out for its explicit concern with the climate crisis. Lynn Keller defines *Sea Change* as “poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene” (2), which conveys the widespread awareness of human impacts on the planet in its linguistic forms. Matthew Griffiths, for his part, demonstrates how Graham’s textuality in *Sea Change* can be reconfigured—while drawing our attention to its own artificiality—as a form of sustainability. These studies offer new possibilities for appreciating Graham’s eco-poetics and reevaluating her apocalyptic vision within the context of experimental poetry.

This paper, while building on existing studies of Graham’s work, explores the full implications of her eco-poetics, which brings our attention to the *affective* dimension of experimental forms of language. Graham’s poetry is not just discursively constituted, it involves our emotional or bodily engagement, which allows us to have an experiential encounter with the environmental crisis. Graham’s *Sea Change* evokes ecological awareness and a sense of interconnectedness with the environment, not primarily through linguistic representation or (de)construction but via a consorted enactment of lyric language and our sensory perception. It is Graham’s particular mode of writing that brings together linguistic (discursive) and emotional (physical) factors into an embodied performance. This paper draws on Graham’s *Sea Change* and her interviews to investigate how her eco-poetics disrupts our *normal* modes of perception and attention—often involved in the social production of apathy or denial regarding climate change—to redirect our sensibility, and examine how her poetry awakens our sense of coexistence with and responsibility towards nonhuman others.

POETICS OF APOCALYPSE

Graham's apocalypse is a way of imagining the end of nature and, thus, the end of the world that might have already happened. We are currently facing the total destruction of the environment and human civilization. As Lawrence Buell states, "apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor . . . the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to the sense of crisis" (285). Apocalypse usually refers to either revelation in its biblical sense or the end of the world in its popular sense. The former can be called "revelatory apocalypse," which envisages eschatological salvation; the latter may be termed "secular apocalypse," which denotes any natural or human-driven catastrophe. The revelatory apocalypse is central to Western cultures as—Malcolm Woodland claims—it intimates "a particular discursive power and a particular desire" for mastery, finality, and closure (xvi) that promotes the arrival at "the promised land" or promised end (Parker qtd. in Woodland 20). It is this desire for finality and closure that gives shape and meaning to history, and this meaning is inseparable from Western apocalyptic teleology.

However, Graham's apocalypse in *Sea Change* is presented rather as an antithesis to the traditional revelatory apocalypse. As Woodland observes when analyzing Graham's *The Errancy* (1997), "Graham's anticlosural stance, then, is an antiapocalyptic stance" (171). Graham considers the aesthetic discourse of finality or closure to be complicit with the revelatory apocalypse. In an interview, she claims that "ending-dependence and eschatological thinking" has shaped "Western sensibility," as evident in notions such as "manifest destiny, westward expansion. Imperialisms of all kinds"; this kind of "apocalypse," she adds, is "the ultimate commodification" (Graham, Interview by Thomas Gardner [A] 84). Graham associates "eschatological thinking" with the imperial desire for order and mastery—with an urge to dominate and appropriate—which contributes to "the ultimate commodification" of social relations and of the natural (nonhuman) world. The fact that the earth is fundamentally transformed as a result of pollution, exploitation, and colonization compels her to question the aesthetic discourse of "the end" and by extension the capitalistic culpability for the destruction of the earth.

The revelatory apocalypse has been a basis for the very Western capitalistic thinking that has brought about the present environmental crisis. Thus, Graham strives to subvert aesthetic closure and rational control and leaves the text completely "open" by bringing into play the poetic devices she characteristically employs in her experimental poems, such as broken syntax, wide spacing between lines, enjambment, dashes,

abstract diction, and so on. Graham has found a way to render apocalypse while avoiding the pitfall of teleological revelation by transforming or recontextualizing the revelatory apocalypse into the secular environmental apocalypse.² The textual openness of her poetry, designed to disrupt any teleological schemes and the desire for closure, comes to disclose environmental crisis and ecological entanglement. Because of its radical openness, her text appears to be chaotic and fragmentary, which ironically dramatizes the apocalyptic ruins and wreckage. Yet, within the crumbling relics of this failing planet, one can witness, with unusual clarity, the interconnectedness of all the beings—animate or inanimate—that share the same destiny.

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APOCALYPTIC DRAMA

The apocalyptic vision of *Sea Change* allows us to “experience” catastrophic climate change, the inevitable death of species, and all other destructive effects of humanity on the planet. The poem presents a deteriorating world, against which Graham tests her sense of what she is—that is, having mind and body. Graham explores new modes of lyric poetry that may respond to the questions Margaret Ronda asks in her *Remainders* (2018) even though the latter does not consider Graham in her analysis:

How can a poem speak for, to, with ecological phenomena? Can poetry give matter and creaturely life a “voice,” a “face”? How does a poem make loss and extinction visible, or register new, disturbing presences, such as toxic sludge, oil spills, dead zones? How ought responsibility for ecological calamity be adjudicated at the level of the individual subject and the collective? (1)

The question of how a poem can depict “ecological phenomena” and evoke a sense of “responsibility for ecological calamity” is precisely what Graham is concerned with. Graham’s unique solution is to render *Sea Change* as an apocalyptic drama, which enacts the human-nonhuman entanglement. This is a stage where a multitude of human and nonhuman actors (including natural phenomena) appear to have their own agencies—

² Woodland suggests that Graham’s *The Errancy*, while rejecting the revelatory apocalypse, secretly seeks another, as is the case in the poetry of Wallace Stevens: “In closing off one version of apocalypse, it opens another” (181). However, Graham’s *Sea Change*, at least, does not aim for any sort of resolution. What Graham is seeking here is to lay bare the chaotic situation of the apocalyptic world and its tormenting and destructive hold on humans and nonhumans.

forces and “voice[s].” *Sea Change*, thus, invites readers to enter the drama as actors themselves to encounter who we are, who we are with, and where we all (humans and nonhumans) are.

In *Sea Change*, Graham imagines the worst-case scenario that, because of increasing anthropogenic intervention, we may have irreversibly crossed the tipping point, the point of no return at which the earth has lost its capacity to restore equilibrium. *Sea Change* was written, Graham explains, “after a very deep apprenticeship to the facts and issues involved in climate science” (Interview by Sharon Blackie 39). The poem “Positive Feedback Loop,” for example, employs the scientific model of the tipping point thematically and stylistically to show how a slight change in the climate can bring about unpredictable consequences through the amplifying (“positive”) loops of cause and effect.

I am listening in the silence that precedes. Forget
 everything, start listening. Tipping point, flash
 point,
 convective chimneys in the seas bounded by Greenland.

.....

fish are starving to death in the Great Barrier Reef, the new Age of
 Extinctions is
 now
 says the silence-that-precedes—you know not what
 you
 are entering, a time
 beyond belief. Who is one when one calls oneself
 one?

(“Positive Feedback Loop,” *Sea Change* 42)

The poem describes a series of feedback loops between global warming, melting icebergs, and ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland, and rising sea levels across the globe. The melting of Greenland’s ice sheet, caused by the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, leads to a rise in sea levels, which, as von Holle et. al. demonstrate, has devastating effects on coastal habitats: “fish are starving to death” (694). Moreover, the gradual retreat of the ice in Greenland leads to a progressive reduction of “convective chimneys,” which diminishes the supply of dense water to the Atlantic Ocean, which, in turn, makes it more difficult for oceanic convection—“a key mechanism that regulates . . . water-mass transformation, CO₂ exchange, and nutrient transport” (Vreugdenhil and Gayen 1)—to occur. “Once feedback loops like the above cut in,” Frederick Buell would argue,

“global warming can suddenly and catastrophically increase” (103), with the increasing possibility of passing the tipping point.

positive feedback loops—& the chimneys again, & how it is the ray of sun is taken in
 in freedom, & was there another way for
 this host
 our guest,
 we who began as hands, magic of fingers, laying our thresholds stone upon stone,
 stretched skin between life and death,

(“Positive Feedback Loop,” *Sea Change* 43)

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The poem also reminds us of the fact that global warming is a phenomenon engendered by the industrial activities of humanity and the reckless pursuit of profit. The result is that the environmental damage caused by humans has reciprocal effects on humanity. With the extinction of species and loss of habitat, we “are entering, a time” of total annihilation when there is no “one” left: “Who is one when one calls oneself / one?” Our rapacious “hands, magic of fingers” have fundamentally transformed the planet, while “laying our thresholds stone upon stone, / stretched skin between life and death.” It is this “positive feedback loop” in which humans and nonhumans are caught up, as “this host / our guest,” in the vicious circle.

Sea Change incorporates the discourse of climate change into our physical body in the form of feeling. Graham does not want us to simply understand the scientific concepts of climate change; her goal is to have us “actually ‘feel’ (and thus physically believe) what we have and what we are losing” (Interview by Deidre Wengen). Graham’s task then is to reengage us with the moribund planet by embodying the deteriorating world of matter in the discursive structure of her poetry. The poem alternates between long lines and short lines (set in the middle of the page), which, Graham expounds, is designed to “enact a sense of a ‘tipping point’—the feeling of falling forward, or ‘down’ in the hyper-short lines” (Interview by Deidre Wengen). The fluctuating, zigzag lines give us a sensation of passing the tipping point, making us undergo the hazardous oscillations of cause and effect. While the vertical lines embody the speed and immediacy of the environmental crisis in the manner of linear inevitability, the horizontal lines enact the non-linear swings of sudden amplification, which provoke the anxiety of the “positive feedback loops.”

Indeed, global warming is not something we can directly experience or whose physical substance we can discern. Because global warming is not a thing that is visible to the naked eye, it can be grasped only through scientific concepts and models such as “positive feedback” and “tipping point.” As Ben Dibley argues, the unintended consequences of

climate change, such as changes in sea level, mass extinction, and oceanic acidification, “escape the human sensorium.” These effects are “only brought to vision through scientific analysis” as they are beyond or outside our experiential realm (Dibley). In other words, no human being ever perceives climate change or its effects on the planet.³ Moreover, it is notable that we cannot see ourselves as one of the creatures affected by our activities. As Dipesh Chakrabarty maintains: “We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such” (220). Our failure to imagine beyond our experience is part of the reason why we have created the environmental crisis. This poses a significant challenge for Graham, since it involves the imagination of immense-scale events and species-level impacts.

One day: stronger wind than anyone expected. Stronger than
 ever before in the recording
 of such. Un-
 natural says the news. Also the body says it. Which part of the body—I look
 down, can
 feel it, yes, don't know
 where. Also submerging us,
 making of the fields, the trees, a cast of characters in an
 unnegotiable
 drama, ordained, iron-gloom of low light, everything at once undoing
 itself.

(“Sea Change,” *Sea Change* 3)

The news about the unusual nature of phenomena (the “Un- / natural” news of climate change) is now everywhere, and we can hear about it every day. Nevertheless, the speaker is led to question “Which part of the body” can truly “feel it.” The speaker is unable to locate the area of sensation in the body (“don't know / where”). Indeed, it is the power of poetry that enables us to have an experiential encounter with unimaginable environmental dissolution, the “unnegotiable / drama” of climate change. This encounter is achieved through linguistic experiments, which bestows on Graham a kind of “negative capability” to perceive truths without the framework of logic or science.⁴ We need courage, Graham advises, to break

³ Climate change can hardly be grasped by our daily experience. Only “a perceptive person old enough to remember the climate of 1951–1980 should recognize the existence of climate change” (Hansen E2415).

⁴ John Keats’s “negative capability,” the ability to inhabit “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (492), may help us procure

away from the conventional use of language: “I saw the failure of courage as a failure of imagination. And that is where art comes in” (Interview by Sharon Blackie 38). Therefore, “the primary job of the imagination,” Graham argues, is “to connect the world in which you are, to one in which you have not yet been, or cannot imagine being” (Interview by Poets Q&A). This is precisely her intention or ambition in writing *Sea Change*: “I think artists have a large responsibility at present—that of awakening the imagination of a deep future, . . . in order that people feel ‘connected’ to it in their willingness to act. . . . I happen to feel one can reawaken that sensation of an ‘unimaginably’ far off horizon” (Interview by Deidre Wengen). *Sea Change* gives the dynamics of climate change—shifting ocean currents, species extinction, floods, and droughts—a poetic voice through the use of various rhetorical devices (such as enjambment) and the particular spatial arrangement of language. With these diverse and multi-layered artifices, Graham’s poetry can articulate what scientific discourse cannot and render the declining ecosystem more sensible and perceptible than any scientific model can.

. . . in the

coiling, at the very bottom of
the food
chain, sprung
from undercurrents, warming by 1 degree, the in-
dispensable
plankton is forced north now, & yet further north,
spawning too late for the cod larvae hatch, such
that the hatch will not survive, nor the
species in the end, in the right-now forever un-
interruptable slowing of the
gulf
stream, so that I, speaking in this wind today, out loud in it, to no one, . . .
(“Sea Change,” *Sea Change* 4)

We read that the “1 degree” increase in temperature makes the “plankton” “[spring] / from undercurrents,” disrupting the whole system of “food chain,” which will lead to “the end” of “species.” The wiggling zigzag lines endow motion and vitality to the agential force of the plankton. These tiny invisible organisms, which are unable to propel themselves against the current, manifest their catalytic roles in the substantiality of the marine environment and biodiversity, through the actions—embodied in a series

perspectives other than our own and truths beyond human reasoning. It is the ability that Graham would associate with the courage of imagination to move beyond conventional scientific knowledge.

of sharp turns—such as “coiling,” “sprung,” and being drifted (by the current) “further north” to help the “spawning” “cod larvae” (albeit “too late”). Particularly, as Keller argues, the unexpected line breaks separating “in” from “dispensable” and “un” from “interruptible” convey “how what had seemed impossible is now not just possible but inescapably taking place” (109). Moreover, these line breaks, which introduce the opposite meaning of a word, make us stand dangerously on the edge or threshold of civilization as if the world had been pushed beyond the limits of sustainability and entered a “time” of existential uncertainty.

Poetry, for Graham, is an act of perception in its present situation, which allows readers to experience the environmental crisis as happening “here and now.” Graham’s experimental forms of language are founded upon the perceptive language of the lyric. For Graham, it is the “lyric” language (“I, speaking in this wind today”) that creates a sense of presence—the subjective feeling of actually “being” in a particular time and place—and, therefore, allows us to participate in ungraspable or unimaginable catastrophes: “One has to find means to see what isn’t apparently ‘there.’ . . . I believe that ‘unseeable thereness’ (if I can call it that) is what one is looking for, in lyric” (Interview by Poets Q&A). As Min Hyoung Song, in *Climate Lyricism*, suggests, “the lyric is a way to train attention on a here and now” in order to apprehend “a phenomenon that eludes familiar scales of comprehension” (40, 3).

Notably, the *lyric* sense of presence is associated with the act of perception, which assumes a bodily action in its cognitive situations. Sharon Lattig, in *Cognitive Ecopoetics*, claims that “lyric language is intensely active, generating meaning in the manner of perception”; it reproduces “the physical activity of the neural substrate and thus the basic dynamics of cognitive functioning” (19). Lyric poetry recapitulates the way we engage with the environment through cognitive processes. It involves the perceptual activity of our brain system that enables the comprehension of environments. Lattig’s cognitive ecopoetics sheds light on Graham’s lyric language as an embodied performance of our sensory systems. Graham’s lyric moves beyond what Jonathan Culler defines as the Romantic mode of “intense expression of the subject’s inner experience” (22) to awaken a sense of crisis within the physical act of perception. The lyric subjectivity in *Sea Change* takes no prevailing center from which to speak; it enacts the multiple dynamics of entanglements between the self and the other (environment), between humans and nonhumans.⁵

⁵ For Graham, the lyric “I” is “simultaneously illusory and essential” (Interview by Mark Wunderlich). It is neither the Romantic notion of an essential self nor the post-structuralist notion of a socially or linguistically constructed one. Graham’s self, as I argued elsewhere by

it looks back at us. The fact that the cuttlefish has its own “look” troubles the distinction between human and nonhuman: “Own what, own / whom.” Nature appears to have mind (agency), and the human is reduced to a species-level existence. With the conflation of looking and being looked at, owning and being owned, Graham not only destabilizes the basic premises of human exceptionalism, which separates us from the rest of the world, but also enacts what Barad calls “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (33) which disrupts the very structure of ownership, to such a degree that one can never have the privilege to “own” or act upon the other; they can only “intra-act” with one another.

What Graham has done is to bring the environmental plights to “the human sensorium,” so that people can truly *feel* what they think they already know. Graham relates in an interview that “[s]cientists can provide all the information [on climate change] in the world, but . . . it does not necessarily awaken them [people] to a genuine physical belief” (Interview by Poets Q&A). She continues, in another interview: “They *feel* they ‘know’ this information already, . . . That is precisely the point. *They ‘know’ it. They are not ‘feeling it’*” (Interview by Sharon Blackie 40). For Graham, information or knowledge should be made *affective* to be effective or capable of motivating people to take action; thus, “feeling” can be an intra-active way of engaging the reader with the ecological crisis. Poetry, for this reason, should be somehow *experienced* through the body because knowing (a discursive process) is dependent on one’s physical experience of material reality. As Griffiths puts it, “Graham is trying to give thought its due in bodily perception in order to engage abstract phenomena through sensory experience” (222). Graham believes that poetry can provoke “feeling” in our material body, through which we come to *know* that we are (constitutive parts) *of* the world, not (simply living) *in* the world.

Graham’s association between feeling and knowing becomes evident when she declares, in a manner reminiscent of Descartes, “I think I feel my thinking self and how it / stands” (*Materialism* 142). She is in line with Antonio Damasio who, rejecting Descartes’s dichotomy of mind and body in his *Descartes’ Error*, emphasizes the affective body involved in the production of the human mind. For Damasio, feelings are *embodied* ways of knowing, and they are responsible for steering behavior, specifically decision-making. Feelings actually take place in the brain: they are “mental experiences of body states” (Damasio and Carvalho 143). Damasio’s clinical studies of the brain suggest that consciousness (mind) emerges from feelings: “Mind begins at the level of feeling. It’s when you have a feeling (even if you’re a very little creature) that you begin to have a mind and a self. . . . Feelings are where the self emerges, and consciousness itself” (Interview by Jason Pontin). As Damasio says, feelings are “just as

cognitive as other precepts”; they are part of reason and thought (*Descartes* xv). Without emotion, there is no such thing as rational decision-making.⁷ Emotion involves engagement with the world as it gives us the meaning of the world. Damasio’s scientific insights into feeling as part of the reasoning process underscore the interdependence of mind and body—that is, of *how we think* and *how we feel*.

However, our “natural” feelings are not intact; they can be altered and shaped. In particular, they are subject to social control or management. In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild argues that we have been estranged from our feelings as social factors participate in the very formulation of emotions. She provides a set of examples of how society uses feelings as norms of conduct, exploring the implications of civilization and commercialization for the management of emotion. Human emotion has been manipulated through the process of civilization; such maneuvering of emotion has been intensified in a capitalistic society. Hochschild maintains that emotion is “a means by which we know about our relation to the world” (220); “When we do not feel emotion, or disclaim emotion, we lose touch with how we link inner to outer reality” (223). In a similar vein, Graham claims that “We have managed to divorce people from their capacity for sensation, and from the way in which sensation would lead to the heart and to conscience, fear, compassion, mortal outrage, and action” (Interview by Thomas Gardner [B]). She would agree with Hochschild who states that feelings have become “‘products,’ thus belonging more to an organization and less to the self” (198). For Graham, such emotional management is nothing but “a coup upon the reality status of events and of people and therefore on nature itself,” and it is, therefore, the role of “[p]oetry . . . to break through, to make reality *feel* real” (Interview by Thomas Gardner [B], *italics mine*).

The irregular linguistic forms and the textual openness in *Sea Change*, intended to disrupt teleological closure and, thus, reject commercialized ways of producing meaning, can be duly understood as a strategy to evoke or appeal to our *unmanaged* primitive emotion, which allows us to draw on the elemental life that is experienced as a *species*. Damasio’s neuroscience and Hochschild’s sociology of emotions align with Graham’s insistence on feeling as physical knowledge and the body’s power to affect the mind. Their notions of coexistence of mind and body also support Graham’s recognition that the human and the nonhuman have a shared physicality

⁷ Emotions have a significant impact on our reasoning and decision-making. Damasio acquired his insights from his clinical studies on brain-damaged patients who were unable to use reason in making proper decisions because their emotions were impaired, while their cognitive regions (abilities) remained unaffected (see ch. 2 and 3, *Descartes*).

in origin as well as a shared destiny on the planet. She states that “here is another kind of knowledge we need in addition to that of the intellect. These are *feelings of belonging in creation*. That is what I am trying to awaken in myself and others in this book” (Interview by Deidre Wengen). This may be an extension of the Whitmanian sense of belonging in creation—“For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (27)—to include more explicitly nonhuman others and build a sense of shared agency. All beings are created equally; they are made out of the same materials. Graham’s purpose in evoking “feeling” is to awaken in herself and others multiple ecologies of belonging and the material interrelatedness of all beings. It is this ethical dimension of Graham’s ecopoetics that stresses an enlarged sense of interconnection between the self and nonhuman “earth” others.

CONCLUSION

Graham’s *Sea Change* is an artistic response to the prevailing public apathy and social denial regarding climate change, at a time when the US refuses to take its share of responsibility for ecological destruction. The poem is designed to raise public awareness of the environmental crisis by embodying an apocalyptic world in its linguistic forms and thus making us “experience” catastrophic events and the destructive impact of human activity on the planet. For Graham, feeling is an effective way of engaging the reader with the environmental catastrophe as it has the power to affect our minds and, thus, (re)direct our actions. We are invited to enter the apocalyptic drama with a renewed sense of the material dimensions of human existence. Graham’s radical ecopoetics turns our future absence into our presence by reactivating or cultivating the cognitive, affective, and sensorial means to awaken our sense of interconnectedness with others in nature. Graham’s *Sea Change* helps us redefine our sense of attachment and connection to the nonhuman. It shifts our sensorial and perceptual coordinates to help us see our existence as fully enmeshed in the material world.

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Clark Coolidge's *The Land of All Time*: An Affectively Restless Ecopoem

ABSTRACT

Clark Coolidge (1939–) is often connected with language poetry and the New York School. The language of his poetry is opaque and disjunctive, like that of the artists associated with the first group, but it is also energetic, rambling and fast-paced. Curiously, in his most recent book, *The Land of All Time* (2020), Coolidge displays ecological preoccupations, the first poem in the collection, “Goodbye,” asking us to reflect upon how nature and culture are today nearly indistinguishable: “hark! an ocean as / generator see the wires? me neither oh well / there’s a heat vent somewhere in this wilderness.” In this article, we explore how Coolidge mobilizes his extreme wordiness for ecological purposes, arguing that Coolidge’s *The Land of All Time* proposes a model for harnessing restless affect for responding to climate change and ecological crises in a way that allows for the exploration of possibilities rather than falling prey to environmental despair. Coolidge is interested in experimenting with how to respond to extreme situations with vibrancy, speed, and flow, aligning the dynamism of language with that of nature.

Keywords: Clark Coolidge, ecocriticism, New York School, language poetry, affect.

The first poem, “Goodbye,” of Clark Coolidge’s most recent poetry collection, *The Land of All Time* (2020), begins by clearing the table and taking stock of what is left of the natural world after humans started defacing it (with more and more serious consequences as we get closer to our own time):

Clear away all the trees and rocks and dirt and shrubs and
 beasties and such and you and me
 what have you got? wild caress of airs?
 a balance of poems? hark! an ocean as
 generator see the wires? me neither oh well
 there’s a heat vent somewhere in this wilderness
 (Coolidge, “Goodbye” 11)

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The act of “[c]lear[ing] away” elements such as trees and rocks and “you and me leaves us with nature that has nevertheless been infiltrated by human influence, as “a balance of poems” and such technological apparatus as heat vents and generators with their invisible wires interfere in the “wilderness.” Somewhere in this wilderness there is a heat vent which supposedly makes the temperature rise. The poem proceeds in large imaginative leaps all the way through to a kind of an extreme, a “Land of No People and No Things,” a designation found on the last line of the poem, which may well be what we will end up with after climate change is complete and we have had to say our goodbyes, as the title of the poem indicates.

As Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino remark in their introduction to *Affective Ecocriticism*, considering climate change provides plenty of opportunities for mobilizing affects, and these bodily, unnameable reactions often tend to turn into rather negative emotional states, like “anxiety, fear, sorrow” (2), for obvious reasons. Coolidge’s poetry also mobilizes affects, but it does so in ways that are more complex than simply negative. On the whole, “Goodbye” is fast-paced and it evokes images of swift action (“we’ll go up run and jump then stop go out”) (11), as if the speaker has just taken an idea and run with it. The speaker accentuates his care-free attitude with the insertion “oh well.” Coolidge plays with instability of meaning through his swift, improvisatory transitions from one idea to the next, which is likely to have its own effect on the reader.

Coolidge, who was born in 1939, has a long track record of writing poetry: his first poems were published in the 1960s, and critics have observed a variety of periods in his work, connecting him with the New York School, particularly its second generation (Ladkin 425) and language poetry (Wilson 1426). He experiments with language, producing

disjunctive, complex poetry that defies simple readings. Coolidge's poetry works by introducing a multitude of possibilities of meaning and unusual combinations of words and, as Aldon L. Nielsen writes of Coolidge's earlier poem "Comes Through in the Call Hold," he allows his readers to "reenter the poem by means of any of its referential openings, but what counts is the shape and generative force of the improvisation" (106). In other words, the "generative force" of free association is significant, and readers are invited to join the play of association, like in the quoted passage above, where we are presented with a rapid transition from a "wild caress of airs?" to "a balance of poems?" (Coolidge, "Goodbye" 11).

In this article, we argue that Coolidge's *The Land of All Time* proposes a model for harnessing affects for responding to climate change and ecological crises. Instead of allowing anxiety and sorrow to wear us out, Coolidge shows how we might remain aware of the gravity and extremity of what we are dealing with when it comes to ecological crises without merely collapsing under their weight. What is extreme about Coolidge's work is not so much a strong sense of doom, but rather radical forms of awareness through cultivating play, speed, and attention to how language can register restless affect. He works with indeterminacy in a somewhat similar sense as the poets discussed by Marjorie Perloff in her classic study *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*: "[I]ndeterminacy or 'undecidability,' . . . literalness and free play" (vii). The freedom provided by Coolidge's improvisatory shifts of meaning, as exemplified by the disjunctions of the first poem as cited above, encourage the exploration of possibilities and a focus on movement rather than the search for solace in fixed meaning and easily determined affect. Language poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis's recent book *Late Work* (2018) displays a similar attitude towards today's environmental challenges. The hour is late, we are running out of time, but this does not mean we should despair and do nothing. "For who," she notes, "faced / with the future, / would choose not / to try a little something?" (DuPlessis 10). The eco-poetic possibilities of language writing have only recently begun to be studied, and in this exploration, we join critics like Sarah Nolan, who writes in *Unnatural Eco-poetics* (2017) about how experimenting with the possibilities of language in poetry is apt for tackling the interconnections between natural spaces and "individual memory, personal experience, ideology, and the limitations of the senses" (8–9). Nolan argues that Lyn Hejinian's language experiments in *My Life* (1980/1987), which are geared toward forming a sense of, indeed, her life in as multifaceted a form as the limitations of language allow, enable her to simultaneously explore the interconnectedness of nature and culture (47).

Coolidge's language experiments, as we suggest, are designed to tackle similar concerns, especially given that this recent poetry collection

explicitly works with nature-culture connections. While the collection can be read as commenting on many other issues too, the opening poem, as discussed above, clearly sets the tone for the book. Its last line, which points to a “Land of No People and No Things,” corresponds with the title of the book, *The Land of All Time*, as well as with the last lines of the last poem “and then / they all left the planet” (Coolidge, “What Begins” 133), which are also repeated on the back cover. The Earth is simultaneously seen as becoming empty and being somehow enduring, “of all time.” In a poem titled “A History,” “Mars is what happened when the light went out,” which alludes to the common idea that humans might need to escape to space if the Earth becomes unlivable (Coolidge 20). Further emphasis on the possibility of facing imminent doom is added by the front cover image which features the poet “gazing into Kilauea firepit, the island of Hawaii” (Coolidge, *The Land of All Time* n.pag.). Such themes of imminent destruction and the need for escape recur throughout the collection, but as we suggest, the improvisatory shifts of meaning produced by disjunctiveness and extreme attention to language mean that the affective stance of *The Land of All Time* is more complex than straightforwardly negative. In what follows, then, we first discuss how Coolidge uses language as material for exploring the connections between nature and culture. Next, we proceed to discuss the affective possibilities of such uses of language. We connect Coolidge’s exploration of the connections between nature and culture to recent ecocritical theory while reading the possibilities offered by the poems in *The Land of All Time*.

In considering Coolidge’s work with the connections between nature and culture, we engage with two different frameworks: affect theory and ecocriticism. Both areas of research have been viewed in multifaceted ways during the last twenty years or so. As Alex Houen points out, affect has often been viewed “as a form of *bodily* feeling that is distinct from emotion, cognition, and language” (3, italics in the original). However, as Houen emphasizes, this view is not shared by all (4). Houen’s conception of affect “is neither strictly cognitivist nor noncognitivist, and [it] is open to considering literary affect in terms of fusions of content and form” (5). Brian Massumi has suggested that affects can be defined as autonomous, unconscious bodily intensities that can be qualified further into emotions (85–86, 88). For their part, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg have defined affect as “those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise)” (1). For our purposes, a strict delimiting of affect to something that is entirely separate from cognition and language is unnecessary, but an emphasis on the body and materiality as central to affect is a useful starting point. For Bladow and Ladino, who discuss affect studies and its connection to ecocriticism, “[b]oth affect

studies and ecocriticism emerged in part as reactions to the poststructuralist focus on discourse” and there has been an “overemphasis on discourse at the expense of embodied experience” (4). They proceed to note that the emergence of materialist thought in ecocriticism is linked to affect (7). Indeed, for Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman, material ecocriticism is also connected to discourse since, as they write, it “examines matter both in texts and as a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality” (2). As we consider Coolidge’s engagement with play, speed, and attention to language in response to climate change through affect, a focus on materiality is of importance, as we show below.

About Coolidge’s early work, Steve McCaffery states that it presents us “a textual field with minimal to zero signification” (159). According to McCaffery, Coolidge challenges readers “to engage words outside the regime and expectancies of description and propositional language, words in a condition that we might consider as prior to meaning” (161). In his early work, such as *Space* (1970), Coolidge was interested in treating language as material in ways that have connections to geology, as discussed for example by Michael Golston (297–98). In *The Land of All Time*, although the mangled words that populate Coolidge’s early work are less frequent and, in general, the poems make grammatical sense, we can say that here too Coolidge seems to be more interested in using words in a sculptural manner than in making meaning in a conventional sense. Most often, he appears to choose words based on their aural properties and on what they allow him to do in terms of the rhythm and the flow of the poem, a good example being the poem “Stottered (Grubbish),” where we find “lunchish vitrines presented in dim red bulb glow / atrash in their wastes and gooey possible filmishes” (Coolidge 32). Particularly the more peculiar words here are overloaded with possible meanings, but also with other qualities. Such work with words as material is connected to Coolidge’s oft-quoted poetics statement, also reproduced in his author biography in *The Land of All Time*, where he considers the material qualities of words: “Hardness, Density, Sound-Shape, Vector-Force & Degrees of Transparency/Opacity.” As in his early work, he seems to include words because they are interesting, which allows him to not only add colour and life to the poem, but also to use language like an instrument in improvisatory music.

The Land of All Time foregrounds ecological themes, the extent of which we can observe even in the two lines cited above where vitrines (objects lit up in “dim red bulb glow”) have been contaminated by wastes and some kind of a gooey film-ish substance, giving them an aura of uncanniness. The poem draws a direct line between pollution or waste and consumerism, as the references to window displays and eating (consumption) make

plain. The condensed expressions foreground the role of language (and the noxious ideologies it sustains) in spelling out human influence on nature. Language is treated as efficient and productive, and at the same time, it risks being seen as wasteful if words and sentences are viewed as nonsensical. Nevertheless, as Coolidge's comment about word qualities such as hardness and sound-shape suggests, if words are considered akin to material objects, already their presence can serve to reveal something new. Instead of simply managing the apocalypse, Coolidge's poetry seeks ways to remain on the move and to generate something productive by way of an improvisatory poetics. Language is treated as material that can, through playful movement of words and meanings, reveal intensities that would otherwise remain unarticulated.

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Nature and language have, as discussed by Scott Knickerbocker, been considered to be incompatible particularly in first-wave ecocriticism even though, as Knickerbocker argues, the capacity of poetry "to make nature matter to us depends precisely on the defamiliarizing figurative language and rhetorical devices too often associated with 'artificiality'" that can often be found in poetry (2–3). Experimenting with the possibilities of language through poetic indeterminacy allows Coolidge to tackle human influence on nature and the connection between nature and culture head-on.

As mentioned above, improvisation is a central mode of creativity for Coolidge. Improvisation can also be said to relate to natural processes. In an article in Iovino and Oppermann's *Material Ecocriticism*, Hubert Zapf argues, with reference to Wendy Wheeler's discussion of creativity and biosemiotics (Wheeler 270), that "creative processes in nature and culture share an element of agency and improvisational flexibility" (Zapf 53). According to Wheeler, who discusses biosemiotics as a way in which natural organisms engage with meaning and interpretation with reference to Charles Sanders Peirce's thinking (271), "[i]mprovisation is the key to both natural and cultural creative evolution" (273). We can, thus, propose that creating new combinations in language through improvisatory explorations allows Coolidge to propose alternative connections between nature and culture. This exploration is based on trial-and-error, deviance, spontaneity, nonsense—values and methods that go against the official way of handling problems about the environment, the official way meaning, for example, minor bureaucratic tweaks and policies that pander to the very corporations that are responsible for environmental problems in the first place.

Like "Goodbye," "Stottered (Grubbish)" gestures to human effects on the environment, but it does not do so simply through lamenting on the destruction humans have wrought on the environment. Instead, it states the facts through a condensed, fast-moving language that, nevertheless, displays awareness of humans' negative effects on the environment. The

poem presents several verb-like words in the form of adjectival past participles, such as “squashed,” “vercrusted” or “bunsted and loppered,” which seems to suggest that some action, although we cannot quite specify what, has been taken on something else (Coolidge 32). The abundance of adjective-like words presented as a list adds layers upon layers of potential meanings so that the play with language is in constant movement.

Coolidge uses language as material for energetic transitions from one line and idea to the next. In this kind of writing, meanings are in motion and readers' attention is drawn to the movement of *affect* underneath the play with language. Coolidge's writing engages with that which, much like affect, circulates under the surface of texts. We can, indeed, propose that precisely affects, which in Massumi's definition (85–86, 88) are autonomous, unconscious bodily intensities that can be qualified further into emotions, can serve to “make nature matter to us” (cf. Knickerbocker 2) when we encounter them in poetry. As Patricia T. Clough remarks, “for Massumi the turn to affect is about opening the body to its indeterminacy, the indeterminacy of autonomic responses,” which is why he determines affect to be separate from language (209). However, when we consider Coolidge's writing which is concerned with indeterminacy, disjunction and rapid movement, we can see that precisely inventive ways of using language and indeterminacy allow him to mobilize affect in ways that explore the material world.

In recent ecocriticism and environmental philosophy, one notices a tendency to portray nature as a reality that is inseparable from human society and culture. Material ecocriticism “traces the trajectories of natural-cultural interaction” in texts (Iovino and Oppermann 6). Furthermore, for example Timothy Morton, in *Ecology without Nature*, considers the role of nature in human society (1). For her part, Sarah Nolan notes that “the concept of a purely natural environment is becoming increasingly fictional” (20). Similarly, Timothy Clark points out that the concept of “Nature” needs redefining not merely because there is no returning to nature that would be untainted by humans, but also because the concept of “natural” is frequently used uncritically to refer to distinctions that become untenable at a closer look, such as the idea that a particular food being marketed as “natural” tends to lead us to assume that it is automatically good (31–32).

Ultimately, nature is inextricable from the human world not only because of the damage that industrial development has done to the environment (the atmosphere, water, and forests, for example) but also because it has increasingly become clear to us that our ideas about nature are never innocent and neutral, but rather the product of cultural models which negotiate particular human desires and fears. It is not surprising, therefore, that the kind of nature we find in Coolidge's book is not at

all the green and pristine nature of the Romantic imaginary but rather of a compromised sort—the forests and bodies of water we encounter are permeated by pipes, cables, and electronics, which make clear that these environments have been transformed and moulded by humans. As Morton remarks, there is no simple answer to the question of what the environment is, and we cannot find it by clearing away “rabbits, trees and skyscrapers” (11–12). In a similar vein, if we “[c]lear away all the trees and rocks and dirt and shrubs and / beasties and such and you and me” (Coolidge, “Goodbye” 11), we will hardly be left with just “the environment” or pure “nature”. Thus, for Coolidge’s poetic speaker too, such an act of “[c]lear[ing] away” will only produce more questions, like “what have you got?” (Coolidge, “Goodbye” 11). This sense of unresolvedness, or indeterminacy, is common in Coolidge’s book overall.

In “Goodbye,” Coolidge presents composite nature-culture spaces in lines like: “hark! an ocean as / generator see the wires? me neither oh well / there’s a heat vent somewhere in this wilderness” (11). Even when environments appear to be in a virginal or wild state, a closer look shows how they are in fact always already enmeshed in human networks, both tangible and intangible. As Morton points out in *Ecology without Nature*, apropos the recent notion of the Anthropocene, today, the damage humans have done to nature is physically all-pervasive, in the sense that there is really no space in nature that has not somehow been affected, say, by climate change. On the other hand, the media we consume inflects the way we perceive nature, overlaying a series of meanings upon actual geographical locations. Coolidge says as much, for example in “What’s Up? Water”: “Without this camera I’d be in Panama” (123). The line could also be read as a comment on how a more informed perspective on the environment disrupts the illusion that there are still paradisiacal spaces in nature that remain untouched by humans. Similarly, in “But Not at Home,” Coolidge writes about

The rocks outside of town a secret
 people see everyday driving by
 still don’t know they’re there spots
 only showing on special maps appear
 sometimes only in freight novels beyond the grasp
 of even the curious there are places
 out in the open that don’t leave traces for most
 movies shown on the woods balloon stains
 (48)

For the poem’s speaker, “[t]he rocks outside of town” and places “that don’t leave traces” are secrets waiting to be discovered, hidden in plain view. Something as ordinary as rocks can only be visible on “special maps” and

in bulk novels that are “beyond the grasp / of even the curious.” If a movie is shown *on* the woods, it does not leave a trace. People have become accustomed to not noticing the traces they have left on the environment, even when such traces are inscribed on a map or clearly projected on nature. Nevertheless, these human-influenced places are “out in the open,” always already out there and mediated by the mediatized environment in which we live. While this reading of the poem attempts to resolve some of its disjunctions, we can note that it is nevertheless fast-paced, as suggested for example by the seemingly random compound word “freight novel.” The improvisatory disjunctions in the poem, again, suggest a restless affect and an undecidability about how to view nature.

Like Donna Haraway, who in *Staying with the Trouble* encourages us to love the compromised and fragile nature we find all around us (including in cities, labs and even homes, which we normally do not see as “natural” spaces), Coolidge appears to tell us that there is no going back to the unsoiled Romantic spaces of yore. “Neverland” (the title of one of the poems) is gone forever, and so is our innocence and youth. All we are left with is a “ticking crocodile” (132), a symbol of a cataclysmic collapse (perhaps our extinction as a species?) that has yet to happen, but which will very likely coincide with the “death of Mrs. Prevaricate,” a figure that evokes the perpetual waffling and stalling of the bureaucratic apparatus when it comes to the environment.

Although Coolidge sees environmental damage as something ubiquitous and inescapable, he nonetheless does not seem to think, as scholars such as Claire Colebrook do, that we are already living in the end times and that all that is left for us to do is to manage the ongoing environmental apocalypse in the best way we can, a notion that is evident throughout the introduction to her book *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*. Instead, the strategy of Coolidge's poems is to acknowledge the facts while keeping things moving. Not all the poems in *The Land of All Time* obviously lend themselves to ecocritical readings, and those that do often do this with sly insertions that gesture to the state of our planet, such as the line “where ice grows faint” in the poem “Location Liquid” that describes a place or a location “where the end's just one more inch” (Coolidge 22). “Location Liquid” is a list poem that qualifies the place it describes with fourteen different relative clauses, which do not really form a coherent whole. The clause “where ice grows faint” is perhaps the one that makes sense most immediately as it registers the thinning of ice, an evident problem on a global level. The notion, however, is contrasted with other events and places that are not obviously related to nature, such as “[w]here pencils buckle” (Coolidge, “Location Liquid” 22). The location that is being described appears to be deferred indefinitely or in motion, as

the word “location” only appears in the title, not in the poem itself. The poem qualifies the location in several incommensurable clauses. Moreover, the location is liquid, a form of matter that is by definition free-flowing, fluid, and the logical result of ice growing faint. These remarks point to the damage that has already been inflicted on nature casually, as if they were simply facts among a multitude of other, equally relevant facts.

The collection features many similar list poems where meanings are in motion and that exhibit, above all, a playfulness with both meaning and sound that does not allow readers to stop to brood over the desperate state of our “land of all time.” While the end is nigh, it may not be here yet. In many of the list poems such as “Location Liquid” (22) or “A Forward List” (26), the focus is on recording observations rather than on the observer and their experience. Even when “ice grows faint” and “the end’s just one more inch” (Coolidge, “Location Liquid” 22), not only poetic play but also affective engagement must go on.

In a sense, *The Land of All Time* charts similar territory as the writer Min Hyoung Song discusses in *Climate Lyricism*, defining the titular concept as “an attention to expression itself, to consider how *innovations in speech, address, image, sound, and movement* call forth shifting ways of apprehending a phenomenon that eludes familiar scales of comprehension” (3, emphasis ours). Furthermore, climate lyricism is “a demand for a response” (Song 3). For Song, particularly suitable for such exploration are certain kinds of recent lyric writing that engage with “compression of expression, a heavy investment in apostrophe, the careful observation of what is observable in language, a probing of what comprises the human” without, however, solely focusing on “the individual ‘I’” (4). This, then, is lyricism that is concerned with movement and that extends from the traditional lyric focus on an individual “I” to a more global level.

Indeed, in Coolidge’s work too, attention is focused not only on a lyric speaker but also on the reader. Many poems do not explicitly mention or focus on a singular “I,” and address an explicit “you” or another listener like the reader is relatively frequent, as can be seen in the many questions that we find in Coolidge’s work. Often, questions call on readers to join in on the observation of natural phenomena, as in an inquiry posed by the speaker of “Ever Seen Before”: “See those clouds up ahead?” (Coolidge 49). Another example of Coolidge’s many questions is “Can I have a pizza and a body of water?” (“More Room!” 81), which subtly distorts a commonplace speech form, an order for a pizza and a bottle of water, so that it expands to a broader scale. The line seems both familiar and strange, and the reader is invited to consider the unexpected combination further. The line seems to suggest the human desire to have both the unending delights of the Western world, symbolized here by something as banal as

a pizza, as well as to take advantage of nature on a larger level. The response to the question that we find on the next line is “yes but relations never work” (81), which might be taken to indicate that such an easy comparison is not worth the trouble, but ultimately, the comment is more of a quasi-answer that does not unambiguously answer the question. The poetic play, combined with an attention to ways of thinking and forms of speech and affect are, thus, also viewed as collaborative processes.

Coolidge's use of language is improvisatory, as we have discussed throughout the article, but this does not mean complete randomness. Rather, it is about creating various kinds of arrangements. Michael Golston points out, in his essay about the poet's early work, that “in *Space*, Coolidge metaphorically equates words and rocks (both of which ‘contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures’)” (298). It is fairly well known that Coolidge's work is deeply concerned with geology, another instance where his work overlaps with materiality. In a lecture he gave at the Naropa Institute in 1978, titled “Arrangement,” Coolidge explains that he became fascinated with rocks as a child. When he was six years old, his parents took him to the natural history museum in Boston. This is how he describes the visit:

Imagine, six years old, and there it is—minerals! Crystals, quartz, calcite, agates, opals—things; I didn't know what they were. Push the button, see this arrangement. And the minerals themselves as an arrangement of molecules, the axes of a crystal. They are distinct substances and they have powers.

Coolidge goes on to say that from then on, he started collecting rocks and for a long time toyed with the idea of becoming a geologist.

In another interesting anecdote he relates in the lecture, the poet says a trip to the Lurey Caverns in Virginia also had a big impact on him. He describes it thus:

A beautiful cave full of orange and red stalactites, totally covered with these beautiful and weird formations. . . . Some of these caves had thirty or forty miles of passageways. . . . You're following the result of a natural process. You go where it goes. . . . From that, I think about the arrangements of the actual world. This stuff. (Coolidge, “Arrangement”)

“Arrangement” is, for Coolidge, a term that evokes Olson's expansive poetics of field as well as John Cage's semi-random patterns. We notice here that Coolidge was already quite attentive to the so-called natural flow of things, the question of improvisation and staying faithful to the heterogeneity of the material world, its sharp edges as well as its messy

diversity. Going back to the poet's early work, according to Golston, Coolidge takes a cue from Robert Smithson as regards the figurative overlaps between grammar and geology. Both linguistic and geological structures are composed of sediments (for example, we can find fragments of words and ideas from the past lodged in those we use in the present).

If we similarly apply this analogical model to *The Land of All Time*, we can perhaps say that the text seems to be less interested in geology and the properties of rocks (hardness, opaqueness, stasis) than in ideas of vibrancy, speed, and flow. This is a text that keeps us on the move, and if there is any analogy here, it is one between the diversity, playfulness, and dynamism of language and that of nature. This is evident, for example, in Coolidge's invented words in "Stottered (Grubbish)" as discussed above, and in unexpected combinations such as "A glass of snake? / jar of an orange" (Coolidge, "El Condor Pasa" 37). Even the "Giggling layers of sandstone" that we find in "Tales from Wagner" seem to be somehow vibrant, and this layered arrangement, too, collapses sooner rather than later into an overload of meanings including "jiggling dioramas a clogged coal chute," "layers and layers of radioactive redwood," and a host of cultural references including Captain Ahab and Superman (75).

The playful mood of Coolidge's work suggests a complex restless affect that does not dwell in mere disappointment, while it also steers clear of untroubled delight and satisfaction. In her essay in *Affective Ecocriticism*, Lisa Ottum suggests that while a negative mood such as disappointment is often viewed as leading into inaction and propelling passivity, or even functioning as an "ugly feeling" in Sianne Ngai's (1) sense, it can, in fact, foster cognizance of "a disjuncture between something we expected to feel and something that we actually feel" which, in turn, can lead to "politically useful" reflection (Ottum 259–60). For Ottum, disappointment is productive because it can lead us towards positive action, but she also notes at the end of her article that "[w]e would do well to cultivate a radical openness to good surprises, to affects such as delight and interest, even in the midst of melancholy" (273–74). For Coolidge, restless affect means a fundamental indeterminacy that does not aim to be simply positive or negative.

Similarly, as Song points out, living in denial might be needed temporarily in order to keep going, but what is even more significant is "to feel overwhelmed and to dwell on such a feeling so as to appreciate the enormity of what is happening" (75). However, we can say that a sense of being overwhelmed can also be created through other means than merely dwelling in disappointment, as can be observed in Coolidge's work. Far from suggesting that living in denial would be productive, his poetry presents movement in language and focusing on play as an equally overwhelming strategy as dwelling in disappointment might be. Coolidge's poems do not

present finalized emotions like disappointment or joy. Instead, they hover somewhere in between an imminent sense of doom and taking delight in play and movement.

What is productive for Coolidge, then, is remaining in instability and indeterminacy. Ultimately, his poetry proposes that experimenting with various possibilities while remaining open to their affective force is vital. He experiments with language, acutely aware of how particular arrangements in language, like lists or newly coined words, might propose affective movement. The poems in *The Land of All Time* showcase the compromised connection between nature and culture without suggesting that all that is left for us to do is to wait for the inevitable. In reading Coolidge's poems, we can encounter energetic intensities that are not quite processed into finalized emotions. His poems make visible an explorative energy that does not take for granted assumptions about appropriate ways of reacting to the environmental apocalypse.

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LIMITS

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Delimit / De-limit: Barbara Guest at Kandinsky's Window

ABSTRACT

This essay reads Barbara Guest's poem "The View from Kandinsky's Window" from her 1989 collection *Fair Realism* alongside Wassily Kandinsky's own theories of form and abstraction. It argues that Guest's poetic reinvention of historic avant-garde aesthetics on the page can be taken as an exemplary case for new feminist theorizing of the avant-garde as a set of decentered, provisional, and heterogenous practices. Guest's engagement with Kandinsky is initially situated in the context of Clement Greenberg's criticisms of the painter throughout the 1940s. According to Greenberg's formalism, Kandinsky is shown to have "failed" due to his provincialism, eclecticism, and disharmonizing of scale. Guest's poem can be seen as valuing and accentuating each of these qualities and in so doing it presents a subtle defence of Kandinsky's aesthetics and becomes an example of the kind of intermedia contamination which Greenberg's theorizing on "pure" modernist painting had attempted to delimit. Guest's counter interest in "*de-limiting*" the work of art—removing boundaries imposed by period, style, and media—is contextualized within debates on the "limit" within avant-garde aesthetics.

Keywords: Barbara Guest, avant-garde, weak modernism, poetics, New York School.

“What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears to have *no beginning and no end*, so that it overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page.” (Guest, *Forces* 100)

“Only by feeling, are we able to determine when the point is approaching its extreme limit and to evaluate this.” (Kandinsky 30)

“Works of art attract by a resembling unlikeness.” (Pound 42)

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How to write about a poem’s use of visual phenomena? Does this use amount to anything other than description, citation, ekphrasis, or allusion, “a mimesis of mimesis” (Burwick 159): an attempt at likeness or a borrowing of forms and techniques that accentuate unlikeness? These questions, along with their ethical, epistemological, and stylistic implications, have animated work on the New York School of poetry for a generation, with critics following poet James Schuyler’s suggestion that “if you try to derive a strictly literary ancestry for the New York poetry, the main connection gets missed” (2). This “main connection” between poetic experimentalism and visual art in the case of the New York School seems self-evident: the school took its own name, with a wry sense of its own inferiority, from the painters, who had in turn styled themselves on the School of Paris. Canon formation of the school tended to go hand in hand with scholarship, led by Marjorie Perloff and Charles Altieri, that took up the question of its painterly poetics, its leaps into abstraction, the plasticity of its verse. The associations delineated by this consensus are elastic enough: each poet can be positioned somewhere within a set of relations, with each new narrative realigning one axis or another, shifting the margin an inch at a time. Yet the result is often a kind of all-or-nothing assessment of the New York School’s authenticity (or not) as avant-garde, a perspective facilitated by a narrowing of definition that has produced its peculiar status as both the first and, as David Lehman put it in 1998, “the last authentic avant-garde movement that we have had in American poetry” (1). What might be gained by stepping back from strong claims such as this? How close were the poets themselves to such claims in their practice? How to theorize the full range of shifting perspectives across media, cultures, and forms that the New York poets adopted?

Barbara Guest was born in 1920. Dada was about to make its way back to Europe after a fleeting appearance in New York, with Man Ray stating in a letter of 1921: "All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival" (65). It would be fifteen years before a carefully staged return. The exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* opened at the MoMA in December 1936, the inauguration delayed due to "the great number and variety of the art" arriving from Europe ("Press release"). In the interim, the institution had begun its inexorable annexation of the historic avant-garde. In the aftermath, surrounded by declarations of the new American avant-garde, Guest would begin work as an editorial assistant for *Art News*, her first poems published in 1960 by a small gallery press. She wrote of how she "grew up under the shadow of Surrealism" (*Forces* 51) and again, in an interview with Catherine Wagner: "I grew up in the febrility of modernisms. I love constructionism and cubism, all those isms" (176). Responding to such comments, here I want to take Guest as a representative case of what happens when any "main connection" with a *single* tradition is deliberately skewed and weakened. In place of "connection," with its suggestion of a certain fixity, this "febrility" of "all those isms" is felt in Guest's poems as an inconclusive dialogue, a questing after correlations, a cross-contamination of intermedia practices, period styles, and artistic cultures. To read Guest alongside an artist like Wassily Kandinsky is therefore to approach obliquely authenticity, connection, and influence as codependent terms which an avant-garde poetics is always and already intent on destabilizing.

Interest in Guest's work this century has developed in parallel to feminist reassessments of avant-gardism. Guest's own reading (and viewing) of "all those isms" remained a constant theme of her critical writing as well as an inexhaustible source of renewal across her poetry. Indeed, Robert Kaufman's suggestion in 2000 that Guest represented "A Future for Modernism" was prophetic not simply since she extended modernism well beyond its classic periodization but because the reflexivity and openness with which her poetics returns to past "isms" itself anticipated scholarly reassessments of avant-gardism in this century. Whereas earlier classifications of the avant-garde presented "a limited and predetermined set of possibilities" that homogenized what may have been "very diverse projects" (Strom 38), more recent scholarship by Griselda Pollock, Susan Rosenbaum, Suzanne W. Churchill, and Linda Kinnahan has sought to open up a plurality of avant-garde constellations as traversed and reshaped by marginalized participants. The result, as Pollock describes, is "a variety of avant-garde communities, trajectories, or traditions where the sense of breaking new ground is always a relative variable subject to the context rather than categorical absolutes" (796). Guest's poetics can provide us

both with an exemplary case of this situated and provisional avant-gardism, as well as representing an intervention in debates about “all those isms” from her own time, an intervention which can ground this scholarly move towards a looser and more permeable definition of avant-gardism.

In what follows, I take the poem “The View from Kandinsky’s Window” from *Fair Realism* as one occasion for reading avant-gardism with and through Guest. To do so is to suggest that her sampling of past artistic gestures and her sense of a belated modernity—a topological puzzle of a future made present in the past—together constitute a poetics that unfolds a proliferation of possible relations with *and within* the historic avant-garde. Such a reading is necessary if new theorizing of the avant-garde is to find a historical basis in the poetic practice of actors such as Guest. Seen in this way, the single poem is not “proof” of Guest’s avant-gardist credentials according to this or that hard classification. Rather, the poem becomes a site within which problematics of avant-gardism, its radical dissolution of stylistic, temporal, and formal boundaries, are recuperated and particularized.

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NEW YORK, OLD LIMITS

Reception of the avant-garde resists the idea of completion or continuity. Looking back to the historic avant-garde means returning to go forward, a reparative move that counters the presumed progress of aesthetic periodization: the neo-avant-garde, as in Hal Foster’s schematic, *comprehends* but does not complete the projects of its forerunners (15). But Foster’s critique of Peter Bürger’s theory was also a reckoning with the failure of these movements to realize their projects on their own terms, a failure which prefigured and then allowed for their absorption into dominant cultural narratives of post-war America. As Bürger subsequently acknowledged: “The paradox of the failure of the avant-gardes lies without a doubt in the musealization of their manifestations as works of art, that is, in their artistic success” (“Avant-Garde” 705). In many respects, recent feminist reformulations of avant-gardism as provisional and situated begin by facing up to this failure. The *En Dehors Garde* that orbits rather than advances, that marks and amends the centre even as it resists its pull (as proposed by Churchill et al.), is a concept that becomes essential as soon as we recognize that voices on the margins of the historic avant-garde had always understood the limitations of utopian projects which appropriated and replicated violent, reactionary, and misogynistic rhetoric. It follows that the avant-gardism of such actors is to be interpreted as a discrete set of discursive strategies rather than as the naïf echoing of the manifesto’s monologic blast.

Guest, arriving in New York in 1946, would have been alert to one particular use of the avant-garde which, rather than configuring it as a challenge to stylistic or political limits, explicitly associated it with a harmonizing of aesthetic limitations and the legitimization of American exceptionalism. In the influential essays of Clement Greenberg, the avant-garde (a term which he used more or less interchangeably with modernism) was understood as a working through of the possibilities of a given media in order to delimit art's domain:

Guiding themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, by a notion of purity derived from the example of music, the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. The arts lie safe now, each within its "legitimate" boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. ("Laocoon" 32)

Greenberg's polemics, published throughout the 1940s in the *Partisan Review*, were explicitly presented as part of his "historical justification" of "the present superiority of abstract art" in America ("Laocoon" 37). Greenberg posits strong limits: the avant-garde perfects its activity through the acceptance of "limitations" and "legitimate" boundaries." It is worth pausing over the quotation marks that Greenberg places around "legitimate" since this is where later reformulations of the historic avant-garde would set out from, taking this hint of unease—"legitimate" in what sense, for who, and under what conditions?—and amplifying it tenfold. The supposition of a limit would come to be theorized not as the proper ambit of the historic avant-garde but as its antagonist, overturning Greenberg's argument. In the work of Poggioli, the avant-garde was to be thought of as a position "beyond" limits, a critique of society from without, with an "annihilation of all the past, precedent and tradition" as its aim (47). In this model, the avant-garde represented either an attempt to reject the notion of limit or, in a weaker form, posited the transcendence of limits so as to make way for the new. In the second theoretical model, following the work of Bürger, the avant-garde is positioned as working against limits—political, social, cultural—by presenting a revolutionary critique which "cannot be separated from society, but is inescapably implicated in it" (Poggioli 109) and taking the institution as terrain on which to carry out this struggle.

For Poggioli and Bürger, the limit constructs a field of intelligibility or interpretation: a selection of instances (the poem, the painting) that fall within the limit are taken as paradigmatic. This selection is itself contingent

on a paradigm (the poetic, the aesthetic). The significance of the historic avant-garde was its *resistance* to this function of the limit and the strategies it developed to unveil the paradoxes that sustain it. As Ann Gibson describes, it did so by “interrupting the sense of continuous development in the arts by its transgressions against anything established as a given” (205). In Greenberg’s earlier theorization, continuity and receptivity remain the watchwords; rupture and resistance almost entirely absent. The limit is not a construct with which categories such as “art” and “life” are organized, but simply a structuring principle inherent in the materiality of each category. The legitimacy which the limit confers (and, in a circular fashion, the limits which a legitimate paradigm allows for) is not therefore put in question. In Greenberg this legitimacy is merely the by-product of “essential norms or conventions” (“Modernist Painting” 311). And that this “essential” could fast become essentializing was the initial target for later revisions of avant-garde histories that took issue with mid-century formalism.

Greenberg’s writings on Wassily Kandinsky are particularly revealing of how notions of continuity, progress, centre and limit were to be strongly defended as the foundations for New York’s mid-century artistic flourishing. Before turning to Guest’s poem, it is worth rehearsing aspects of Greenberg’s analysis of the painter, so as to understand the ways in which the poem’s dialogue with Kandinsky represents a break with his reception in the New York of the 1940s. Greenberg’s assessments are set out in two reviews for *The Nation* (for exhibitions at the Nierendorf gallery in 1941 and 1945), as well as articles for *Partisan Review* (where Guest later worked as poetry editor), followed by references peppered to Kandinsky in later essays. The importance of Kandinsky for the New York painters was, according to Greenberg in “‘American-Type’ Painting,” ascribable to “the accessibility of a large number of early Kandinskys in what is now the Solomon Guggenheim Museum. All in all, this marked the first time that a generation of American artists could start out fully abreast—and perhaps even a little ahead—of their contemporaries elsewhere” (qtd. in Taylor 5). The teleology of Greenberg’s argument is unmistakable: the American artist could advance from positions taken up by earlier avant-gardes. Yet if these early Kandinskys were a welcome resource for the uptown group of New York artists, in his earlier reviews Greenberg also attacks Kandinsky’s post-1914 works as failures which set a “dangerous” example to younger painters (“Obituary” 6). His critique is organized around three major claims: firstly, Kandinsky mistakenly turned to music as a theoretical basis for his abstraction; secondly, he remained “provincial” with respect to the School of Paris and so unable to build upon the example of Cubism; finally, and as a consequence, he failed to develop a cohesive style in his mature phase. From this thumbnail sketch it is possible to discern Greenberg’s strong attachment to a formally pure, centred,

and unified development of style. Examining each claim a little more closely provides a context for the treatment of Kandinsky in Guest's poem.

In his earliest review from 1941, Greenberg speculates that post-1914, Kandinsky had been misled by "some false analogies with the mathematics of music, with music as an art of self-expression, and with Platonic notions of essential form" ("Review" 64). Greenberg here is referring to the influence of Arnold Schönberg's atonal experimentation, which Kandinsky had first encountered in May 1913 at a concert in Munich. As Roger Rothman has shown, Greenberg's privileging of French modernism over German modernism amounted to a refusal to recognize "the split between the reduction of the figure to the ground on the one hand, and, on the other, the gradual collapse of the ground to the point where what remained were figures-without-a-ground." Greenberg's championing of Cubism and critique of Kandinsky emerges from this distinction, and can be traced back through several similar accounts of Cubism's vital and radical "groundedness"—that is, the exploitation of the canvas and the materiality of paint as its primary principles of organization—to Apollinaire's writing on Cubism: "the object is the inner frame of the picture and marks the limits of its profundity, just as the actual frame marks its external limits" (74). Kandinsky's first "mistake" was therefore to overstep such limits, and to take atonal music not only as weakly analogous to abstraction in art but as showing the way towards an entirely new conception of art that could be freed *both* from representation *and* the limits of its own materiality. To Greenberg's mind, this meant neglecting the advancements proposed by Cubism: the capacity of avant-garde art to double down on the substance of its media. In order to explain this neglect, Greenberg's second critique, elaborated in a later review from 1945 which also served as an obituary, called attention to Kandinsky's "provincialism" in relation to Paris (where the artist had died two weeks before):

Kandinsky was very quick to perceive one of the most basic implications of the revolution cubism had effected in Western painting. Pictorial art was at last able to free itself completely from the object—the eidetic image—and take for its sole positive matter the sensuous facts of its own medium. . . . But Kandinsky erred in assuming that this newly won freedom exhausted the meaning of the cubist revolution and that it permitted the artist to make a clean break with the past and start all over again from scratch—something which no art can do without losing all sense of style. ("Obituary" 4)

This loss of style was Kandinsky's final failure, according to Greenberg, and could be seen in the late paintings as an "eclecticism" of "stylistic and thematic ingredients . . . as diverse as the colors of Joseph's coat:

peasant, ancient, and Oriental art, much Klee, some Picasso, surrealism protoplasma, maps, blueprints, musical notation, etc.; etc.” (5).

If we keep the broad strokes of these critiques in mind, it is possible to see in Guest’s poetics a response to Greenberg, perhaps even a defence of Kandinsky’s “eclecticism,” “provincialism,” and “impurity” as the basis for a different interpretation of the historic avant-garde. It is in this vein that Guest writes in a late essay: “What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears to *have no beginning and no end*” (*Forces* 100). Guest’s striking use of “delimit” here, with original emphases, suggests not the imposition of limits—“to mark or determine the limits of” (“delimit, v.”)—but their elimination, a call to *de-limit*, which would be the removal of limits as such, aiming at the limitlessness of “*no beginning and no end.*” Her poems enact this de-limiting, inhabit a “febrility of modernisms” which ranges across artistic forms, and deconstruct the notion of a unified style or a linear progression of innovation. They therefore take up a threshold position: they anticipate the theoretical debates on avant-gardism which Poggioli and Bürger would inaugurate, whilst also attending to Greenberg’s interpretation of the avant-garde that preceded them. They are poems that seem to wait, as it were, within the limits proposed by the historic avant-garde, limits which would later be expanded and theorized alongside their active reappropriation. Another way of expressing this would be to say that in Guest’s earliest collections, avant-gardism usually presents itself as a question of style—producing texts that seem deliberately shaped according to aesthetic principles borrowed from one of the many “isms”—as can be seen in “In the Middle of the Easel,” from 1960’s *The Location of Things*:

My darling, only
 a cubist angle seen after
 produces this volume in which our hearts go
 (tick tick)

(*Collected* 4)

The poem sets up a bricolage of visual sensations, recalling Kenneth Rexroth’s characterization of Cubist poetry as “the conscious, deliberate, dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity made self-sufficient by its rigorous architecture” (253). It thereby offers a comment on the “cubist angle” of perception as well as hazarding a Cubist style in poetry. This reading keeps Guest more or less aligned with Charles Altieri’s demonstrations of poetic adaptations of the grammars developed by modernist painting (see *Painterly Abstraction*). The force of the semantic rearrangement of the visual field enacted by Cubism is “carried over” by Guest. Yet, extending Altieri’s argument, we might also

ask if such a resampling and reinvigoration of radical modernist style is itself an avant-gardist gesture. What Jeff Dolven calls “the first irony of style”—“to itemize a style is to disable its spontaneous charisma, and even to turn it into something else. (Method, perhaps.)” (59)—succinctly captures a certain avant-garde orientation. First, the itemization of (and attack on) a *period style*, then the dissociative rearrangement of personal style, and finally the move to overcome style and replace it with method, praxis. The first irony of the avant-garde? The need to codify an anti-style, to, as it were, “out-style” style. This would, of course, run in direct opposition to Greenberg’s insistence on the codification of a period style and its continuation through gradualist adaptation.

What then might the mature work of Guest suggest about such debates? How is Greenberg’s strong theory of limits tempered and troubled? 1989’s *Fair Realism* is a collection which extends a liquidation of stylistic limits to the historic avant-garde, with poems that move freely between the aesthetics and problematics of Dora Maar and Picasso, Kandinsky, Symbolism, and Surrealism. Eclecticism is part of Guest’s resistance to a “main connection,” to any firm intersection of period styles and their precedents that could be plotted as a convergence or a continuation. These styles pass through Guest’s poems, and as such they look back and forward, opening pathways that are analogous to the breaches in aesthetic conventions which were the avant-gardes’ original achievements. It is the visual field that then becomes a problematic for a poetics that ranges across numerous avant-garde efforts to *de-limit* the work of art. To read Guest with this in mind is to understand her to be extending these efforts, without ever posing a new limit. In place of the New York School of poets as a receptive conduit for painterly innovation, it is to ask, as Wai Chee Dimock has done with different material, what alternative networks might look like, networks that operate by “taking more time to unfold, not quite done even at the end, but perhaps making up for it with the negative illumination of obliqueness and incompleteness?” (745).

VIEWS FROM KANDINSKY'S WINDOW

Obliqueness and incompleteness could well describe much of what readers have found to be difficult in Guest’s work. Can these qualities be read as emerging from her unfolding relations with “all those isms”? Do they connote not only a stylistic inclination but also a poem’s relation to the visual, and to the problematization of the visual by the historic movements which Guest repeatedly quarried? *Fair Realism* begins at the centre of this problematic: its title is a swipe at the idea that the aesthetic can be

defined with reference only to its mimetic capacities. If “realism” has any need of qualification, if it can be shaded as fair or unfair, then its founding premise—any claim to naturalized objectivity—is, in a stroke, troubled. The collection expands upon the title’s opening gesture, with three poems that directly address the limits of the aesthetic in the work of Picasso, Italian futurist Giacomo Balla, and Kandinsky. In doing so, they move against the Greenbergian conception of an art that is “safe now” due its “willing acceptance” of boundaries (“Laocoon” 32). They ask us to see, with Guest, what this “acceptance” of each medium’s limits necessarily occludes. In place of acceptance, Guest suggests that the boundaries of the aesthetic can be troubled and contested through an attempted translation of one medium (visual material) into another (language).

In illustration of this, “The View from Kandinsky’s Window” is particularly representative, demonstrating the qualities of Guest’s poetics that I have been seeking to emphasize here, in opposition to Greenberg’s critique of Kandinsky. Firstly, it signals overtly its return to a marginalized moment of the historic avant-garde which projected itself forward to the future. Next, it transposes another time frame onto this moment, the present, and its mobile perspective inhabits this conjunction of past, present, *and the future of the past*, thereby confounding a linear chronology of artistic progress. Thirdly, it attempts to regulate this relation by zeroing in on its appearance in visual phenomena, in so doing extending an avant-garde disposition (in this case, one that can be traced back through Kandinsky’s own theorizing and interest in music) to the blurring of distinctions between language and the visual. It is, in short, an avant-gardist *vision*, with all of the mystical latencies that this word holds: “the overcoming of instrumental knowledge and, therefore, the de-empowerment of the subject, the entrusting of the subject to the rhythm of the real, de-constructing itself” (Dal Lago 125). The poem begins with a vision of the Russian painter at his window in Moscow and progresses with the grafting of New York’s Union Square onto this distant site:

The View from Kandinsky’s Window

An over-large pot of geraniums on the ledge
 the curtains part
 a view from Kandinsky’s window.

The park shows little concern with Kandinsky’s history
 these buildings are brief about his early life,
 reflections of him seen from the window
 busy with preparations for exile
 the relevance of the geranium color.

Partings, future projects
exceptional changes are meant to occur,
he will rearrange spatial decisions
the geranium disappears, so shall a person.

His apartment looking down on a Square
the last peek of Russia
an intimate one knowing equipment vanishes.

At Union Square the curtains are drawn
diagonals greet us, those curves and sharp city
verticals he taught us their residual movements.

The stroke of difficult white finds an exit
the canvas is clean, pure and violent
a rhythm of exile in its vein,

We have similar balconies, scale
degrees of ingress, door knobs, daffodils
like Kandinsky's view from his window
distance at the street end.

(Collected 212)

The poem unfolds through a double-sightedness. First, there is Kandinsky's view *from* his window over Moscow, on the verge of leaving the city for exile in 1921, "busy with preparations for exile," casting ahead to "future projects." In choosing this moment, Guest situates her engagement with the artist around the same period which Greenberg identified as signaling Kandinsky's artistic "falling off," and she overtly draws attention to his marginality, and his immanent exile, as generative of, rather than damaging to, his future projects. Secondly, the poem is also a "view" *of* this moment, one that looks back with the knowledge of these "exceptional changes." It is a doubleness insinuated by the switch of the title's definite article ("*The* view") to an indefinite one in the third line ("*a* view"), and established by the disjuncts of the opening stanza, which seem to place the perspective as both looking up (from the second stanza's park) and looking down, through the parted curtains. This doubleness—looking back / looking forward, looking up / looking down—itself constitutes a precise poetic restaging of a Kandinskian technique. In his introduction to *Point and Line to Plane*, first published in English in 1947 for New York's Museum of Non-Objective Painting (precursor to the Guggenheim), Kandinsky begins by describing how "[e]very phenomenon can be experienced in two ways":

“Externally—or—inwardly.

The street can be observed through the windowpane, which diminishes its sound so that its movement become phantom-like. The street itself, as seen through the transparent (yet hard and firm) pane seems set apart, existing and pulsating as if “beyond.” (17)

The image of the window then opens Kandinsky’s treatise on the two “basic elements” of painting—the point and the line—which he wrote during his time in Berlin as a contribution to the “science of art” (76). Kandinsky’s text begins from the window-as-point, a fixed position that does not yet have significance (since it is without coordinates, contingencies, a syntax), and moves on to the vertical and horizontal lines of the street, lines which enmesh the window within a series of coordinates of urban living, and which ultimately draw the view towards a perception that is “beyond” observed reality. This, as we shall see, is also a question of upsetting scale and degrees. It is a poem, like much of Guest’s work, which chips away at the false façade which sight presents us with.

The window remains the centre-point of this exploration, and the “point” in Kandinsky’s theorizing is first understood as an element of language: “In the flow of speech, the point symbolizes interruption, non-existence (negative element) and at the same time it forms a bridge from one existence to another (positive element)” (25). It is a fundamentally spatial element, which is arranged temporally only with the introduction of line. The combination of point and line in painting, argues Kandinsky, makes for an art capable of exactly the spatiotemporal “totality” which pre-Romantic aesthetics had kept apart (since writing was understood as operating primarily through time and the plastic arts in space). This art “transgresses the boundaries within which the time would like to confine it and so forecasts the content of the future” (133). Kandinsky’s method, which can only be briefly sketched here, informs the arrangement, texture, and tonalities of Guest’s poem. But this “informing” is returned in kind with a poetic renewal of Kandinsky’s axioms. The window looking out onto the street is their (shared) departure point, and the poem *parts* from there: de-parting into Kandinsky’s future and splitting the initial clarity of vision into constitutive points. The exchange between poet and painter is expressed at the poem’s close: “We have similar balconies, scale / degrees of ingress.” The “scale degree” describes Guest and Kandinsky’s perspectives as visions, points, illuminations, understandings which take their measure from the “distance at the street end,” extending indefinitely with the poem’s end, looping around the distance between poet and painter which is both enclosed and left parted in the poem’s composition. The

derangement of scale and harmony were, as we have seen, one target for Greenberg's criticism of Kandinsky. But a recent reassessment by Brandon Taylor has emphasized the "new conception of relatedness and scale" as "Kandinsky's best intuition both early and late" (6). Relatedness and scale are central to Guest's text, from the "over-large pot of geraniums" to the veiled pun of "peek," which ties together the act of looking with its high-up vantage point (perhaps also recalling Greenberg's suggestion that the artist had peaked in the 1910s). The use of "ingress" in the final stanza returns us to precisely this relation of distance and perception. It is a position on the threshold, the action of entering but not entering itself, corresponding to a poem that hovers sympathetically on the edge—the ledge—of Kandinsky's aesthetic programme.

Guest had come across at least passages quoted from Kandinsky's treatise. In 1986 she described finding "one book that quoted him on the necessity in art for 'inner sound'" and beginning the poem's composition shortly after:

One day looking down on Union Square from the apartment, the sudden realization arrived that Union Square looked remarkably like the Moscow park seen from Kandinsky's apartment.

Several years passed and I moved near the south side of Union Square. I walked over to Union Square one day and looked up at my former apartment. The building now seemed to resemble the old photograph of Kandinsky's apartment. That evening I began to write a poem about the last evening Kandinsky had spent in Moscow before going into exile. (*Forces* 54)

Doubleness is present too in this account: Guest looking down on Union Square, then looking up at the apartment. The poem holds such points in tension and thereby underscores the "residual movements" that Kandinsky's avant-garde theorization might bring to poetics. Guest's poem is not quite a "Kandinskian vision" nor a "vision of Kandinsky." It is an attempt to place both of these adjacent to one another, and in doing so it runs against the purism dictated by Greenberg in her own time. There is a traceable reading of Kandinsky's geometries, or, perhaps, an attempt to make them legible, to enact them, in poetry. The poem thereby insists on a renewal of the historic avant-garde, a renewal that is worked through as a poetic process, one that poses a proliferation of possible relations with past attempts to investigate the porous binaries of word/image, painting/poetry, distance/scale. This processual working-through goes beyond a "main connection" with one form of visual representation, one -ism or another. Instead, Guest's poetics suggests that the promise of the avant-garde lay in its capacity to entangle

such connections, confounding the very Greenbergian notions of pure style, its sharp periodization, and its studied unification. In place of this strong theory of the avant-garde, we find a playful and indeterminate exploration of avant-gardism, as a process of removing limits rather than building new ones. Guest is an exceptional part of this story, and its writing.

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“What I lack is myself”: The Fluid Text and the Dialogic Subjectivity in Susan Howe’s *Debths*

ABSTRACT

James Joyce’s neologism “debths” (*Finnegans Wake*) that Susan Howe elects for the title of her 2017 volume of poetry points to at least three semantic coordinates of “obligation,” “trespass,” and “demise,” never—due to its implied transaction between the sound and the spelling—fully yielding to or being appropriated by any stable signification. In *Debths*, the end of life, writing, and, perhaps, literature are palpable, if overtly manifested, currents of poetic discourse. In my article, I advance the idea of recognizing this tripartite taxonomy as a variant of what Divya Victor calls “extremity.” Within this context, I demonstrate the emergence of a dialogic, intertextual, and appropriative subjectivity of the poet.

Keywords: Susan Howe, Jorge Luis Borges, James Joyce, found poetry, textual fluidity, extremity, dialogic subjectivity.

“Live in fragments no longer. Only connect”
(Forster 197)

“He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
It was but the mocking echo of his own”
(Frost 338)

“urlop od siebie?”

tylko przez odmianę
siebie
przez ten sam przypadek”
(Białoszewski 154)

“The earth is an oyster with nothing inside it,
Not to be born is the best for man”
(Auden 152)

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I

The postulate of extreme poetry put forward by poet and scholar Divya Victor in the thematic issue of *Jacket2* magazine, published in 2019, has solid political, social, and economic contexts.¹ From 2017, Donald Trump’s presidency had already meant that part of American society had to learn how to live an everyday life under less-than-normal conditions, braving the violation of civil rights, misogyny, racism, transphobia, supremacist politics, isolationism, and xenophobia. The novelty of the circumstances did not lie in their sudden appearance—they were neither new nor sudden in contemporary America—but in the intensity, scale, and social support they gained. Or better: their extremity. The word “extreme” and its synonyms were a significant part of the vocabulary used by the Republican president, a verbal signature of his radicalism noticeable in his obsessive use of adjectives such as “big,” “huge,” “major,” and “vast,” and in the emphatic multiplication of words that reinforce meanings, for example, “major, major,” “many, many, many.” But Victor’s exploration of the significance of the term for America is not limited to radical politics. Taking a longer historical perspective, she sees “extreme” as pertaining to

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American consumer practices, comfort, security, and class privilege: “[e]xtremity . . . is one way of assuring the consumer-citizen that what is theirs . . . is theirs in some ultimate, final, complete, total way.” This process is not conditioned by the degree to which the right or the left dominates the political scene but reflects the American attitude to material possessions and understanding of what a “secure” life, devoid of randomness, is. It is a token of the naive but persistent American belief in people’s ability to control individual destiny and existential fulfillment. Thus, there emerges a double connotation of the word “extreme” and, at the same time, its valuation meaning. For Victor, this becomes a pretext for plotting aporetic directions in the development of contemporary poetry.

According to Victor, the notion of “extreme” should invigorate the kind of poetry that does not run away into the domain of abstractions but critiques contemporaneity, broadening the field of reflection on topics that anchor us in the here and now. Extreme conditions demand extreme reactions; therefore, she “intuit[s] that poetry (and writing about poetry) could argue against this particular and peculiar condition of the term in the twenty-first century.” She seeks and invites writing digressive verse that is extreme in its search for new formal solutions. Her proposition has a transgressive character, although the notion of transgression is unclear and persistently eludes a precise definition. “A truly potent abstract concept avoids, resists closure. The rough, blurred outlines of such a concept, like a net in which the fish have eaten large, gaping holes, permit entry and escape equally. What does one catch in such a net?” asks Donald Barthelme. Transgression is inseparable from a limit and possesses a contradictory quality. The acts of violating or infringing on the law, commandment, or convention simultaneously announce the same law, commandment, or convention. Denial is tantamount to affirmation. Extremity, transgression, and limit are the coefficients of thinking through Victor’s idea of poetry. Yet, at the same time, they do not guarantee that the poetry defined in this way will affect any change in the non-textual world, especially in the realm of politics and social affairs. Let us try to grapple with the apparent insolubility of this contradiction.

II

James Joyce’s neologism “debths” appearing in *Finnegans Wake* that Susan Howe chose for the title of her 2017 volume of conceptual poetry points to at least three semantic coordinates of “obligation,” “trespass,” and “demise,” never—due to its actual transaction between the sound and the spelling—fully yielding to any stable signification. In *Debths*, the end of life, writing, and, perhaps, literature are palpable, if overtly manifested,

currents of poetic discourse. This article advances the idea of recognizing this tripartite taxonomy as a variant of what Victor calls “extremity.” The interpretive method I adopt is a direct echo of the compositional method used by Howe herself. It assumes a meandering, rhizomatic form and uses a whole range of texts that wrap around the poet’s designated paths of intertextual forays. I choose productive, associative texts, ones that, in my opinion, resonate meaningfully with the discourse of *Debths*, for in the case of this book, it is difficult to apply a critical perspective that is not at least partially eclectic. In the conclusion of my reflections, Howe is recognized as an author whose writing strategy is not fully embraceable and whose inconclusive text-non-text narratives, scraps of other people’s words, cross over to the realm of autobiography. A certain kind of writing subjectivity emerges in the interpretive process, and I am convinced it is of a supra-individual quality, one that may provide (some) mental inoculation against the extremism of the world around. To demonstrate this, the theoretical framework for my reading of *Debths* engages Craig Dworkin’s metaphor of “echo” describing an act of poetic transcription, one tale by Jorge Luis Borges, John Bryant’s notion of the “fluid text,” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of a dialogic self.

Whenever images and stories of death and resurrection appear in *Debths*, the boundaries between them are always fluid. The book contains two epigraphs. The first is taken from *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce’s version of the story, in which a dead, drunk Finnegan is “resurrected” by a good dousing of spilled aqua vitae (whiskey).² The other, inserted before the “Periscope” series of poems, comes from chapter 93 of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, “The Castaway,” a kind of resurrection story where Pip, another character falling in and out from under the water, saw “God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” (304). Joyce and Melville, Ireland and New England are the extreme poles between which Howe’s intellectual life and works develop. Howe’s affinity with Irish culture and the modernist panache for experimental writing, deliberately difficult, requiring a rethinking of reading habits, is primarily linked to her mother, Mary Manning, an actress and writer, who once produced a theatrical adaptation of *Finnegans Wake*. She admired Samuel Beckett and W. B. Yeats, and extracts from the latter’s poetry appear in the pages of her daughter’s book.

Debths’s poetry emerges from the depths of the Atlantic. In the final parts of the volume, in a collage-like series of shreds of printed fragments, only single, “floating” words can be identified. And they are significant: “the

² “. . . childlinen scarf to encourage his obsequies where he’d check their debths in that mormon’s thames, be questing and handsetl, hop, step and a depend, with his berths in their toiling moil . . .” (Joyce 198–99).

frontier” (129), “infant” (131), “Nothing,” “Diarmuid” (136), and “Death, the TREE OF KNOWLEDGE” (137). In the lexical-symbolic layer, the whole book comes full circle. After all, it begins with an autobiographical childhood memory and ends with the memory of Diarmuid (Diarmuid Ua Duibhne), a figure from Celtic mythology, the son of Donn, the god of death, whose name will appear in the cyclically constructed *Finnegans Wake*. Diarmuid, in turn, takes the reader back to the early parts of the book, again to an autobiographical essay that mentions Yeats, author of the poetic prose “Diarmuid and Grania” (written 1901 in collaboration with George Moore). Howe’s discourse develops in motion; it is a dynamic of morphic meanings that allow no fixed signification. Equally unclosed remains the identity of the writing subject. This is a subject as uncertain as the next possible version of Yeats’ manuscript of the poem—Howe is clearly fascinated by the unfinished and the infinite—that is quoted verbatim, retaining the original crossing of lines:

I thought that old age might show
 grow old to show
I thought I could show me what
 What
That line of Robert Browning ment
‘An old hunter talking with gods’
 But now
But o my god I am not content
 dream
 rem[?n]ent (21)

For Howe, “draft” words and meanings are not to be lost or extinguished, even in the case when the manuscript version of a poem was, in fact, later discarded or deleted (as Yeats himself decided). In a more general manner, the past-ness of somebody’s text needs to be preserved. Then it can be, for example, assimilated into Howe’s own discourse. And it is out of such textual layers that her own writing emerges.

“Debths,” a semantically loaded neologism, signals Howe’s literary borrowings, her self-identification strategies, and—perhaps—her biological demise. This is evident from the very first page of the introductory essay, which begins with excerpts from Bing Crosby’s 1939 song “Little Sir Echo” and then starts with a recollection of a childhood trip. The essay—which is an autobiographical feature but, in an important way, also clarifies the contexts of the poems that will appear later in the volume—is inscribed in a matrix of relationships and connections. The life and identity of the poet remain dependent on places, people, texts of others, history, and myth. Howe begins by recalling her stay at Little Sir Echo Camp for Girls on

Lake Arlington, stressing the experience of childhood anxiety when her parents left her “alone with my dread of being lost in the past; absent” (9). In adulthood, the echo of that fear will be overcome and turned into a passion for the past, the absence, repetitions, intertextual dialogues, and the inflow of other texts. “Echo,” in fact, is at the core of conceptual writing as its value lies in the act of duplication. Echoing a primary text comes down to transcription—often the first, by no means last stage of composition—thus leaving behind or sidestepping “the confessions of Narcissus” as a traditional manner of expression in verse (Dworkin xlvi). As repetition, echo also functions as a figure of “secondariness” (Jockims 102), requiring the presence of an/other as a prerequisite for the secondary text to come into textual being. An act of transcription pulls out poesis from its original root, and, as a consequence, “[w]hat is made . . . is not something new, but the old newly seen” (Jockims 102–03). Or, put differently, resurrected.

The text of *Debths*’ introductory essay unravels as a series of associations, drawing together diverse elements of experience across space and time so that “odd analogies assume a second life” (13). Recalling one of Wallace Stevens’s most beloved poems, “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” Howe admits to a desire to “face things exactly as they are” (10), but it turns out a paradoxical statement, for in her view of reality she navigates a web of densely woven, hardly penetrable, and mainly textual connections. What reality does Stevens’s poem give her access to? “Chocorua” points to Mount Chocorua, near a small town in Carroll County, New Hampshire, and a Native American chief or a prophet who, according to one legend, fell or jumped from the mountain while hunting. It was an accidental death or suicide. Stevens’s text, local legend, and death motif momentarily return to the autobiographical recollection:

In the fall of 1899 Leonora Piper, the famous Boston medium, spent a week with William James and his wife at their house at Chocorua for discussions concerning various aspects of trance-phenomena including her trance-talk with “Phinuit” “a former native of this world.” One afternoon they took a break from work and went fishing. Mrs. Piper caught the largest bass ever recorded in the lake.

There. Messages flow through clear lake water and yes, gravity pulls matter together to form a cosmic web. Even if this looks like the end of my Picnic at Lake Armington story the three of us are strung together like beads on a necklace. (11)

The name “Piper” soon reappears in the title of the sculpture, “The Personal Effects of the Pied Piper,” seen by the poet at New York’s Whitney Museum.

Known as the Pan Piper (of Hamelin), this character from German folklore is a cunning rat-catcher who lures rats with the help of melodies he plays. But provoked, he can pose a threat as a child kidnapper.

The two extensive cycles of poems included in *Debths*, “Tom ‘Tit ‘Tot” and “Debths,” are intersemiotic works inasmuch as verbal and non-verbal modes of signification are intertwined and dependent on each other to convey messages of sorts—often vague—drowned in a chaotic accumulation of lines, repeated words, figures, and symbols. Fragments of printed texts, cut up with scissors and then grouped and superimposed on the glass surface of a photocopying machine, are instances of intended illegibility and inaccessibility that confound attempted reading. They cannot be contextualized and interpreted unequivocally, and comprehension of the black intersemiotic fields on the white pages requires a paradoxical ability on the part of the reader to unread them, i.e. to acknowledge the illegible. Placed in the center, “Tom ‘Tit ‘Tot” contains fifty-seven collage pieces and is the most extended section in the entire book. The alliterative title, which could, thanks to its one-syllable structure, bring to mind a case of echolalia, refers to one of the books Howe copied and cut, Edward Clodd’s *Tom Tit Tot: An Essay on Savage Philosophy in Folk-Tale* (1898). Even with a cursory perusal of these scraps, two phrases give the impression of functioning as the farewell of an elderly poet: “the rhymes I made” and “hopes and fears of life’s work.”

III

Howe’s authored and un- or dis-authored volume declares its unoriginality and uncreativity by liberating and re-purposing poems of others, narratives of others, and scraps of unidentified printed pages. The mode of transcription leads to the cross-breeding of genres, for example, the transgressive movement from document to verse or, more generally, from the original to the cut-up or unacknowledged quotation. In seeking illuminating parallels to Howe’s compositional method, she can be situated next to a certain well-known literary figure.

One of the pioneers of “secondariness” in modern literature is the protagonist of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.” The story begins with an evocation of the death and funeral, taking the form of an elaborate obituary. An unnamed critic pays homage to an apocryphal poet, Pierre Menard, presenting a catalog of both his “visible” and his “underground” or “invisible” works. Among the latter, there is Menard’s *Quixote*, a fragmentary, incomplete work that coincides, word for word, with Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. The narrator adamantly maintains that Menard’s word-for-word magic emulation of the original

words is not simply a copy of the original text. Instead, as the story suggests, Menard produced a much more nuanced text than Cervantes:

Cervantes' text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More *ambiguous*, his detractors will say—but ambiguity is richness.)

It is a revelation to compare the *Don Quixote* of Pierre Menard with that of Miguel de Cervantes. Cervantes, for example, wrote the following (Part I, Chapter IX):

“. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.”

This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the “ingenious layman” Miguel de Cervantes, is merely rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

“. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.” (94)

The repetition of the original text is, therefore, not a repetition in the literal sense of the word; it is instead the generation of meanings hitherto non-existent, meanings needed for arbitrary purposes (thus, in a way, anticipating the Roland Barthes-style hermeneutic flippancy of the 1960s). Menard's *Quixote* is a lost manuscript. We have no option but to rely on the narrator's testimony (a risky enterprise) even to assess the existence of such work because Menard “did not let anyone examine these drafts and took care they should not survive him. In vain [the narrator] tried to reconstruct them” (95). At the end of the story, readers cannot be certain to what extent the narrator might have examined or read Menard's manuscripts. In any case, for the tenacious narrator, it is of no consequence that Menard's incomplete *Quixote* was destroyed because he has artfully redefined the act of reading to compensate for the partial, or total absence of Menard's text. It is again the unreliable narrator, not Menard, who posits the “true” significance of the text, and who deems the latter's *Quixote* subtler and richer than the original. The story raises questions about the meaning of authorship, touches on issues of literary appropriation, and is a penetrating, if ironic, study of the questionable “essence” of the writer's identity.

In a similar manner, Howe's early, famous *My Emily Dickinson*, a volume containing elements of literary criticism, cultural history, personal essay, and aesthetic manifesto, is both an open admission of a non-objective un-academic

critical perspective and an emphatic statement of ownership. The book is largely a transcription of passages, often with minimal or no commentary, from poems and letters by Dickinson and other sources (Emily Brontë, Shakespeare, Jonathan Edwards, and Mary Rowlandson). It is a seminal monograph on the work of the Amherst poet but also an autobiographical narrative. What Howe has to say about Dickinson repeatedly expresses something pertinent about her own writing.³ Published in 1985, it set the path of her own creativity, which Howe has never abandoned, and which is exemplified in the volume under consideration in the present article.

IV

In *Debths*, the liberated, re-purposed poems and narratives, collaged and collapsed together, are freed from the proper names of original authors attached to them, fished up from the deep richness of Howe’s reading life. The river of changes flows from manuscript to draft to editorial revision to proofs to printed text and corrections in subsequent editions. Not only is this fluidity a constitutional quality of any literary text with several versions, but, as John Bryant points out, it characterizes all works (1). The current of fluidity overflows its banks and affects the exactness of rendition of the writer’s thought or idea into their writing, the crossing between the mental and the material (even if it is beyond readers’ or critics’ verification), translations of the text into other media as adaptations, into other languages, or the tampering with private papers for publishing them posthumously without the author’s consent. Thus, it both matters what specific texts and authors Howe fashions her collage poems out of (as she thereby declares affinity with particular authors and traditions) and, at the same time, does not matter, since her point is that literary texts are contrived through acts of literary borrowing and recycling and that authorship is

³ An apt description of Howe’s peculiar method of reading Dickinson’s work is given by John Taggart: “In time poets and their poetry become critical cartoons. The great value of Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* is that it neither reproduces nor produces such criticism. What it does produce is a picture of mystery and power. The poet is a hunter consciously and aggressively active in the hunting process of composition; the poetry is what’s hunted down and transformed by that process in wilderness of language. Power has been exerted to be transformed and exerted again upon us as readers of the poetry. Because Susan Howe’s reading is attentive both to the poet’s historical contexts and to her texts—passionately attentive and open-ended in interpretation—the final mystery of the poet’s motivation is respected and the exertion of the poetry’s power is given free play. It is a picture, but a picture that releases to mystery and power. It is a picture of Emily Dickinson, an and it is a picture of the poet in the act of composition that applies to the practice of contemporary poets” (264).

collaborative rather than individual. This recognition compromises the very idea of a definite text and, at the same time, introduces the problem of “shifting intentionality” and definite authorship:

No doubt readers gravitate to so-called definite texts because they desire the . . . comforts that definite texts propose to offer: authenticity, authority, exactitude, singularity, fixity in the midst of the inherent indeterminacy of language. We are happy to acknowledge that any single text can yield up multiple interpretations; but the mind resists the thought that single literary works are themselves multiform. (Bryant 2)

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V

In one way or another, Howe’s book measures itself “with the social role of poetry in the contemporary political landscape,” just as Victor wants. This, however, is done in a camouflaged manner. In *Debts*, the literary and non-literary discourses are read in their historical dimensions. But in the present article, I look at her work from a somewhat different angle, namely, as one that is probing the limits of the author’s self, or, rather, as a Bakhtinian exercise in determining the identity of the writing self:

[A]ll words (utterances, speech, and literary works) except my own are the other’s words. I live in a world of others’ words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture (expressed in the word or other semiotic materials). (Bakhtin 143)

The premise of Howe’s compositional method, which involves collaging and stitching textual and visual fragments, is relatively simple. It is the recognition that there is no such thing as a self-contained, out-of-context statement. This, granted, is not an original recognition, but its realization—yes. In Howe’s case, the recorded utterance, the sentence, and the fragment are always chain elements. The chain has no end. It begins, as befits a poetic text, *in medias res*.

The related voices of “others” are social in nature. They are an assemblage of fragments of other authors’ consciousness. Intertextuality in writing cannot be separated from how the author exists as an identity and their relationship to language. In this sense, Howe follows Bakhtin, who admits: “I realize myself initially through others: from them, I receive words, forms, and the tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself” (138). All this invites generalization (a word Howe seems to dislike). Human

subjectivity, including that of the author, crystallizes in intersubjective relationships. The more we recognize the dependence of our expression on external factors, the closer we come to the ideal of freedom in the use of language. There is a paradox in this. In the case of the writer, there is, first of all, a critical awareness of one’s dependence on the context of tradition and history, including the history of silences and omissions.

All of Howe’s publications derive from now-classic books such as Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* and William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*, which address American cultural history in a way that balances the assemblage of scholarly work, anthologies of source texts and literary discourse.⁴ The idea is to encounter the past in the text in the least mediated way possible, as Benjamin did, for example, in his compilation of texts collected in the bound volume *The Arcades Project*.⁵ The contexts that she charts with chains of dependent quotations and allusions sometimes render a notion of the historical and literary era irrelevant. Reading someone else’s text or manuscript, studying a photograph, Howe recognizes herself, her uniqueness, and, at the same time, an awareness of the otherness of the other. What was another’s voice is appropriated, internalized, and overtly claimed as a possession.

Howe’s appropriations seem to aspire to acts of identification in the spirit of Pierre Menard, the idea which Borges, however, mocks in his short story. In her fluid texts, the appropriation as identification seems an ultimate point on the flow chart. Can one go beyond the threshold? Is it the limit of extremity? Silence, illegibility, absence, and coupled fragments of texts, form the logosphere of discourse. So, another problem arises here. Is it critically appropriate to treat Howe’s books as largely autobiographical (as they almost always are) or as reports from archival research? Is it Susan Howe or a persona she creates every single time, with every new context triggered by a new quote? In other words, how to tell Howe from “not Howe”? On one of the pages, we come across a clue, a trace:

If to sense you are
alive is pleasant itself
or can be nearly so—
If I knew what it is
I’d show it—but no

What I lack is myself (110)

⁴ For the discussion of other affinities between Howe and Williams, see Partyka (211–25).

⁵ For a discussion of parallels between the compositional method used in Benjamin’s posthumous book and modernist and postmodernist poetry, see Perloff (24–49).

But is it the answer to all questions that crop up in the analysis of a discourse notable for its tendency to defer answers? Therefore, we ask ourselves—and this is perhaps the last stage of our interpretation—whether this is a question uttered by a human writing subject or by the self-defining literary text.

In a sense, *Debths* is part of an important dispute in contemporary philosophical reflection about the status and meaning of subjectivity—in this case, the subjectivity of the writer, the author. Howe seems to disbelieve in the writing *cogito*, which in the act of simple reflection adequately captures itself and therefore is perfectly transparent to itself. Her doubt, in fact, is more extreme and undermines the subject understood as the principle of inner unity and singularity of thought. But even if the “I” of the author comes to be seen as the arena of many different forces, Howe’s way of creating poetry is not about replacing the erstwhile exaltation of the subject proposed by Descartes with its humiliation and rejection. To answer the question “Who am I as a poet, as an author, as a person?” it is not enough just to reflect directly; no intuitive insight into oneself will suffice. Only an indirect method comes into play here: interpretation of what I write, how I write, and why I write it. Subjectivity shows itself through various objectivities—other people’s words, other people’s material practices, other people’s discourse assemblies, other people’s view of the world, other people’s metaphysics, etc. The writerly “I” co-shapes all these “objectivities” and is co-shaped by them. To be oneself as a writer, to be able to label oneself with the word “I,” does not mean to resemble an essential entity, an unchanging causal factor. In other words, “I” will not express itself as “I am” but as “I relate to something.” The writer’s subjectivity is relational and extreme in the scope of contexts it embraces and then internalizes.

Subjectivity understood dialogically arises in Howe’s work primarily from the inscription of the author’s “I” in a network of interacting other’s texts (voices), although it can be seen in the specific formal solutions of individual poems or poem-collages, and more specifically in the way they “compromise . . . the coherence of syntax and the integrity of the line” (Eastman 2). The series titled “Periscope,” whose title alludes to a painting by Paul Thek, contains highly compressed content in which the semantic message is heavily compromised by broken syntax. An illustration of this grammatical-ontological procedure is the opening of the series:

Closed book who stole
 who away do brackets
 signify emptiness was
 it a rift in experience

Mackerel and porpoise
 was this the last us (Howe 101)

Recognition of oneself in another, or, in other words, “intersubjectivity” (Eastman 11) is presented through the specific construction of individual lines, the use of enjambment, and the omission of some—grammatically required—lexical elements. The doubling of “who” introduces the indeterminacy of subject and complement, thereby suggesting “a renegotiation of identity” (Eastman 11).⁶

From a very different, more general, ethical-ontological perspective, the renegotiation of human subjectivity appears in a post-humanist interpretation of the passage, where Howe challenges currents of thinking about the supposed centrality and privileged position of humans, while opening up new ways of representing humans in relation to the non-human. Pirnajmuddin and Mousavi, for example, highlight in their analysis how the resounding voice (or voices) throughout the series challenge the boundaries between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, thus challenging liberal humanist models of subjectivity. Howe creates a visionary engagement and encounter with the natural world and “anthropomorphized things” in an attempt to give voice to the inarticulate Other:

The title [Periscope] indicates the desire to communicate a new perspective of humanity and its place in the universe. Periscope-like, the poem offers the desire . . . [to explore] the possibility of withdrawing from any anthropocentric or human-centered worldview. Instead, the poem privileges engagement with and immersion in the natural world to expand the possibilities of vision and to evoke “imagined” imageries rather than to capture only real images. (Pirnajmuddin and Mousavi 194)

VI

In 2018, when Howe’s book was awarded the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize, American novelist, poet and critic Ben Lerner pointed out not only the inspiring encouragement implicit in the book for readers to seek their own idiosyncratic constellations of the personal and the archived but insisted that *Debths* does not surrender to the “trivial criterion of relevance,” shows “other orders of thinking,” and, significantly, “stand[s] in opposition to the fascist amnesiac buffoonery of the present U.S. government” (“Griffin Poetry Prize 2018”). And it is for this “distinctly

⁶ In a similar direction follow the considerations of Nicky Marsh, who, when considering the concept of subjectivity in the works of Howe, points to another side of the construction of such a dialogical structure: “the fear that she [Howe] feels in writing verse that demands a moving beyond the subjective boundaries of the self” (128).

un-American” dimension that Lerner was particularly grateful to Howe. As the poet of found language, she finds her own language in archives to reconnect to various points in her life and build up her subjectivity in writing. In the onslaught of various political and social extremes, the unpredictability of such extreme art created by an idiosyncratic dialogic subjectivity is a mental salvation. Or at least a hope for it.

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EXTREME FORMS

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Plasticity and the Poetics of Inside- Out Inversion in Emmett Williams and Roman Stańczak

ABSTRACT

Informed by the current call for a reassessment of the concepts of radicalism and extremity in the fields of literature and visual arts, my study aims to investigate the radicalities entailed by the tactics of turning inside out the materialities of poems and artworks as exemplified, respectively, by Emmett Williams's concrete poetry and Roman Stańczak's sculptural works conceptualized as inverted everyday objects. Taking a cue chiefly from Catherine Malabou's explorations of plasticity, I propose to argue that by destabilizing the interior/exterior dichotomy of the forms belonging to their respective fields, both Williams and Stańczak challenge the commonplaceness, transparency and rigidity of text, sign, and the quotidian object, thus, on the one hand, gesturing towards what the philosopher terms as "the twilight of writing" and, on the other, articulating a need for a more processual and contingent, or plastic as Malabou would have it, way of thinking about literature, art, and life. As I hope to demonstrate, by employing certain strategies to exteriorize the "insides" of the poem (the syntax, the page grid, spacing, or the shape of the grapheme), Williams foregrounds the discursive interplay of the graphic and the plastic, whereas Stańczak's altered objects foray into inquiries on (the lack of) transcendence. The final part of my analysis seeks to envision political dimensions of both concrete poetry and Stańczak's visual works as filtered through the lens of plasticity. The implications brought about by plastic reading, as I claim, link with new models of meaning-making and forms of resistance to ideologies of power.

Keywords: concrete poetry, sculpture, plasticity and inversion, Emmett Williams, Roman Stańczak, Catherine Malabou.

In her multifaceted considerations of the concept of the dusk of the written form in her seminal *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Catherine Malabou develops a link between the term and the notion of insomnia, “the melancholic state into which the psyche of someone who cannot mourn the lost object descends,” which further translates as “the impossible end of writing, with plasticity infinitely opening the wound of an interminable mourning” (15).¹ In effect, as the philosopher imagines it, “even when it is dead and replaced by plastic sublation, writing would nevertheless return, other and stronger . . . , speculatively promoted” (16). Thus, however firmly pronounced, the twilight of writing, understood by Malabou in a Derridean fashion not merely as a “transcription of speech or simple ‘written form’” (12), but in an enlarged sense as “arche-writing,” “the general movement of the trace” (12), “all that gives rise to inscription in general, whether it is literal or not” (Derrida qtd. in Malabou, *Plasticity* 58), appears to fail to mark a definite departure from the linguistic-graphic paradigm of organizing human thought. Noticing the dusk to have “too many dusks” in itself (Malabou, *Plasticity* 16), Malabou detects the space between writing and plasticity as “a darkened frontier” and “a passage to the other *on the same ground*” (16); and if the philosopher perceives this indistinct area to be guided by a reprieve, mourning, melancholy, and separation, what could be said about the perimeters of a writing that is metamorphic and cannot depart? I would like to argue that the specificities of writing in twilight are well communicated by concrete poetry, whose radical aesthetics invite one to reappraise their protrusion from the sanctioned idioms of artistic expression into something larger than writing. Aiming to delineate the plastic implications of concretism, I engage in a discussion of Emmett Williams’s concrete poems which attempt to materialize the compositional “insides” of the poetic form and which find a silent partner in the inverted textures of Roman Stańczak’s sculptures.

PLASTICITY, NEW MATERIALISMS, AESTHETICS: PRODUCTIVE JUNCTIONS

Emerging at the beginning of 21st century together with other critical ventures classified under the aegis of “new materialism,” Malabou’s reflection on the need to recalibrate our thinking about the modalities of writing partakes in voicing larger concerns about focalizing critical attention on the notion of representation and rehabilitating language as

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an epistemic tool, all characteristic for social constructionism and the so-called linguistic turn. The preoccupations of academe at the turn of the centuries have been succinctly summarized by Karen Barad:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. . . . What compels the belief that we have a direct access to cultural representation and their content that we lack toward the things represented? How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? (801)

Believing, on the one hand, that “language and other forms of representation [are given] more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve” (Barad 802) and, on the other, willing to generally decolonize critical thought from its foundations that always subsume discussions within the logic of binary oppositions (nature/culture, subject/object, language/matter, among others), the advocates of new materialist theories have sought to build their endeavors around restoring the agency of matter.

Along with various other domains, this paradigmatic shift has entailed a number of implications for the fields of literature, literary studies and literary theory. Surveying a wide range of literary materialisms, Liedeke Plate observes that the material turn in literary criticism and creative endeavors have existed in fertile reciprocity, with the former helping to generate “new objects of literary study,” yet simultaneously constituting “[a] response to new literary and artistic practices,” which have otherwise posed an insurmountable problem for dominant critical paradigms (11). For Plate, an object of study “attesting to the importance of the materiality of literature” (10) and requiring a thoroughly reconsidered methodology of criticism is perfectly typified by Emily Dickinson’s envelope poems, a set of works “written on bits of salvaged envelopes, torn or carefully pried apart at the seams and flattened out” (9) which were not discovered until the mid-1990s. In the scholar’s own words,

Dickinson’s envelope poem demands that the scholar accounts for the materiality of the paper, its shape, folds, and traces of former uses and that she accounts for the ways in which she holds the paper in her hand, feels its texture, turns the multidimensional physical object around. In consequence, the new object of study also requires another language, a vocabulary to speak of materials and the materiality of literature; a language that is largely unknown to the student of literature, whose glossary of literary terms includes burlesque but not buckram, interpretation but not interleaved, rhyme but not rubbed. (11–12)

In the second half of the 20th century, parallel challenges to readerly habits and critical tools were openly reiterated by concrete, visual and conceptual poetry, whose modalities anticipated a host of new materialisms' premises by predicating on the arbitrariness of binaries such as the verbal/the visual and language/matter, to say nothing of their mistrust of representation. Interestingly enough and concurrently to the emergence of new materialisms, in the first decades of the 21st century these poetics have enjoyed a steady revival of interest with poets, publishers and curators. Some scholars have attributed this resurgence to the current perimeters of culture that bespeak of living through the "late age of print," in which all "the literary [becomes reevaluated] as an 'analogue' verbal-visual art" (Plate 11). Others, which is equally significant for my later discussion of plasticity in Williams's and Stańczak's works, have sought to link its momentum with the circumstances of the crisis of culture. Willard Bohn and Grant Caldwell concur in claiming that the renewed interest in crafting visual poetry, which Caldwell wishes to subsume into the category of concrete poetry (and which is certainly debatable), converges with "a crisis of the sign, which reflects a crisis of culture" (Caldwell).² In François Rigolot's view, this translates as a phase when "the formulators of culture . . . question their expressive medium" (qtd. in Caldwell), which is undoubtedly facilitated by the emergence of new technologies and forms of communication. The ebbs and flows of interest in visually-oriented poetics, Bohn continues, are not confined to the last century, but are a phenomenon that has continued at least since the Alexandrian period, always foreshadowing paradigmatic shifts in culture (qtd. in Caldwell). Thus, foundational for the practice of visual poetry, the idea of the crisis of the sign, defined in its basic sense as "an object, quality, or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else" ("Sign") comports with the premises of new materialisms which disavow and plunge the ontological powers of representation into discredit. The literary, which fades into the "analogue" verbal-visual in the late age of print, appears to intersect with the condition of the "linguistic-graphic scheme" of human thought heralded by Malabou as "diminishing and . . . enter[ing] a twilight" (*Plasticity* 59) to be eventually superseded by the plastic modality. Plasticity is further explored and expanded by the philosopher in a number of works, including the 2009 *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, which, among other contexts, grounds the concept within the perimeters of Freudian psychoanalysis, neuroscience and trauma studies to recognize the ontic

² In my discussion of concrete poetry I am following Nancy Perloff's delineation of its key principles: "language as material," "form . . . equals content," "rejection of the lyric 'I,'" "reduction to a small number of words," "the pursuit of the 'verbivocovisual'" (28–29).

character of the accident and destruction and reflect on its implications for subjectivity. The book brings further complexity to the notion, discussing “the phenomenon of pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair” (Malabou, *The Ontology* 6) as set against transformation and elasticity, both of which do not close on facilitating one’s redemptive return to initial form. Such distinctions, as I hope to demonstrate while reflecting on Stańczak’s sculptures, find reverberations in the realm of aesthetics.

Returning once more to Malabou’s intuitions on identifying the dark territory between the paradigms of writing and plasticity, I would posit that the aesthetics of concrete poetry have always gestured towards the limits and extremities of verbivocovisual expression (to use the term coined by the Brazilian Noigandres group), thereby enacting writing at dusk. Self-referential, permutational and materiality-oriented, concrete poetry can be perceived as a solipsistic exorcism and an act of grieving over the defectiveness of logos, to whose linguistic-graphic manifestations it nonetheless melancholically holds in the act of expression. Concurrently, forming the Malabouian “passage to the other” (*Plasticity* 16), selected works of concrete poets such as Emmett Williams, whose material concerns have been echoed in recent decades by the sculptural output of Roman Stańczak, foreshadow a number of processes comprising the new plastic paradigm. As I hope to stress, among other operations they foreground the interplay of the graphic and the plastic as well as engage in the Malabouian-Heideggerian debate on the closure of transcendence. In a more general perspective, involved in autotelic and anti-mimetic artistic procedures, both Williams and Stańczak lend themselves to a plastic reading, which typically “seeks to reveal the form left in the text through the withdrawing of presence, that is, through its own deconstruction. It is a question of showing how a text lives its deconstruction” (Malabou, *Plasticity* 52).

However, a significant problem evoked by Malabou’s perception of plasticity comes with the question of how one should situate their work in relation to the French philosopher’s wish to confine plastic readings to philosophical discourse. As Malabou posits, “it is necessary . . . to delocalize the concept of plasticity outside the field of aesthetics. More specifically, it is a matter of breaking with the idea that the primary area of meaning and experience for this concept is the aesthetic or artistic field” (56). Reflecting further on the reading of form as a *Gestalt* and calling it “the most suspect of all metaphysical concepts,” Malabou understands the ethical necessity, on the one hand, “to give up on the scene understood as presentation, representation, or figuration” and, on the other, “to privilege the formless, the unrepresentable, ‘the defiguration,’ the scenic removal” (54). To some extent, literary scholarship has been able to address and grapple with these concerns. Arguing that the notion of plasticity “finds echoes in literary critical conversations

about form” and “already belongs to the aesthetic analysis of poetry” insofar as it predicates on “the reciprocal giving and receiving of form” (197), Greg Ellermann points to the speculative powers of Romantic-period thought and poetry as represented by Keats, Coleridge and their contemporaries. No less significantly, Ellermann identifies the source of Malabou’s plasticity in the very field of aesthetics. In the same vein, working on the interstices of poetry and plasticity and discussing the plastic potential of *The Waste Land* (first and foremost focalized around Tiresias’ metamorphic potencies), Matthew Scully propounds that “Malabou’s concept might be productively transposed from ontological form to poetic form and thereby mobilized for a literary reading” (167). Finally, it is also in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* that we find Malabou’s own assessment of deaesthetization of form as a praxis which, in a paradoxical manner, generates “artistic significance” (56). At one point, in order to substantiate her thoughts on the dialectics of form and the trace, the philosopher refers to Giuseppe Penone, a sculptor whose operations she wishes to see as enactments of the formation of the trace and the emergence of form (*Plasticity* 49–50, 93n115). The respective praxes of Williams and Stańczak intersecting at foregrounding the metamorphosability of matter, with the inside-out inversion being exemplary means of achieving this, resonate with scholarly reconsiderations of utilizing the concept of plasticity in literary criticism thus furthering the search for aesthetic implications of Malabou’s argument.

Before venturing into charting the plastic modalities of Williams and Stańczak, it is also interesting to notice that a type of configuration of form made evident by a plastic reading—in Malabou’s words, “the fruit of the self-regulation of the relation between tradition and its superseding and which at the same time exceeds the strict binary terms of this relation” (*Plasticity* 52)—aligns in a peculiar way with the trajectory of reception of concretism in literature. The extreme character of concrete poetry relegated the movement to the margins of what has been aptly defined by Charles Bernstein as the “official verse culture” (246). What the culture endorses, Bernstein notes, is “a restricted vocabulary, neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax, received conceits, static and unitary form” (245). Not being any of this, concrete poetry has come in for a wide scope of denigration. This ranges from “a common criticism . . . that it represents nothing more than a kind of automatism where isolated words are arbitrarily thrown together” (Tolman 156), through conceiving of it as something “usually lucid and simple . . . [with its] appeal often more sensuous than intellectual, more immediate than dependent on long study” (Scobie qtd. in Beaulieu 24), to peak with strong declarations as represented by Louise Hanson, who claims that “no concrete poetry is literature” (79). Together with the challenges posed by defining concrete aesthetics, all

this made concrete poetry, Kenneth Goldsmith notes, “a little, somewhat forgotten movement in the middle of the last century” (qtd. in Beaulieu 23).³ Unsuccessful as they turned out to be in opening a larger crack in the sanctioned and sanctified dominant literary discourses, the practices of concrete poets nevertheless appear to have marked an interesting and perhaps an ongoing moment of Malabouian self-regulation between traditional notions of poetic form and something which is yet to come. Given this context, the invitation by the Noigandres group to envisage concrete poetry as “tension of things-words in space-time” (Campos 72) could be seen as related not only to the confines of the page but also to the paradigmatic frictions effectuating the metamorphoses of the historicity of literature. There is, therefore, yet another reason why the failed revolution of concrete poetry might be worth returning to and reappraising for its radical inquiry into the transformative and plastic capacities of form.⁴

ARTICULATING ALTERITY IN WILLIAMS

The plastic implications of Emmett Williams’s poetry, as manifested via the tactics of turning inside out the materialities of the poem, would not be by any means identified as the chief characteristics of the artist’s prolific output. Alongside his interdisciplinary and collaborative involvement in the visual arts, performance, editing and coordination of Fluxus events, all of which raised arguably the biggest critical interest in his work, Williams

³ The peripheral status of concrete poetry in American literature is corroborated by its near-absence in many seminal anthologies of and companions to post-war American poetry. Concrete poets receive no mention in the 1996 *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol. 8: Poetry and Criticism, 1940–1995* (ed. Sacvan Bercovitch), Christopher Beach’s 2012 *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, the 2012 *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Postmodernisms 1950–Present* (ed. Steven Gould Axelrod et al.). Short notes on concrete aesthetics can be found in Jennifer Ashton’s 2008 *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* and in the 2003 *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (ed. Neil Roberts). Notwithstanding its marginal position in America, the concrete movement emerged as a significant international phenomenon and one of the driving forces behind the rise of the global neo-avant-garde, attracting the critical eye of esteemed American literary critics such as Marjorie Perloff.

⁴ It is perhaps never enough to stress that Malabou’s perception of form significantly deviates from what the concept was always meant to connote in literary studies. Whereas, to extrapolate Hurley and O’Neill’s understanding of poetic form to all literary expression, the use of the term may “cover individual features of [literary] construction” (3) and as such belongs to the realm of the graphic for Malabou, the Malabouian form is closer to an instance of plastic being, an ontological unit of mutability. The graphic and the plastic, as I claim further in the article, are brought together in and by Williams’s concrete poems.

is typically remembered and credited for editing the first American anthology of international concrete poetry published in 1967 by New York-based Something Else Press. His own work in concrete poetry has been recognized as significant for the early development of concrete aesthetics while simultaneously garnering startlingly little criticism. As Nancy Perloff observes, “[d]espite Williams’ role as an enthusiastic promoter of concrete poetry . . . and as a leading figure within Fluxus, there are currently few scholarly articles and no monographs . . . analyzing his long artistic career and collaborations” (“Getty Research”). It may be that the failure to address Williams is a symptom of a bigger problem besetting criticism—namely, its inability to seriously approach “any radical deviation from a printing norm” and its “difficulty of talking about visual prosody; we lack a sophisticated critical tradition and ready vocabulary” (Dworkin 32).

Since it approximates Williams’s poetic tactics, Malabouian perception of discursive alterities may offer one specific way of framing an approach to concrete aesthetics, partially making up for the deficiencies of criticism. To begin with and to reiterate an earlier point, the philosopher’s discussion of plasticity is grounded in confronting the graphic model of writing, being analogous to the Derridean work of the trace and the infinite entanglement of the signifier in the movement of *differance*, with plasticity as a reformulated paradigm for human thought going beyond deconstruction, engaging neuroscientific findings and manifesting the “aptitude to receive form, . . . the ability to give form, . . . [as well as] the power to annihilate form” (Malabou, *Plasticity* 87n13). However, oppositional as they are, Malabou continues, the graphic and the plastic convene and may be perceived as indispensable to one another. By referring to Lyotard’s *Discourse* and its discussion of this specific space of discourse which “is not itself a linguistic space in which the work of meaning takes place, but a kind of worldly, plastic, atmospheric space in which one must move about, circle around things, to vary their silhouette and be able to offer such and such meaning that was hitherto hidden” (qtd. in Malabou, *Plasticity* 55–56), Malabou wishes to see “plasticity . . . [as] the condition of existence of meaning [in the graphic] in as much as it confers its *visibility* upon it” (56). Significantly, as Malabou concludes, the implications of language exteriorizing itself into the graphic via plastic space of the discourse extend to the field of art, which facilitates the movement “from the interior of discourse . . . into the figure” (Lyotard qtd. in Malabou, *Plasticity* 56), thereby generating an incessant alterity of forms, a flow of “energy, infinitely composed in painting, fiction, music and poetry, [being] precisely *the form of writing*” (Malabou, *Plasticity* 56).

A significant part of Emmett Williams’s poetic and artistic output appears to enact the moment of moving from the plastic to the graphic as delineated by Malabou and Lyotard. Turning to works comprising *Selected*

Thus, by attacking the most basic code of the logos and corrupting it by implanting in it other codes such as algorithms and permutations, and producing alternative alphabetical orders and models of their graphic representations thereby, Williams foregrounds the plastic contingencies of discourse. In a way, the alphabetic poems seize the moments of externalizing various potentialities of the plastic, which confers forms, such as linguistic codes, that amount to the plastic form of writing. Moreover, the Malabouian postulate of deaestheticizing form, which in a peculiar manner helps it to gain a deeper artistic significance (*Plasticity* 56), finds its successful realization in Williams's poems. In keeping with Malabou's argument, the emergence and accentuation of the graphic/the figural in the concrete poem is "not a means of [exhibiting] plastic resistance to discourse but [a way of uttering] the depth of the field of discourse itself" (56). Put in other words, reduced to the most basic units of the linguistic code and inflected with algorithms, Williams's alphabetic procedures *make visible* the act of conferring *visibility* onto meaningful units. Accordingly, the illegible poetic form from Fig. 3 seems to reenact in a twofold way the opposite and the extreme of the aforementioned act, which is, respectively, the discursive invisibility of the action and the event that Carloyn Shread has aptly termed as "the infinite slippage of the signifier in the graphic model" (130).

Throughout Williams's career the praxis of deaestheticizing the aesthetic (and, as Malabou helps us to see, bringing to light the nucleus of the form of writing) was orchestrated in many other ways. In *Schemes & Variations*, showcasing a selection of his works from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, the artist stresses that

[t]he most important part of the process of making art is the desire to understand the process of making art. I like to see, and I like to show, the bare bones of the process. In most of my serial works, the variations are only steps towards the last picture in the series—but the last picture, without the variations that lead up to it, is not enough. The series must be looked at as a whole. Following the process . . . is really what the work is all about. (11)

Analogically, alongside visualizing the undoing of the alphabet, much of Williams's poetry attempts to exteriorize other structural and material components of the poetic form. Looking once more at the discussed alphabetical poems, the works presented in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 disestablish the apodeictic axes of reading—predilection for horizontal and linear sequence of phrases building up the verse—by inviting the reader to a more vertically-oriented, algorithm-guided, paragrammatic reading. In

terms of text layout, the poem in Fig. 3 appears to additionally destabilize (and thus expose) the grid of the page by overlaying multiple strings of letters, and by doing so, bringing out (the lack of) line spacing. The black lines generated therefrom may be also seen to be activating, intensifying and, to a certain extent, mocking the property of word-spacing (despite reinforcing spacing, the text is illegible).

Another noteworthy constructive element which is inverted inside-out by Williams is syntax. In “do you remember” through an act of recollection the speaker develops a narrative by alternating between their own and their addressee’s past activities and states. The verse is generated by applying what might be called a gradual and cyclical permutation; the variables of a consecutive position in a clause grow by one, with an invariable conjunction *and* beginning every line (the mathematical pattern would thus be: *and* plus *pronoun*+1 plus *verb*+2 plus *adjective*+3 plus *adjective describing color*+4 plus *noun*+5). An example of one full cycle is as follows:

and i loved mellow blue nights
 and you hated livid red valleys
 and i kissed soft green potatoes
 and you loved hard yellow seagulls
 and i hated mellow pink dewdrops
 and you kissed livid blue oysters (*Selected Short Poems* 250)

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The tactic seems to but graphically highlight, and again likely mock, the rigidity of sentence structures (such as the fixed grammatical order of multiple adjectives). Anaphorically emphasized and being the only invariable element, the coordinating conjunction is literally at the forefront perhaps to signal the concretist preference for the equal valence of clauses over the necessity of subordinating one meaning to the other.

Finally, Williams’s 1970 “poetry is all” features a type of a zooming-in technique which, as if by reaching the other side of the grapheme, materializes the nuances of the shape of the sign and the medium of ink (Fig. 4). Composed as a sequence of eight developmental pieces, the poem loops the phrase “poetry is all they say it is and more and even a bit less i would guess” in each stage (*Selected Short Poems* 384) while successively increasing the font size. In the final installment, which illustrates the magnified bowl of the letter “p” and accentuates its counter of white space, the well-accustomed graphic form of the utilized character is somewhat lost, with a smooth curve giving way to a blotted and jagged stroke.

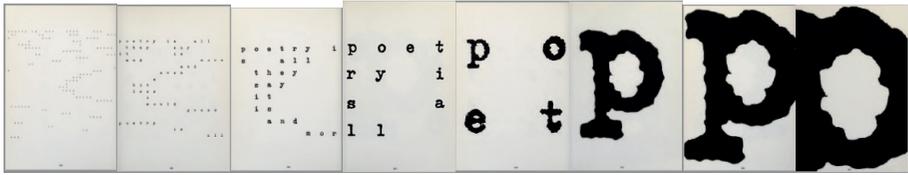


Fig. 4

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The finale of the sequence invites one to read it as an act of undermining the firmness and rigidity of signs as well as a homage to the medium of ink, whose substance enables signs to take their material form. Somewhat reminiscent of a microscopic look-through the holes in Georgia O'Keeffe's pelvis series or Roy Lichtenstein's sculptural practice pivoting between two- and three-dimensionality, Williams's serial poem, as it were, pierces through the two dimensions of the text and the page to further destabilize the dichotomy between the verbal and the visual.

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EXHAUSTING THE ESSENCE IN STAŃCZAK

The plastic radicalities of Emmett Williams's experiments bringing out the sculptural qualities of poetic form seem to naturally segue into the work of a sculptor whose autotelic praxis, on the one hand, strongly echoes the investigations of concrete poetry and elicits further aspects of Malabouian plasticity, on the other. Roman Stańczak has been most recognized for his practice of violating the matter of quotidian objects by using chisel, wooden mallet or hammer to subsequently turn them inside-out. *Misquic* (1992) brings to light the discolored and rusted insides of a kettle, whose metal substance was melted until it became fluid. *Cupboards* (1996) showcases an inverted furniture set, reminiscent of a casual Polish transformation-era wall unit, which displays its fibroboard interiors and is covered in wood shavings produced by hammer work. *Untilted* (1996) features over a hundred scooped-out loaves of bread, with the removed bits and crumbs on the floor, which take all of the space of three wooden tables. Stańczak's inversion of everyday items might be said to have found its twisted culmination in *Flight* (2019), an act of turning inside-out a private jet by means of splitting it and welding the inverted halves back; the commissioned sculpture drew much critical attention, representing the Polish pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale.

Stańczak's works have been discussed in numerous contexts, offering both audiences and critics a cornucopia of interpretative possibilities.

Compacting the potential of the artist's oeuvre to *Flight*, one might traverse Dorota Michalska's view and claim that Stańczak's artistic output is "not easily framed by a singular discourse [for it] refers to a number of social, material, political and religious phenomena while not fitting neatly in any of them." While absolutely significant and stimulating, these contexts, perhaps apart from the material concerns, eclipse the ontic register of Stańczak's sculptures, which has not been given due critical attention and with which Malabou's discussion of plasticity seems to strongly resonate. Of the few critics going beyond figurative readings of the inverted objects, Jan Verwoert senses the existential weight of Stańczak's inquiry into the mutability of the altered items' matter. In his eyes,

[i]t is as if a war was on. You feel it. Everything is under threat. Nothing is safe. . . . You are not imagining this. It's real. . . . Things stay still. They remain real. That's the scary bit. No ghosts. Just reality. . . .

This is the state of mind that work by Roman Stańczak can put you in. You sense that things are not entirely safe around his pieces. You feel that something is about to happen, or has happened, and the point is how to deal with it. Maybe Stańczak . . . is already trying to deal with it, and the outcome of his attempt is the very sculpture you are facing. (71)

The existential anxiety sensed and located by Verwoert in the viewer's feeling of spiritual bereavement and being at the mercy of the brute and contingent reality of fluctuating matter reverberates through that part of Malabou's framework which predicates on the plastic economy in Heidegger's thought. Specifically, it is informed by the Heideggerian dissemination of being, which, as stressed by Malabou, posits a definite closure to transcendence as a potential outside-of-being:

Being-in-the-world, existing, amounts to experiencing an absence of exteriority, which is equally an absence of interiority. There is neither an inside nor an outside of the world. Dasein transcends itself, or in other words, ex-ists, only in the absence of a way out. To exist is thus neither to enter nor to leave but rather to cross thresholds of transformation. Dasein, says Heidegger, transcends itself only by becoming modified. (*Plasticity* 68)

Without transcendent alterity to rely on, Malabou continues, the only rule is the rule of the plastic; "[a]bsolute convertibility, the migratory and metamorphic resource of alterity, is the rule. Absolute exchangeability is the structure" (47). Verwoert, then, is right not only about the lack of a transcendental aid to rely on ("no ghosts") when faced with Stańczak's

“bared things” (71–72), objects which have been literally deaestheticized and whose interior/exterior dichotomy has been distorted; he is also correct in noticing that they are being caught by the viewer in some act of conversion, defined neither by “already,” nor by “yet” (“something is about to happen, or has happened”) (71). Likewise, in keeping with plasticity’s power to both receive and give forms, which is in unison with Heidegger’s perception of experience (“To undergo an experience is to receive another inflection and another form from the other as well as to give the other these changes in return” [Malabou, *Plasticity* 41]), Stańczak’s sculptures are a self-reciprocal mechanism that invokes a transitory condition both for the viewer and the artist. Let us turn again to Verwoert who places additional stress on an array of affects the artist must have been going through as well as the levels of physical strength, stamina and persistence necessary to strip the objects down; in the end, one more party bared in the process is Stańczak himself (72). It is in this solipsistic closure, with the matter of the work deaestheticized and in flux, that the artist’s sculptures find close correspondence with Williams’s operations on signs, words and grammatic codes. Just like the bare and delyricized basic components of writing which make up the poet’s works, Stańczak’s self-referential sculptures invite one to let themselves be revealed as nothing more than quotidian objects, stripped of their surfaces and insides and so bereft of claims for a sense of Malabouian/Derridean presence. As such, both praxes signal the crisis of signification and representation, letting forms live through their own deconstruction to see them construct anew in a permanent dialectics of the plastic and the graphic.

But, following once more Malabou via Heidegger, there is also a kind of alterity to the absolute alterity—the plastic and unrelenting convertibility of forms is the rule, yet what more could be said about the inner dynamics of inverted sculptures? Why, instead of simply eradicating the items, Stańczak decided to turn them inside-out? Transforming the objects, yet aiming for a form as approximate as the original one is where another form of plastic metabolism resurfaces; since, as posited by Heidegger, there is no otherness beyond essence, “metamorphosis makes it possible to discover the other ‘in what is essential’” (qtd. in Malabou, *Plasticity* 41). As Malabou continues, this type of otherness “reveals first the strangeness of its essence there where an outside is lacking . . . [which brings it close to a] common definition of the fantastic, in which the frightening, the surprising, and the strange always arise from that which is already there (41). This uncanny aura of Stańczak’s altered items, making for a different type of plasticity, cannot be denied and is perhaps what Verwoert notices when he claims that

[i]n being bare, Stańczak's sculptures are highly alive. . . . It's the strangest thing: by virtue of being bare, you would assume, the sculpture should have something "reductive" or "subtractive" about them. But they don't. . . . Nothing is taken away. Something is given. Something that was maybe already there. (76)

Given the context of a plastic reading of Stańczak, the inflicted damage is by no means insignificant—in *The Ontology of the Accident* Malabou specifies the surplus value of destruction: "Something *shows* itself when there is damage, a cut, something to which normal creative plasticity gives neither access nor body: the deserting of subjectivity" (6), which further helps one to realize that "a power of annihilation [with no point of elastic return] hides within the very constitution of identity" (37). In this way Stańczak's inverted sculptures prefigure "a form of alterity, when no transcendence, flight or escape is left" (11) and as such deprive the viewer of a sense of safety.

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CONCLUSIONS

As I hope to have demonstrated, the radicalities of inside-out inversion, employed by Emmett Williams and Roman Stańczak in their artistic explorations of the respective fields of concrete poetry and sculpture, on the one hand, comport with many concerns of contemporary materialist criticism and, on the other, help to rethink creativity in extremis. Also, in a manner complementary to one another and to Malabou's project, both artists' works signal, excavate and enact various aspects of plasticity, such as the interplay between the plastic and the graphic or the metabolism of the non-transcendental essential and its other. At the same time, my discussion of Williams and Stańczak does not by any means wish to retrench the richness of their respective artistic idioms, nor does it in any way exhaust the potential for a more developed plastic investigation of their praxes.

Charting paths for further explorations, Malabou's discussion of nerve information networks as necessitating new metaphors of representation bears affinity to models of meaning-making in concrete poetry. Specifically, the neuroplastic configurations of organizing human thought, which in Malabou's view must supersede the no-longer-relevant model of writing embedded in the work of the graph and the trace, seem to strongly resound with the poetic format of constellation (perhaps best recognized as the trademark of Eugen Gomringer's concretist idiom), which abolishes traditional syntax in favour of visual and typographic grammar.

If, as wished by the philosopher, plasticity “may be used to describe the crystallization of form and the concretization of shape” (*Plasticity* 67), then it might be worth elucidating the ways in which neuroplastic “linkages,” “relationships,” and “spider’s webs” (60) hold analogy to crystalline and constellational compositions of poetic units in concrete poetry.

Finally, by corrupting the pragmatism and banality of quotidian items, Roman Stańczak’s modified objects urge the necessity to address and challenge the dominant capitalist mindsets, otherwise ideologically guised as progress and modernity. The irreversibility of forms inferred on the objects by the artist connects it to Malabou’s discussion of destructive powers of plasticity as contrasted with flexibility and elasticity; being plasticity’s hyper-capitalist ideological reverses, the latter fetishize conforming and returning to forms, while remaining oblivious to annihilation with no point of return. In a similar way, by stimulating “the defiant activity of words when they refuse to be merely containers for instrumental communication” (Dworkin 11) and abolishing traditional syntax “function[ing] as a forward movement” (Finlay qtd. in Perloff 28), concrete poetry may be seen as refusing to pander to—referencing Debord’s idea—“words work[ing] on behalf of the dominant organization of life” (qtd. in Dworkin 11), a model of human thought to which Malabou bids farewell.

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HTML Texts and the Dawn of Asemic Digital Literature: Exploring Dennis Cooper's Ideas

ABSTRACT

Dennis Cooper's HTML texts which use Graphic Interchange Format (GIFs) instead of traditional glyph-based text, exhibit the extremities of our times, both thematically and structurally, through the radical temporality of the GIFs. The digital geometry of these texts is constructed through the juxtaposition of GIFs. This has allowed Cooper to construct and explore a new pictorial language predicated upon metamorphosis, flow, and flux. Cooper's HTML texts highlight the motifs of human fallibility, contingency, and finitude, culminating in a rejection of the rationalist and idealist conceptions of what a novel is. Focusing on the structural and hermeneutical aspects of the HTML texts, rather than the ephemeral content of the GIFs themselves, allows for the proposition of a new digital hermeneutics and skepticism necessary for literary exegesis in our increasing digital world. Through an examination of the theoretical implications of Cooper's HTML texts, one can trace the future frontiers of digital literature and its necessary hermeneutics.

Keywords: HTML texts, GIFs, Dennis Cooper, digital artefact, asemic digital literature.

“Our plastic possibilities are actually never-ending.”
 (Malabou, *The Ontology of the Accident* 10)

INTRODUCTION

The epochal novelty of digital technologies and their insidious growth into the everyday practices of our lives has created new technological artistic productions. These conditions for neoteric artistic practices and avant-garde digital aesthetics are altering our ideas of what is sublime or an artistic object, much in the way that Dadaism did one hundred years ago. Dennis Cooper’s HTML texts, which use Graphic Interchange Format (GIFs) instead of traditional glyph-based text, exhibit the role of extremities in our times both thematically and structurally. This is accomplished through the radical temporality of GIFs, i.e. a process of continuous becoming and deforming, constructing an aesthetic of flux highlighted by the aseptic nature of these texts.

Through an analysis of the theoretical implications of Dennis Cooper’s HTML novels and short stories, I will examine the structural and hermeneutical possibilities presented in the HTML texts, through GIFs, as well as tracing the history of the wordless novel which culminates in Cooper’s radical digital work and its possible future within the burgeoning market of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). This focus upon the structural and hermeneutical aspects of the HTML texts rather than the content of the GIFs themselves is necessary as the translation from GIF to essay diminishes their impact, allowing only for the conveying of a deformed and truncated text. Cooper’s HTML texts are *sui generis* in the realm of digital literature, and this places Cooper as not only an incredibly unique author of the digital literary avant-garde, but also a leading theorist in his commentary upon his own work. In replacing glyphs with GIFs, Cooper usurps the traditional structure of the novel and short story within digital literary forms, and his HTML texts are indicative of the new frontiers of digital literatures.

For Cooper, GIFs exist as found fragments or artefacts of digital life. Cooper’s HTML texts force us to consider the enigmatic relationship between figure and writing, the plastic and graphic. The queer, plastic qualities of the HTML texts are not in their content, but rather in their position in relation to both traditional literary formats and digital texts. This phantasmal amalgamation of GIFs Cooper constructs as texts expands our notion of digital literature by providing an orientation of the trajectory that twenty-first-century literature may take. Cooper himself writes of this digital hermeneutics in his latest novel *I Wished*: “It’s a form

of operatic laziness about the rules of composition dating back to when the Internet freed every word that has erected or been tortured over time into a jewel-like, pleading noise . . ." (19). This "freeing" is applicable to the GIFs used to compose his HTML texts. By ordering the individual GIFs, Cooper effaces their original contextualization and constructs a new intertextual digital space for his HTML novels and short stories.

Cooper's HTML texts extend the tradition of found objects as art, elevating it to the digital, and are reminiscent of the methods of collage developed by Kurt Schwitters in his Merz-pictures. The HTML texts may also be seen as an extension of the wordless novels of Frans Masereel, which are composed of black and white woodcuts in an Art Deco and German Expressionist style. Also drawing from this tradition is Otto Nüchel's wordless novel *Schicksal*, and the six wood-engraving wordless novels of Lynd Ward influenced by Masereel. In replacing glyphs and images with GIFs, Cooper constructs a new digital extreme of literature and its accompanying hermeneutics, extending the tradition of subverting conventional rhetoric. Diarmuid Hester writes in *Wrong: A Critical Biography of Dennis Cooper* that:

Cooper's HTML books may be aligned with the popular cultures of the web, but they're also curiously reminiscent of the work of the twentieth-century avant-garde. As assemblages of found GIFs, we might consider them as digital counterparts to Robert Rauschenberg's combines or Joseph Cornell's shadow boxes, which similarly juxtaposed salvaged objects in unique and complex arrangements. (253)

Hester goes on to suggest that they also follow in the tradition of early cinematic mediums writing, as "[i]n terms of their aesthetic, they recall zoetropes or kinetoscopes, which similarly featured short, silent, looping sequences of images that conveyed the impression of movement" (249). Cooper's HTML texts expand this aseptic tradition into the digital age. His digital works engage in radical interdiscursivity through the repetitive nature of the GIFs, altering the way one reads and experiences literature.

These precursors to aseptic digital texts and the avant-garde nature of these texts allow us to place Cooper's HTML texts in a tradition that both expands our theory and definition of the novel while at the same time disrupting rhetoric and the cultural, political, and, in the case of the HTML texts, economic aspects of traditional publishing and literature. The implications of these radical changes are far reaching. First, the free nature of the HTML novels and short stories places them outside the traditional economic structures of the publishing industry, allowing these texts to be accessed by anyone. This grants readers access at a global scale outside the

sphere of global capitalism. This aspect of digital works, not just literature, is crucial to understanding the potential that such open-access digital spaces have and their ability to confront and challenge the insidious monopolization of digital spaces, especially queer ones. Sadeq Rahimi comments upon this phenomenon of digital corporate encroachment suggesting “[that] our task is to grow the social spaces, the spaces that can flourish outside digital platforms formatted and owned by capitalist corporations and the military-art-complex” (92). Second, by replacing glyphs with GIFs, Cooper as both artist and theorist opens a myriad of possibilities for the future confluence of literature and our digital world, especially the phenomenology of reading digital texts and the structural implications of the HTML novels and short stories. With the proposed development of the metaverse, the proliferation of smart devices, and the further integration of our lives into the digital realm, the genres and semiotic forms of literature will evolve and expand, constructing new literary horizons.

HTML TEXTS AND RADICAL TEMPORALITY

The structure of the HTML texts is pseudo-ergodic. As the readers scroll through the text, they may pause at any moment constructing a new juxtaposition between GIFs. Espen J. Aarseth expands on this sentiment writing that “[i]t is possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery” (4). Even though they are not, strictly speaking, ergodic texts, their very topography compels the reader to be active in the construction of meaning. In his newest novel *I Wished*, Cooper comments on the topographical aspect of his writing style and his creative method stating,

What the writing did was draw a stylized map to the general location where my wishes were impregnating. I tried to make the maps clever, funny, disturbing, and erotic so the things I wrote about would seem as scary or exciting to envision as they’d been to pen, sort of like the rosy illustrations with which rides are represented in the folded maps they hand you at the entrances of amusement parks. (97)

This relationship between structure and desire, “draw[ing] a stylized map to the general location where my wishes were impregnating” is a motif found throughout Cooper’s oeuvre.

This mapping of desire through text, especially GIFs, allows for the composition of literature with moving, intersecting fragments that are drawn from the ephemera of our digital lives. Through GIFs Cooper

deconstructs the very topography of the novel or short story. Catherine Malabou comments further upon this deconstruction and alteration of digital spaces and the relationship between the topographical and writing in the foreword to *Deconstruction Machines: Writing in the Age of Cyberwar*:

This slippage occurs at a very specific place in the grammatology between topography and topology, developing the spatial logic of deconstruction: The replacement of topology with topography suggests a move from topos, meaning “place,” as logos to topos as writing and grapheme. But what is at stake between topology and topography cannot simply be the difference between logos and writing. . . . This slippage cannot simply be discovered or put into motion by deconstruction; rather, it defines a difference within deconstruction itself. It is on the shifting grounds of this multiplication of spaces that we can understand the deconstruction of the opposition between text and program that Joque develops. If space is multiple and unstable, any topological cut internal to writing is always threatened by topography and the plasticity of spatiality. It becomes impossible to maintain a distinction between text and program, between a deconstructable writing and a writing so exact that it offers nothing to be deconstructed. The connections and proximities of computer code expose it to a deconstruction that cannot be held within the bounds of philosophy or literature. (x–xi)

HTML texts themselves blur this distinction and exist on two digital planes. One, the actual HTML code behind the GIFs that functions as a digital scaffolding, and two, the GIFs themselves and the interaction between them and the reader. The demarcation between code and literature is becoming further blurred as digital works and literature expand and flourish in the twenty-first century.

This effacement between HTML codes and HTML texts is not just one that is composed of GIFs and the other code, but the very movement of the GIFs themselves. Hampus Hagman suggests that movement within GIFs functions as an “attempt to make movement strange again, to assert a power of movement all its own, liberated from the responsibility of making it mean and carry out narrative goals.” This exaltation of movement is solidified in GIFs. It grants them a certain anti-objective nature that requires multiple interpretations. Therefore, the HTML text “[s]urprises the reader, rejects a final interpretation, and challenges the reader to find their own. The HTML novel never finishes saying what it has to say. That is, it can be read again and again, providing a multitude of interpretations and meanings, each equally valid” (Barrows 8). Hagman offers a counterpoint to the argument that one may find a multitude of plots, characters and ultimately meanings in GIFs or a GIF-based text, stating that “the animated gifs that are encountered all

over the internet very seldom tell a story: on the contrary, they seize hold of those purely excessive moments that carry little to no narrative purpose.” This is remedied by Cooper through his careful collation and arranging of GIFs, thus turning digital scraps into unique avant-garde literature.

The GIFs of today are digital abstractions of the new digital human spirit. Cooper’s digital texts liberate the GIFs as a mere looped image through both their juxtaposition and the interaction between reader and text. The repetitive nature of GIFs and the way Cooper arranges them produces a syncretic tableau that prods the reader into constructing their own subjective meanings. The constant movement of the text itself alters the way one reads: “The phenomenology of [reading] the HTML novel is radically different from analog texts. One cannot hold it as one would a physical book . . . One no longer turns pages, one scrolls. The texture is not that of paper, but of plastic and glass. Pages no longer rustle, but are static. The very texturology of reading has become altered” (Barrows 7). The asemic nature of the text highlights this new phenomenology of digital reading and continues to blur the boundaries between literature and programming languages. Justin Joque writes:

What is at stake is not only the boundary between control and randomness but the possibility of the system itself as an identifiable and signifying entity. Thus even the differentiation between any system, such as the program and literature, becomes impossible, but at the same time, this impossibility creates the condition for the possibility of each. (185–86)

These new possibilities lie not only in the creation of avant-garde digital texts but also in how we read them. Cooper brings our attention to this new form of digital reading through the use of GIFs and the very action of scrolling.

The HTML texts are very successful in blurring this distinction. Cooper usurps the traditional novelistic structure and constructs new forms through the repetition of tropes and movements. The GIFs of movement are particularly focused on falling, crashing, and breakage. These motifs allow the reader to glean meaning from the pictorial language of the ordered GIFs themselves. Hester comments on the synthesis between the reading experience and the asemic nature of texts, suggesting that “Cooper is evidently still interested in bringing about an all-over reading experience where the reader’s attention is drawn away from the pursuit of a narrative to what’s happening on the surface of the text. The HTML novels seem highly successful in this regard” (252). In reading the HTML texts, a feedback loop is produced between reader and text with the reader determining if there are any protagonists, plots, or meanings.

This relationship between reader and GIF is not interactive, but imaginative in interpretation. The GIFs and their order cannot be altered by the reader; how the story is told may not be changed. This places the hermeneutics of such a text outside of what is traditionally considered ergodic literature, and the HTML novels and short stories themselves become constellations of fragments, states, and visual puzzles. The digital artefacts that Cooper writes with cannot be separated from the nature of the Internet as a whole, as they have been found, reordered, and then published within this space. This pseudo-ergodic approach is essential to understanding these texts and their place within digital literature as well as their accompanying hermeneutics. As I have argued elsewhere,

Cooper's HTML novels generate new productions of subjectivity through their structure and style. The deconstruction of plot and character and the insistence upon tropes, metaphors, and the repetition of movements define the aesthetics of the novels. Cooper's return to the same images, phrases, and movements demonstrate the aesthetic power of repetition. The repetition of images and actions changes their implications. As one watches the GIFs of the novel repeat themselves endlessly, their meaning becomes altered. (7)

Through this endless repetition the text unfolds itself, displaying new possibilities within each subsequent reading. The GIFs as looping tablets of time ultimately alter the relationship between literature and temporality, and as the twenty-first century progresses this will only become more apparent regarding digital literature and its subsequent hermeneutics.

Cooper's HTML novels and the GIFs that they are composed of cannot be separated from the temporal aspects of reading and the archiving of not just digital literature but in this case the very content of the novels themselves. As temporal relations become further predicated upon the Internet, machine learning, and digital networks in the twenty-first century and beyond, our methods of examining time and its relation to (digital) entities and artefacts must change as well. Digital archives have the potential to generate new narratives and alternative relations to time and space, radically impacting upon the ways in which we read.

Cooper's method of writing these novels and short stories is reminiscent of the archiving of digital data by government intelligence agencies (e.g., PRISM, ECHELON) and the use of cookies for predicative individual advertisements by multinational corporations. Cooper found all the GIFs used in the novels and short stories by simple keyword searches often focused on a certain motif of motion. None of the GIFs were created by Cooper but merely collected by him and collated into their present

form. In an interview Cooper describes his method as both writing and sculpting, stating:

I was making these posts that were tall stacks of GIFs organized along a thematic. I started to realize that really interesting things were happening between the GIFs—rhythmic, poetic, narrative, associative things. So I started experimenting with organizing them in a deliberate way, and then dividing them into groupings. At one point, I realized that I was trying to write fiction using them as the equivalents of sentences, phrases, paragraphs, and that I was able to do that using pretty much the exact same compositional methods I've used with my written fiction. And so I wound up writing the first GIF novel, *Zac's Haunted House*. I take the GIF fiction as seriously as I do my written fiction. I consider *Zac's Haunted House* and the new GIF novel, *Zac's Freight Elevator* to be my 10th and 11th novels. And I think the second book of short GIF works, *Zac's Control Panel*, is easily one of the best things I've ever written. (Cooper, "Dennis Cooper on Writing as Sculpture")

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Cooper's method captures the aesthetic of the digital archive through his recycling of GIFs. His HTML texts actualize the banal temporality of the digital by mirroring the everydayness of our collective digital archives.

The use of found GIFs creates a hauntological digital text and this is reflected in the title of the first HTML novel, *Zac's Haunted House*. The cultural nostalgia depicted in many of the GIFs such as old cartoons, black and white television clips, and retro video games invokes a hypnagogic cultural memory. Cooper's HTML texts capture the pervasive contemporary cultural movement of retromania. The hypnagogic aspect of these texts cannot be divorced from the very temporality of the GIFs themselves. David Bering-Porter writes on the temporality of GIFs, suggesting that their very nature is indicative of late-stage capitalism and liberal democracy. He writes: "The looped and looping temporality of the gif and the cinemagraph reveals something important about the cultural logic of our age. This kind of temporality is without beginnings or endings but preserves and tends to the present moment—it is a system of time that is antithetical to real change" (190). The looping of the GIF reduces the pluralism of the GIFS to a monism. Through the repetition of action, one arrives at a single aesthetic and rhetorical point that everything blends into everything. This reflects Deleuze and Guattari's dictum, "pluralism=monism" (20). For Cooper, the GIFs and the HTML texts operate as an always-differentiating process, one that is always looping, re-looping, existing in a constant state of repetition.

These digital archives become specters of the hauntological, modifying the digital space into both a graveyard and as an immense digital library

storing the banal artefacts of our everyday digital existences. The vastness of these archives is almost inconceivable and the nature of them is now rooted in machine learning and AI. Rahimi suggests that these new digital spheres mirror our digital ontologies:

The emergent cyber worlds of internet and virtual reality, new forms of power relations depending less on information than on simulacra: big data sets mined by machine learning algorithms, accelerated visual and sonic impressions, deep fakes in swarming circulation, memes that become data attractors and aggregators (collecting sentiments), networks (and data storage) hosting ghosts and revenants and doubles or multiples of ourselves, beyond explainability, but knowing (nudging, seducing, enticing) ourselves better than we ourselves ever can, hidden in plain sight but coded, embedded, encrypted, and flying by in signaling beyond the capacities of human senses. (87)

These digital archives “[know] ourselves better than we ourselves ever can” because they are composed of our mostly ordinary writings, artefacts that were never meant to exist in perpetuity. E-mails, tweets, old accounts, videos, GIFs, memes, out of date information all saved, fill our digital landscapes like air, changing the value and criterion of what it means to archive an artefact in the network age. The increasingly automated collection of big data will irreversibly change how we define comprehension, hermeneutics, and meaning. These developments will change the future methodologies of academia as a whole and will revolutionize our economic, environmental, and social systems for better or worse. Regarding the analysis of digital literature, these effects are already happening with a proliferation in studies of digital arts and literature, and the interdisciplinary analysis of digital aesthetics, ethics, and politics.

Cooper’s HTML novels and short stories may be understood as a way for literature to liberate these insidious methods by turning surveillance into art. These novels and short stories already exist in an alternative economy of exchange by allowing anyone to access them for free, and reflecting the autonomous nature of the GIFs they are composed with. Graig Uhlin comments on the role of GIFs as “illustrative examples of an alternative economy of exchange enabled by digital technologies, namely the sharing economy of the internet” (518). This sharing economy will continue to grow and transform digital commerce in the twenty-first century. It will lead to new notions and definitions of copyright and digital ownership, especially with the proliferation of blockchain technology. As the world becomes further digitized and more and more human activity is computerized, logged, and ultimately preserved, the spirit of the information age is progressively transforming from anonymous privacy to a global digital panopticon. Justin

Joque comments on these phenomena and their dangers, stating that “the increasing digitization of information increasingly exposes the archive to a systemwide catastrophe and destabilization from within” (74). Cooper’s HTML novels and short stories offer a glimpse of the liberating aspect of the digital human spirit in turning the artefacts of vast digital archives into art, reclaiming and producing new meanings and styles. As both author and theorist Cooper expands what constitutes digital literature as well as the accompanying hermeneutics.

CYBER AWAKENING: THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL LITERATURE

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The digital artefacts that Cooper writes with cannot be separated from the nature of the Internet as a whole, as they have been found, reordered, and then published within this space. The role the Internet plays in these texts is paramount, and “[t]he influence of the Internet upon the written word is irreversible and has ushered in paradigmatic change. The relations between writing and the word, and the word to the event have become obfuscated in our digital age” (Barrows 2). This process of continuous formation is integral to the temporal nature of GIFs, and with their expanding cultural prominence they are forever altering the new spaces of digital rhetoric, literature, and discourse.

As digital literature blossoms in the twenty-first century, it faces many vulnerabilities due to the incessant evolution of both current and new programming languages, applications, and web browsers. The potential phasing out of HTML or other programming languages, and the threat of new web applications that do not support HTML or other formats, are risks to digital art and literature. Due to the advancement of technologies, this is a threat to digital literature and may place the future of these works in peril, highlighting the need for an expansion of spaces for digital preservation. Preventative measures should be imposed to ensure digital literary works do not go the way of silent films, most of which have perished.

The future of works like Dennis Cooper’s HTML texts may be a Non-Fungible Token (NFT) format in which digital texts will become akin to Medieval chained books, which contain enormous value through their uniqueness. Though the owner of an NFT may share and copy the underwriting digital files, this is not obligatory. Though they do not own the copyright, they would still be able to hoard digital literature through avaricious means. HTML novels and future digital literature may also go the way of the *Cremaster Cycle* created by Matthew Barney, particularly in emulating its exclusivity and its avant-garde and pseudo-asemic nature.

Cooper's HTML texts reflect new modes of global literature, mirroring the invisible digital and informational networks and exchanges that make up our contemporary digital lifeworld. The HTML text symbolizes and reflects the vastness of the Internet, reveling in a nearly infinite number of digital artefacts and possibilities of recycling them into art.

Cooper himself may be seen as both author and theorist in his novel approach to digital literature. He has not only created completely unique digital texts, but also provided the inputs for a new hermeneutics of digital literature. By using GIFs instead of glyphs, Cooper develops a digital constellation that is "[n]ot a language of the desiring exchange of messages or objects that are transmitted in a social contract of communication and desire beyond want, but a language of want, of the fear that edges up to it and runs along its edges" (Kristeva 38). This new digital language of want and desire expressed through GIFs allows for the exploration of the relationship between humans and liminal digital artefacts, especially those that have been forgotten and lie gathering proverbial dust in the archives of our digital worlds. Kristeva continues that upon "[c]lose inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (207). Cooper explores both as author and theorist this "fragile border" of digital objects and their relationship to each other and human identities. He exposes the liminal aspect of digital objects and their ephemeral connection to our everyday lived experiences, specifically the affective nature of digital temporality.

The juxtaposition of the GIFs causes them to repel and attract each other at the same time, creating rhythms of continuity and discontinuity. This syncopation of breakages lends an extreme aesthetic to the work and, by reveling in bodily forms and movements, grants the HTML texts an abject quality. Julia Kristeva describes the role of the author of the abject as "[a] divisor of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly questions his solidity and impel him to start afresh" (8). The cyclical temporality of the GIF is also reflected in the author of the abject through the constant questioning of temporality exhibited in the HTML texts. In his quest to dissect both the corporeal body and the traditional body of the novel, Cooper has imbued the human body as a vessel, a material *tabula rasa*, one that is essentially broken and fragmented. In the HTML texts as well as his other works, Cooper suggests that we must fill this body and plug the holes and gaps. For Cooper, the corporeal and symbolic body becomes a metaphor for the masses as seen through the eyes of scientific rationalism and global capitalism.

This notion of the body as metaphor pervades Cooper's oeuvre, but it is elevated in the HTML novels and short stories by using GIFs which highlight its explicit nature through action. By using the pictorial language of GIFs arranged by Cooper, these texts immerse the reader/viewer in the abject. The subjective nature of plot, character and meaning allows the reader or viewer to construct a multitude of readings each unique in their own truthfulness. Commenting upon Cooper's earlier novels, Earl Jackson Jr. suggests that "Cooper's texts are one such critique of the 'truth of spectacle.' In exposing that spectacle as the 'visible negation of life,' Cooper also lays the groundwork for reconceiving representation as a concrete cultural elaboration of the death drive" (190). This "critique of the 'truth of spectacle'" is also evident in his HTML works. Through the interplay of GIFs Cooper as both author and theorist critiques the spectacle of the digital and explores the liminal nature of digital texts and spaces by deconstructing the digital archive and creating a new digital visual space that functions through the pictorial language of GIFs.

Cooper's HTML novels and short stories expose how GIFS may function as a modification of the temporality of the digital. This change in narrative, space, and time is indicative of the new forms of digital literature and the extremity of its potential impact upon society. The radical structural change that is occurring due to the digitalizing of our everyday life practices will sculpt literary genres, forms, and content in unfathomable ways. This mirrors Martin Heidegger's comments on the typewriter in his *Parmenides* lectures as a machine that augments our ontology. He states: "The typewriter is a signless cloud (ἀτέκμαρτα νέφος), i.e. a withdrawing concealment in the midst of its very obtrusiveness, and through it the relation of Being to man is transformed" (85). The growth of the Internet has likewise transformed humanity's relationship with Being, writing, and literature. Don Ihde comments on this transformation of both writing and literature suggesting "[that] a still more dramatic change is currently happening with the contemporary and much more complex context of . . . humans, computers, and the wider connections of the Internet . . . With word processing, associated with Internet capabilities, writing is much more apparent as action within a system" (98). Cooper's HTML texts have furthered this connection between the Internet and writing, ushering in a paradigmatic shift and spawning new forms of literature.

With the expansion of the Internet into all spheres of our everyday lives, the threat of a real digital panopticon comes closer to fruition. The use of digital spaces as a simulacrum of human experiences and interactions allows for the total archiving of human behavior, thus constructing algorithms and machine learning software that can mimic human thought

(e.g., Google's LaMDA, ChatGPT) influencing the masses and further entrenching the commodification of everything. Cooper's HTML texts resist this digital maw of commodification through their free access and in their very structure and content. By using the artefacts of our everyday digital lives Cooper has constructed digital mosaics that force us to question: what constitutes a novel or short story? What is digital literature? And, ultimately, where does meaning lie in the nearly infinite vastness of an Internet populated by the proliferations of memes, GIFs, and emojis? These future aseptic digital texts may usher in an age of post-literacy with the formation of a universal pictorial language that operates alongside our current glyph-based ones. As digital literature continues to grow and expand in the twenty-first century these questions of aesthetics, structural forms, and hermeneutics will create new modalities of scholarship and analysis. These new fields will allow for a better examination of digital works and their intersection with our everyday digital lives. With the future expansion of digital spaces, the construction of digital metaverses, and the growth of smart technologies and machine learning, the role and forms of literature will irrevocably change. The way we write and produce literature will forever be altered by the integration of the Internet into our aesthetics, politics, and ethics.

Dedicated to Georgia Cate Byler.

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MEMORY IN EXTREMIS

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The Extremities of Literature: Traumatic Memory in Two Novels by Kazuo Ishiguro

ABSTRACT

Drawing on Michel Foucault's description of literature as being from the outside, Catherine Malabou explains that only literature can give us access to the inconceivable space occupied by traumatic experiences. How a literary text opens such a space, one on the extremity of experience and literature itself, involves an understanding of trauma as a neurobiological wound. In this essay I will argue that what Malabou refers to as *neuro-literature* and her *plastic reading* of texts provide useful additions to current critical approaches to two of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels that address traumatic memories. Literary critics have approached the theme of traumatic memory in Ishiguro's work from psychological positionalities. Using psychology, like neurobiology, already suggests that a literary work can give us access to traumatic experiences. A fuller understanding of traumatic memories as manifested by Ishiguro's writing is here viewed through the lens of neurobiology which considers the plasticity of the brain and a plastic reading of these literary texts. This paper explores two narratives driven by traumatic memories: Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000), both of which address the long-term effects brought on by the trauma of war and loss.

Keywords: plastic reading, neuro-literature, memory, trauma, Kazuo Ishiguro.

INTRODUCTION

Post-traumatic experiences and traumatic memories have been featured in several novels by the Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro. Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, a narrative of trauma and migration, is approached from the perspective of narrative strategies and the use of an unreliable narrator in analyses by Michael R. Molino and Ljubica Matek. Both critics recognize the difficulties of understanding trauma that blocks out memories which impede any contextualization (Molino 322–34; Matek 133). Yet, as Matek points out, “this kind of unavoidable deception (provoked by the traumatic event) does not prevent a verbalization of trauma, even if this means a deeply subjective, and therefore questionable, account of the circumstances regarding the traumatic event” (133). Matthew Mead examines Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* as a trauma narrative, looking at how it fits into the trauma aesthetic and trauma culture that emerged in the 1990s. His analysis describes textual features which encapsulate the traumatic experience, and to some extent overlaps with the current study. It does this, firstly, in its use of neurobiological terms (such as *wound*), bringing together the physical with the psychiatric; and secondly in noting that memory in Ishiguro's novel goes beyond the genre boundaries of trauma fiction, suggesting something akin to Malabou's account of extremities of the traumatic experience discussed below. In more recent works, such as the fantastical *The Buried Giant* (2015), Ishiguro exploits the trauma narrative in a story that hinges on the undoing of a spell causing collective amnesia. It has been analyzed as such by Edyta Lorek-Jezińska using psychoanalytic approaches to trauma in literature, drawing from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and separate research by Cathy Caruth.

The verbalization of trauma, largely through internal dialogue, is also at the heart of the two Ishiguro novels examined in this essay. *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000) employ unreliable narrators reflecting on their memories of disturbing times in their pasts. The human ability to select and interpret relevant experiences in retrospect and thus combine past and present selves is a major theme of Ishiguro's work.

While *Orphans* has been discussed in terms of traumatic memories, *Artist* is mostly treated as a work about memories of shame and guilt against the backdrop of the trauma of war. Both novels, arguably by the actions and narrations of the characters, are about manifestations of trauma. Including *Artist* in an analysis of trauma fiction is also made possible by an expanded definition of trauma which has emerged in contemporary discourse and can also be found in Malabou's writings, as discussed later.

In narrating their past, the protagonists of both novels suppress their feelings in order to protect themselves from painful experiences, even though they do not fully understand or recognize those experiences. Ishiguro describes his protagonists as characters who

know what they have to avoid and that determines the route they take through memory, and through the past. There's no coincidence that they're worrying because they sense there isn't something quite right there. But of course memory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception. (qtd. in Swift 38–39)

In both novels, the issue of memory arises as the protagonists try to find closure with their pasts. Strictly speaking, if these were memories of the past which involved the consequences of past actions—that is, responses to being a trauma victim—then psychological interpretations might suffice. However, situations and events from the past imposed on the narrators by forces not in their control point to traumatic experiences that, in Malabou's reckoning, require a neurobiological understanding. In addition to this, using Malabou's definition of trauma to include being the perpetrator of a traumatic action on another person, and therefore racked by guilt, offers a richer analysis than that offered in current approaches to Ishiguro's work.

NEURO-LITERATURE

In her discussion of Michel Foucault's characterization of literature as being from the outside, Malabou explains that “[t]he outside is the post-traumatic, and . . . that only literature, conceived of as neutrality, could give us access to this unthinkable space” (“Neuro-literature” 86–87). This view is shared by Anne Whitehead in her seminal work *Trauma Fiction*, which suggests that literature, using its textual forms, themes, and stylistic devices (such as repetition and intertextuality), can depict and serve as a witness to trauma (83–85). While Whitehead's focus rests in literary and textual studies, Malabou's approach to understanding trauma, and the role of literature in that understanding, comes from neurobiology.

Malabou introduces “neuro-literature” not as a theory or movement akin to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction or Foucault's “archaeology of knowledge.” Rather she observes that “[w]hat literature was supposed to resist most, namely scientific discourse, paradoxically appears today as revealing the truth of literature, as opening for literature the outside that it was supposed to offer, and that it actually failed to open” (“Neuro-literature” 79). For Malabou, this scientific discourse comes most fittingly

from neurobiology. Key to this is understanding what Malabou means by *cerebrality* and *plasticity* of the brain. Malabou makes a distinction between the brain and cerebrality similar to the Freudian distinction between sex and sexuality (see Freud). She argues that “[i]f the brain designates the set of ‘cerebral functions,’ cerebrality would be the specific word for the causal value of the damage inflicted upon these functions—that is, upon their capacity to determine the course of psychic life” (*New Wounded* 2). The recognition of this causality will be expanded upon below with the discussion of the two novels.

The concept of plasticity has been a hallmark of Malabou’s philosophical writings. For the purposes of the present study, I limit discussion to the plasticity of the brain and the resulting plastic readings of literary works on trauma. According to Malabou, “[t]he work proper to the brain that engages with history and individual experience has a name: *plasticity*. What we have called the constitutive historicity of the brain is really nothing other than its plasticity” (*What Should We Do* 4). In the same work, Malabou offers this summary: “Talking about the plasticity of the brain thus amounts to thinking of the brain as something modifiable, ‘formable,’ and formative at the same time” (5). Applied to literary works on trauma, this could help to explain the hallucinations brought on by traumatic memories, taking our understandings beyond psychoses of the mind to the physicality of the brain.

In addition to describing the brain as being modifiable, plasticity also encapsulates the creation and destruction of forms. Malabou explains that “plasticity is situated between two extremes: on the one side the sensible image of taking form (sculpture or plastic objects), and on the other side that of the annihilation of all form (explosion)” (*What Should We Do* 5). These characteristics of plasticity are reflected in the post-traumatic experiences of the traumatized, in real life and in their fictional personae, and pull us away from a reliance on traumatic memories as the primary force of the trauma narrative.

THE TRAUMA NARRATIVE

The word *trauma* in Greek means “wound,” and for centuries held only a physical signification. Trauma as an emotional and psychological phenomenon did not emerge until the mid-nineteenth century as a condition experienced by railway workers known as *railway spine*, having nightmares and flashbacks alongside chronic pain (Sehgal). The scope of its meaning has been expanding throughout the twentieth century. Recent writing about trauma tells us that it now encompasses “anything the body perceives as too much,

too fast, or too soon” (Menakem). Noting this expansion of the meaning of trauma, Sehgal explains that “[t]oday, with the term having grown even more elastic, this same diagnosis can apply to a journalist who reported on that atrocity, to descendants of the victims, and even to a historian studying the event a century later, who may be a casualty of ‘vicarious trauma.’” Malabou stretches the definition of traumatic experience further still, explaining that “[t]he neurobiological approach to traumas, which considers their impact upon cerebrality, leads to a general reelaboration of the question of suffering and wounding—and thus of the question of *evil*. To be ill or to do ill” (*New Wounded* 168). This follows the works of other writers on trauma, such as Dominick LaCapra, pointing out that trauma is not only about being a victim or vicarious victim, but also the agent behind the traumatic event.

Using the concept of cerebrality, Malabou explains that trauma patients “challenge us to think pure, senseless danger as an unexpected event—*incompatible with the possibility of being fantasized*. One does not fantasize a brain injury; one cannot even represent it. Cerebrality is thus the causality of a neutral and destructive accident—without reason” (*New Wounded* 9, emphasis in the original). This “essence of trauma” is articulated by Bessel van der Kolk as “overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable” (194). In his work with PTSD, he discovered that “each patient demands that we suspend our sense of what is normal and accept that we are dealing with a dual reality: the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous, ever-present past” (194).

Memories, therefore, are integral to any discussion of trauma, and as noted earlier, they are a key constituent of Ishiguro’s novels and more generally speaking the trauma narrative. Critical works by Elizabeth Weston, Wojciech Drąg, and Cynthia F. Wong have pointed to the common theme of memories that are both suppressed and revisited by Ishiguro’s characters.

Anne Whitehead argues that trauma fiction for which memories are central requires a literary form that departs from the so-called conventional linear sequence. Although literature abounds with books that are not about trauma but tell their story without adhering to linearity, the lack of linearity is a baseline to reflect the fractured temporality and memories in the mind of the traumatized character. An alternative approach comes from Deyan Guo, who explains: “The irruption of one time into another is figured by Caruth as a form of possession or haunting. The ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present” (2510).

The insertion of memories drawing the past into the narrative’s present-day constitutes a partial account of the role of memory in traumatic experience and traumatic fiction. According to neurobiological research, “memories evolve and change. Immediately after a memory is laid down, it undergoes a lengthy

process of integration and reinterpretation—a process that automatically happens in the mind/brain without any input from the conscious self” (van der Kolk 255). Matek’s analysis of *A Pale View of Hills*, noted earlier, briefly delves into the discourse of neurobiology and van der Kolk’s work to explain that “traumatic memories are stored differently from ordinary memories and, consequently, they are also retrieved in a way that is not verbal (linguistic) in the usual sense of the word, but rather reoccur in the form of unusual feelings, bodily sensations, flashbacks and nightmares” (137).

The trauma narrative is, therefore, one that appears to present a fractured storyline punctuated by recurring and reinterpreted memories alongside the presence of physical bodily experiences *in extremis*.

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AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

The novel is narrated by Masuji Ono, an elderly, retired artist living in Japan, writing a memoir over a period of two years, between 1948 and 1950. Early in his recollections, the reader is told that Ono was a distinguished artist, a member of a group of his contemporaries who were called “artists of the floating world” as they belonged to “the night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink” (45). Along with reflections of his past as a young artist and teacher during the war, Ono records events and conversations from the present day, in particular those involving his two adult daughters. His daughter Setsuko is married with a child, and the other daughter, Noriko, is in search of a husband. This present period is characterized by tensions between him and his daughters’ generation. He argues with his son-in-law, who typifies the political views of the post-war generation, looking upon World War II as a misguided failure, and reducing it to something best forgotten.

Ono’s problem is that he cannot forget. Drag explains this in terms that appear akin to nostalgia, whereby Ono sees the past “with a plenitude of meaning,” while the present is “empty” (Drag 41). Like someone who is nostalgic for a better time, at one point Ono “indulges in conjuring up an unrealistic vision of reinstating the old district” of night-time pleasures (43). From a neurobiological perspective, that is, recognizing the plasticity of the brain, we can see that the pleasure from the past can co-exist with the pain of the present. Moreover, as for those afflicted with trauma, the past and present appear in the same timeframe within Ono’s mind.

In *Artist*, the deaths of Ono’s wife and son are fairly recent to the present time of the narration, yet as Drag points out, the story “is hardly a narration of bereavement” (42). Aside from several references to their deaths and the funeral, “Ono does not dwell on the experience of

bereavement” (42). Drag, however, does not relate this directly to trauma. Wong also does not see this as trauma but explains the protagonist’s lack of emotion over the death of his wife and son as a result of deep-seated guilt. Wong adds that, on one side, there are matters at hand to do with Ono’s work during the war and the guilt over that. On the other side is “Ono’s narrative strategy” whereby he talks “around these deaths by focussing his energy on his daughters’ futures” (49). Recognizing Ono’s experience as traumatic better explains this detachment from emotion.

Noriko’s latest marriage negotiations propel Ono into fear that his past, which is likely to be investigated by the family of Noriko’s future husband, could damage the outcome. As his recollections continue, elements of Ono’s past are filled in while others seem to be rewritten. As the narrator, Ono is aware of his omissions and at times distortions of events. Some of this he blames on memory: “Of course, this is all a matter of many years ago now and I cannot vouch that those were my exact words . . .” (Ishiguro, *Artist* 69). Here, Ono’s mind appears to struggle with modifications to his brain brought about by the physical experience of aging. Given the unsavoury truths that slowly emerge, the reader does not know whether to believe that this unreliable narrator suffers from a faulty memory or if the omissions and distortions are in fact deliberate. Firstly, Ono’s work as an artist might not have been as distinguished as he had claimed. He spent many years mass-producing Japanese motifs for the overseas market. Later he painted propaganda posters promoting militarism and Japan’s involvement in the war. A more disturbing event is remembered. When Ono became an art teacher he also served as an advisor to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities. In this role, he reported a student, Kuroda, to the authorities. As a result, Kuroda was arrested and beaten and his mother interrogated, and, in the present day, Kuroda lives in squalor.

Attempting to deal with the wounds of the past, Ono presents them to the reader as a matter of practicality for his family and not as wounds that are affecting him. He expresses his fear that his involvement in the Nationalist movement might hamper the marriage negotiations of his daughter. In order to justify to the reader that his actions were innocently undertaken, Ono reflects upon his past with the aid of his fragile memory. He knows that he has lived without purpose or lasting impact and finds himself stripped of all agency and control. In the emptiness of his waning life, he appears to be desperately seeking relief from the desolation that he faces, and therefore needs to return to his past to extract from it proof of his own significance. Ono does not admit even to himself that there is a wound that needs to be healed.

The story concludes with Ono’s admissions of guilt and his acceptance of his past. To Noriko’s prospective in-laws, Ono admits that his art may

have had a negative influence on Japan. As noted earlier, a neurobiological approach to trauma in literature considers the concept of evil and the *doing of ill*. Ono's narration is therapeutic, but rather than address a traumatic loss, Ono's account leads to a confession for past wrongdoings and a need to try to understand their original motivations. In a moment of self-awareness, Ono comments: "We have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever we did, we did at the time in good faith" (Ishiguro, *Artist* 201–02).

Gradually, the reader realizes that the younger Ono was naïve in his actions and perhaps unaware of their consequences. As such, this unreliable narrator manages to gain the reader's empathy despite the gravity of his past deeds (Wong). An understanding of the post-traumatic brain brings clarity to this interpretation as the extremity of past experiences renders a person emotionally weak, and worthy of sympathy, while the brain remains strong in its continuous processing of guilt.

Ono's present-day behaviours suggest that he has recovered from the traumatic events of the past, appearing less delusional and confused throughout the narrative. Ono's journey is one of post-traumatic subtleties that indeed require the neutrality of literature to observe. It is likely that Ono has experienced some degree of recovery from the trauma of being a witness to war and that his post-traumatic experience, notably a collective trauma of the entire Japanese nation, is under the surface and barely perceptible to the characters in the world of the text.

Critical analyses of *Artist* have largely focused on the writing style, noting "the way the text mixes memories with commentary and moments of self-awareness, suggesting that these thoughts are floating, playing with the title of the book" (Trimarco). References to unclear memories and self-awareness appear to be part of the narrator's style of speech but can also be viewed through a neurobiological perspective; that is, that the inconsistencies result from the plasticity of the brain. Simultaneously, Ono's comments can be judged by the reader as integral to the actual story as the slips and contradictions suggest that the story needs to be told in order for Ono to understand his past. A neurobiological approach delves into the unclear memories, framing them as traumatic memories brought on by living in a place changed by war and from "the doing of ill" and consequent traumatic guilt.

WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS

This novel is narrated in the first person by Christopher Banks, a famous detective and Englishman who was born in Shanghai and lived there until he was orphaned at the age of ten following the "disappearances" of his parents

and sent to live in England with an aunt. Knowledge of these disappearances indicates to the reader the novel's status as a trauma narrative. In the terms set out by Malabou, "traumatic events appear more and more clearly as events that tend to mask their intentionality, taking two, apparently contradictory, forms: they appear either as perfectly unmotivated accidents or as the necessary blindness of natural laws. In both cases, the intentional orientation of the event is disguised or absent" (*New Wounded* 11). For Banks, who in the present is still ignorant of why his parents were taken away, those events are for him without intention and beyond natural explanation, which in part defines them as traumatic experiences.

As a collection of memories, often remembered episodes within other episodes, the narrative moves back and forth between Shanghai and London. The reader learns from these recollections that Banks's early childhood before his parents' disappearances was idyllic. He was living in the privileged International Settlement and playing with his Japanese friend Akira. Banks's father, an employee in a global trading company, was involved with the opium trade, while his mother was an outspoken critic of opium use.

As an adult, living in London, Banks is portrayed as an emotionally detached character filling his role in life as an eminent detective. The reader naturally suspects something from Banks's past as contributing to this aloofness, whether it be a specific incident or something ongoing throughout his early life. It is only when he meets an old school friend that the reader learns about Uncle Phillip, a family friend in Shanghai, who abandoned him in a market on the day his mother disappeared. These traumatic events are reported to the reader in the detached style of detective fiction, as if the narrator were describing someone else's life.

Since Banks is the novel's focalizer, it is the reported dialogue of others that gives hints that he has had a traumatic experience that he himself does not perceive as traumatic. An old school friend from his days in England, after his parents' disappearances, recalls how Banks was "such an odd bird at school" (Ishiguro, *Orphans* 5). This characterization is denied by Banks who thinks the friend has confused him with someone else. Reflecting on those English school days, he recalls overhearing a conversation with his aunt speaking to "someone," complaining about how young Banks is in his own little world, on his own for hours. The "someone" says: "But it's only to be expected, surely . . . after all that has happened to him" (10). The writer's choice to include these character assessments from characters other than the trauma victim illustrates Malabou's point regarding the potential of literature to tackle the extremes of traumatic experience. By comparison, an autobiographical account in non-fiction could easily circumvent the observations and opinions of others.

In conversation with others from his past, Banks claims to have a “most vivid memory” (24). He restates this privately to the reader in terms of being able to “with ease transport myself back” in time to recollect key events in his life in Shanghai. This claim suggests that the traumatic events of the past feel as fresh as if they were in the present. This is one of the characteristics of the traumatized individual – the confusion of past and present. As the story develops the reader realizes that some of these memories appear implausible or incomplete to the point of presenting different interpretations for the narrator than for the reader.

The reader is given further hints of Banks’s troubled state of mind in the present day of 1930s London through his conversations with Sarah, a socialite he befriends but is unable to commit to. What he thinks are recollections of his childhood in Shanghai for his narrative with the reader turn out to be things that he actually said aloud to Sarah without being aware of it: “I suppose I must then have told her a few further things from the past. I did not reveal anything of any real significance, but after parting with her this afternoon—we eventually got off in Oxford Street—I was surprised and slightly alarmed that I had told her anything at all” (67).

According to Drag, Banks’s nostalgia for his childhood “could be interpreted in the context of the trauma theorists’ criticism of nostalgia’s escapist propensity” (Drag 162). Other trauma theorists see the reliance on nostalgia in *Orphans* as Banks’s inability to forget the past and the futility of trying to do so (Guo 2514). The narrator is aware that he is trying to work out what happened to his parents, yet as the story progresses the reader realizes that Banks is trying to work out what happened to *himself*.

Biwu Shang explores Ishiguro’s narrative of memories in *Orphans* within the framework of identity construction for its narrator and principal character Christopher Banks. Referring to Weston, Shang notes that traumatic loss has contributed to creating a sense of lost identity. An attempt to reclaim this identity might help to explain why the narrator speaks of himself based on his recollections in the past tense and of his feelings during the time of narration in the present tense, creating a dual perspective (or focalization) within the first-person narration. In this way, the narrator tricks the reader into accepting what the narrator believes until the reader can see beyond it. This reflects Malabou’s point regarding literature not being outside and neutral on its own but here requiring a neurobiological approach. The literary text presents an inner textual world created by the narrator and an outer textual world that draws from neurobiology (not necessarily explicitly referred to) in which the reader interacts with the text and its author. Weston describes this inner textual world “as filtered through his mind rather than a relatively objective bird’s

eye perspective, [and] takes on the contours of Banks's experience and recedes from the mind's attempt to grasp it" (341). Using Malabou's work, our understanding from the outer textual world of the brain's plasticity accounts for this dualism between recorded experience, even with accurate memories, and the mind's ability, and perhaps willingness, to understand it and accept it as a genuine experience.

This dualism between true experiences and the mind accepting these experiences emerges in the novel as Banks returns to Shanghai to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearances. Drag explains this in terms of Banks's traumatic experience: "The depth and persistence of the wound sustained by the narrator is not revealed until he returns, after over three decades, to the place of his ordeal" (146). It is 1937 and Shanghai has been destroyed by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). Banks experiences what appears to the reader to be a surrealistic chain of events in his search for his missing parents. As Drag rightly points out: "Although the earlier parts contain Banks's intimations that he still entertains the hope of finding his parents, his condition does not strike the reader as delusional" (146). This position changes when Banks unrealistically aims to reach the kidnappers' suspected hide-out. The events that follow appear surrealistic, full of the illogic of dreams that do not make sense in the real world. In digging for clues, he uncovers one house that was not searched by the police at the time his parents went missing and makes the assumption that his parents are still there after some twenty years. This otherwise logical detective, famous for solving crimes, never questions even to himself the unlikelihood that his parents are still there, if they were ever there in the first place.

The narration also reflects on the plasticity of the brain in its formulation of memories. While memories of childhood are vivid and precise, the narrator struggles to recall events in the present day when he is trying to find his parents. The search for his parents leads Banks into a war zone where he seeks the help of the local police in finding the house. He describes the scene in vague memories:

My recollection is a little hazy now as to how we got down to the bunker. There were perhaps a few more rooms; I remember we walked along a kind of tunnel, stooping to avoid low beams; here too were sentries, and each time we encountered one of their looming black shapes, I was obliged to press myself right into the rough wall in order to squeeze past. (Ishiguro, *Orphans* 230–31)

This description resembles the recounting of a dream and suggests another traumatic event that plays out at the edge of experience.

Following Malabou's assertion that literature is not fully in a position of neutrality without a neurobiological understanding of trauma, but that it needs to reflect such an understanding, we can see how the narration places the reader in a space where the traumatic event occurs even though the narrating character does not realize their traumatized state. The police abandon Banks, yet he continues into the war zone and finds a wounded Japanese soldier whom he thinks is his old childhood friend Akira. It is obvious to the reader that the chances of running into his childhood friend are remote, especially since as a child Akira did not feel any loyalty towards Japan and might have stayed in Shanghai. Moreover, the Japanese soldier does not initially recognize him and is obviously only pretending to be his old friend by repeating the information that Banks gives him. The soldier also slips up a couple of times, admitting that he has a wife and child in Japan, which does not fit Banks's narrative. As such, the reader's realization comes in part from the literary text, but also from an understanding of the brain that originates outside of the literary text.

The notion of traumatic memories being imagined is further manipulated in the text. Following an attack by Chinese soldiers, Banks finds himself in a hospital with small injuries he does not remember receiving, as if he has forgotten a dream. The reader, vicariously experiencing the trauma, never finds out how the injuries actually occurred. Banks's switch from describing a traumatic, and likely imagined, event into accepting it as a forgotten dream reflects the plasticity of the brain to reshape itself to a former state.

The cerebral wound is healed at the story's conclusion. Banks meets Uncle Phillip again, whom he learns took on a new persona after he succeeded in safely getting young Banks out of Shanghai. The older man reveals the truth about the disappearances of Banks's parents; his father left his mother for a mistress and years later died of typhoid fever; his mother had been kidnapped by a warlord, who made her his concubine. His mother survives, and he visits her in a mental institution in Hong Kong, unsure if she knows who he is. Banks accepts this interpretation of events and there is a hint that the long overdue process of mourning can now take place.

CONCLUSIONS

By drawing on the works of Catherine Malabou and other scholars on trauma, this essay has revealed another layer to the complexity of Ishiguro's writing on the themes of memory and trauma beyond those currently found in critical literature. Central to this analysis has been Malabou's argument

that only literature can capture the extremity of the traumatic experience. That is, a neurobiological approach to literature incorporates the clues given in the texts, illustrating the manifestations of the post-traumatic brain, with knowledge of the workings of the wounded traumatized brain. Moreover, through this approach, we can analyze memories described as guilt-ridden; in the case of *Artist's* construction of traumatic experience, those experiences go beyond victimization to include “the doing of ill” to others.

This analysis naturally accommodates Malabou's broader approach to literature: that of a plastic reading. According to Alexander Galloway, such an approach to reading does not perform a critique, but “seeks to be a witness to this event and reconstruct the metamorphosis taking place beyond it all” (12). Where this article has borrowed from Malabou's writing to formulate interpretations, the results do not form a *critique* of these Ishiguro works in the traditional sense of *critique*, as the plasticity of the brain suggests there is no one critique. Rather, Malabou's ideas complement current psychological approaches, offering us interpretations at this point in time and illustrating literature's ability to enter these “unthinkable spaces.”

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“How Do You Know Who You Are?”: *Marjorie Prime* on Envisioning Humanity Through the Faculty of AI-Powered Memory as Reconstructive Tissue

ABSTRACT

In reference to the theme of the issue devoted to literary extremities, Jordan Harrison’s play *Marjorie Prime* raises thought-provoking questions about the potential benefits and drawbacks of advanced AI technology by exploring the nature of memory, identity, and mortality, as well as the ethical implications of creating artificial intelligence that can mimic human behavior and emotions. This article argues that the play positions its AI character—a computerized hologram of Marjorie’s late husband Walter—at the intersection of two divergent perspectives on memory reactivation enhanced by AI-powered technology. While, on the one hand, the humanoid is seen as a potent tool which helps to reduce the cognitive impairment caused by dementia, on the other hand, there is a concern that technological interventions may trigger episodic memory change, testifying to the plastic, and thus reconstructive, character of this foundational human faculty. The article seeks to negotiate the interplay of benefits and dangers of technology-assisted memory reactivation by exploring two divergent ideas represented by Marjorie’s daughter Tess and her son-in-law Jon regarding what would comfort their mother, and, ultimately, their differing ways of comforting each other and themselves individually as the carers of an elderly person. In analyzing how creative and destructive forces exhibited by AI-powered digital tools cross-inhabit the declining memory inflicted by dementia, the article unpacks both the vast potential and the limits of technology while attempting to answer uncomfortable questions about the essence of human existence posed by aging and dementia.

Keywords: memory, dementia, artificial intelligence, memory reactivation, *Marjorie Prime*.

“Aging, death, illness/health, love, marriage, memory, parenting/family.” These are the keywords which can be found at Concord Theatricals website in reference to the 2015 Pulitzer Prize nominated play *Marjorie Prime* by Jordan Harrison. The essence of the play was captured in a question posed by Frank Wood, the actor playing Jon, Marjorie’s son-in-law: “How do you know who you are?” (“*Marjorie Prime* at the Mark Taper Forum”). This question remains unanswered, but it is repeatedly reconfigured throughout the play, in which the characters obtain their AI companions, called “Primes,” to, among other things, slow down their cognitive decline by helping them remember the highlights of their lives. What is exceptional about *Marjorie Prime* is that, despite its holographic techno-characters, the play does not possess an overt atmosphere of science fiction, “at least not the predictive sort,” as Harrison put it, but instead serves as a 21st-century mirror for our own fears and tribulations about what constitutes us as human beings. Is this our presence, or a memory of our presence? In this essay, Frank Wood’s question will be explored in relation to the “intricate relationship between autobiographical memory and the self” (Vanderveren et al.). It is argued that, despite its futuristic setting, the play deals with classic familial discords and uncomfortable questions of existence posed by aging and dementia. As the characters use the Primes to comfort and assist their loved ones, they begin to feel reservations about the limitations and potential dangers of the devices. The Primes become what the humans want them to be, embodying the characters’ own half-truths and frustrations about their histories with the person the hologram represents.

The way in which Harrison, a playwright and a screenwriter,¹ has envisioned his futuristic engagement with the problem of memory loss takes the following trajectory: when the main character, Marjorie, suffers from dementia, the computer-generated hologram of her late husband Walter tries to remind her who she was by giving her the information provided by her son-in-law Jon about her past life that she has already forgotten. The question remains whether her lost memories provide her with what she needs to feel—as the playwright puts it—“more human” (Harrison 48). The suggestive power of Harrison’s vision is grounded in his conviction that it is impossible to disentangle the internal experience of memory loss from the external environment of family and friends. Therefore, it may be argued, after Catherine Malabou, that dementia is rhetorically constructed as it requires negotiation between more than one agent (49). Unlike kidney

¹ Jordan Harrison is not only an award-winning playwright (a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Marjorie Prime*, recipient of, among others, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Hodder Fellowship, and the Horton Foote Prize), but also a well-recognized screenwriter and producer (the Netflix original series *Orange Is the New Black* in 2017 and a 2020 series *Dispatches from Elsewhere*).

or liver dysfunction, brain dysfunction not only impacts upon the affected person's self-identity, but also upon the closest circle of family and friends experiencing extreme cognitive and affective dissonances.

In his review of the 2022 production of Harrison's play staged at the Theatre in the Round in Minneapolis, Rob Dunkelberger admitted that he was taken by surprise by the way that the plot of *Marjorie Prime* developed in subsequent scenes. "What becomes interesting," states Dunkelberger, "is how it illustrates the fallacies of memory. We all remember things differently for one thing. One realization that comes out is withholding memories from the Prime is really just a way of avoiding dealing with them." Marjorie's daughter Tess is a staunch advocate of keeping family secrets away from the Prime. Tess's determination is well demonstrated in the following exchange with Jon:

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TESS: I don't know how memory works. I think of it like sedimentary layers in the brain, but I'm sure that's wrong. We should get a book.

JON: I like sedimentary layers. It means it's all still there.

....

TESS: It doesn't always seem that way.

JON: No.

Short pause.

JON: I think we should remind her, Tess.

TESS: And I think we should *not*, Jon, and she's my mom—

JON: You'd rather just let everything / slip away?

TESS: She's *my mom*, /Jon—

JON: How much does she have to forget before she's not your mom anymore?

Pause. (Harrison 21)

Tess is often read as an overprotective daughter who deems the truth harmful and who, by withholding the family secret from Walter Prime, hopes to finally extricate from her mother's demented mind the unspeakable burden of her son's suicide (Dunkelberger). Balancing on the thin line of

what constitutes a lie, Tess's reason for displaying distrust towards her father's holographic proxy is elucidated as a protective mechanism against revealing the painful family secret.

Throughout her whole life Tess was an agonizing witness to how her elder brother's (un)expected death destroyed Marjorie both as an individual, and, first and foremost, as the mother of a surviving child—the child who never felt good enough to compensate for her mother's heart-wrenching loss. When Jon puts forward the following argument that “[s]he took care of you, now it's your turn to take care of her,” Tess is visibly shaken and limits her reaction to a snap retort: “You weren't there,” thus ending a conversation which evokes immense distress (Harrison 19). The survivor of her sibling's suicide, the bereaved Tess was nevertheless deprived of a chance to comprehend the significance of the grieving process (Adams et al.; Jonas-Simpson et al.; Powell and Matthys). In her case, grieving was marred by her mother's physical and mental withdrawal and ensuing emotional coldness, a symptom of Marjorie's advancing depression, which proved devastating to her relation with her daughter. Marjorie's relationship with Tess was somewhat combative and her daughter has continued this dysfunctional and depressive pattern. Having lived through years of such agonizing experiences, Tess has reversed the logic of dementia as a destructive force.

Her line of thinking concurs with the observation expressed by playwright Peter M. Floyd, the author of *Absence*, a play reflecting on his mother's step-by-step cognitive decline. Floyd admitted that dementia, in its twisted reckoning with the growing absence of memories, also allowed his mother to finally reconcile with her daughter. Aware of the diametrically opposite rationale for the definition of happiness during illness, Floyd articulated what might be seen as the antithesis of a commonly defined value of life. On the one hand, in Floyd's *Absence* we gradually plunge into the unruly mind of a woman called Helen affected by the loss of cognitive functioning resulting in impaired memory. Don Aucoin aptly captured the inevitability of such a predicament:

Helen, who is in her mid-70s, gets lost while out on a walk. She forgets her own age. Twice within the span of five minutes she tells the same story about her father returning from World War II. She conflates her sister with her daughter while telling a tale of the former's biker boyfriend. As Helen's condition worsens, the words spoken to her by others register in a bizarre jumble, as when she hears her husband say, “It's not that the rabbits aren't indexing the volt. . . .”

Tragic as it may seem, Helen's dementia is simultaneously envisioned by Floyd as a peculiar form of catharsis, a life-saving tool which occurred at the last possible moment before her ultimate failure as a mother and a fulfilled

person. In an interview before *Absence's* premiere in Oslo, Floyd admitted that he “had never seen [his mother] happier than in the last few years of her life” (Aucoin). Indeed, the paradoxical counterbalance to losing the memory of the world she used to know was divesting herself of earthbound anguish. “Though the disease took away a part of her, it also took away her cares, her worries, her sadnesses,” the playwright observed (Aucoin). “It kind of freed her in a bizarre way. I was trying to show, with Helen, that as agonizing as it was, there was something releasing about it” (ibid.).

More often than not, however, theatre and cinema portray the “memory-stealing brain disorder” (Aucoin) as a spiral of collective tragedy affecting the sufferer’s closest circle of family and friends. The common factor in these productions is a recurring set of questions which were articulated by Jack Shea in his review of Arnie Reisman’s play with its telling—and chilling—title “Pay Attention to *Not Constantinople* While You Still Can.” Confronted with “memory loss, impaired thinking skills, diminished judgment and language, and an increasing inability to perform the functions of daily life” (Aucoin), Shea claims that the audience is propelled to stand in their truth and to ponder, not only for the characters, but, first and foremost, for themselves: “How do we manage getting old in a world that’s passed us by? How do we live in a world clouded by [dementia]? What are our choices? And does this society respect and nurture its old people?” (Shea).

Bruce Graham’s *The Outgoing Tide* and Barney Norris’s *Visitors* also tap into these questions, with a flashback reflection on the past life. These theatrical portrayals of families whose formulaic rituals gradually and quietly fall apart, “flood your emotions with [their] emotional truth” (Cohen), but “avoid that easy pity that is close cousin to contempt” (Billington). Similarly intimate, confined to the mythical family space of the character of Vivienne and her mother, is *Blackberry Winter* by Steve Yockey. This time, however, dementia is lived through the daughter’s perspective, which allows for a more contemplative and philosophical reflection on the inner turmoil of the offspring who must confront the gradual decline of the beloved parent. Examining Vivienne’s characterization, Rachael Carnes poignantly observes: “Cached within the comforting science of Vivienne’s routines, she has created a fable: a cosmological understanding of Alzheimer’s and its origins, a creation myth, to help herself comprehend and cope with her mother’s ever-entangling brain. Vivienne is heartbreaking—not because she fails but because like all of us, she sometimes falters.”²

² A different take on dementia is offered by two other playwrights. First, Arnie Reisman’s *Not Constantinople* is a dark comedy which puts to the forefront the inevitability of the passing time, ruminating over a question whether a witness stricken with the

This picture would not be complete without reference to two films which have greatly contributed to raising audience awareness of human frailty in the confrontation with the unexpected challenges of declining memory. In both cases, the performances of the actors playing protagonists stricken with dementia have been awarded with Oscars. In 2015 the Best Actress award went to Julianne Moore who in *Still Alice* played, in an exceptionally nuanced way, a terminally ill person aware enough to follow her own decline. In 2021 the Academy Award for Best Actor was presented to Anthony Hopkins for his superb performance in *The Father*. The mood swings of a man desperate over “losing his leaves, the branches, the wind and the rain” (*The Father*, last scene) are best rendered by cinematic means, which offer the kind of intimate viewing experience that is unavailable to the theatre goer. In his *Guardian* review, Peter Bradshaw alludes to the inconspicuous camera-work which at times subtly and at some other times more disturbingly conveys the protagonist’s perplexed mind, clinging to the last strands of vanishing memory. In an Eisensteinian vein, emotion is elicited “without obvious first-person camera tricks”; this is captured by Bradshaw when he describes how the film places the viewer in the protagonist’s mental space:

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We see and don’t see what he sees and doesn’t see. We are cleverly invited to assume that certain passages of dialogue are happening in reality—and then shown that they aren’t. We experience with Anthony, step by step, what appears to be the incremental deterioration in his condition, the disorientating time slips and time loops. People morph into other people; situations get elided; the apartment’s furniture seems suddenly and bewilderingly to change; a scene which had appeared to follow the previous one sequentially turns out to have preceded it, or to be Anthony’s delusion or his memory of something else. And new people, people he doesn’t recognise (played by Mark Gatiss and Olivia Williams) keep appearing in his apartment and responding to him with that same sweet smile of patience when he asks what they are doing there. The universe is gaslighting Anthony with these people.

Against the backdrop of these true-to-life dementia chronicles, Harrison’s *Marjorie Prime* proposes its own vision of the desperate race with time, situating its story in the liminal space between humans and machines powered by AI technology. Analyzing the scientific component

intensifying bouts of dementia would be able to testify against his former mafia bosses before his mind wanders off in an unknown direction. Then, in *The Other Place* by Sharr White the emphasis is shifted from the consequences of the brain degeneration towards kindling the awareness of losing a grasp on reality at the onset of an illness, the diagnosis of which came way too early for a successful scientist and a trailblazing businesswoman.

of the AI-powered Primes in *Playwrights Horizons*, Sarah Lunnie explores the process of “deep learning” in which “computer software sifts through large amounts of data, and, by identifying patterns, develops a kind of autonomous creative intelligence.” To exemplify the possible use of this technology, Lunnie refers to the grant received by the University of Arizona School of Music for developing a robot whose task would be to absorb the library of jazz recordings. Through learning the musical patterns whose sheer volume would overwhelm the cognitive capacity of even the most skillful and talented musician, the robot would develop the ability to improvise while jamming with a band of human players. The breakthrough technology of the AI component would allow the robot to tap into its knowledge base in order to make its own decisions and produce self-created improvised musical pieces. “We’re trying to build something that communicates with humans and doesn’t just wait for the human to tell it what to do,” concluded the creator of the Music Improvising Collaborative Agent, the equivalent of the fictional Prime in the real world of arts and music (Lunnie).³

As mentioned in the introduction, the advanced technology of Primes is not supposed to frame the play as science fiction. This was an intended strategy on Harrison’s part, who explained his vision in the playwright’s notes, significantly titled “Thoughts on the Primes.” Impersonating humans, Primes “are not physical robots.” Instead, “[t]hey are artificial intelligence programs—descendants of the current chatbots—that use sophisticated holographic projections” (Harrison 75). Having read Harrison’s notes on staging, what might come as a surprise is his meticulous approach to keeping the semblance of veracity. The Primes “can move around, of course, but I suspect that they shouldn’t pick up anything or touch anyone (and no such moment is scripted),” explains the playwright; instead, “[i]t may be interesting to highlight, in contrast, the physical contact in scenes between human beings” (75). Even the theatrical space should help to highlight the distinctiveness of Primes. Harrison’s suggestion is that “it may be helpful if there is a kind of dim perimeter around the living room which the Primes occupy after they’ve been introduced, when they aren’t actively in a scene” (75). The spatial boundary, however, extends beyond the stage design for highlighting ontological differences in a particular theatrical moment. For Harrison, the dim perimeter should extend its meaning beyond the marker of a physical space, and, while economically drawn, the strip of darkness should

³ “Whether you think this is good news or bad could be an interesting psycho-spiritual Rorschach test, especially considering who’s footing the bill,” concluded Sarah Lunnie. The last part was a reference to the institution administering the apparently arts-related grant, namely DARPA. The name stands for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, operating in the field of a military technology.

eventually encompass time. “I imagine,” says Harrison, “that this will help establish the sense of their immortality in Part Three—the way that they far outlive the flesh-and-blood problems of the people they’re mimicking” (76).

The author was explicit about a strict rule for staging which would permit only a single element—the phrase “I don’t have that information” spoken “when the Primes incriminate themselves” or “when they’re stumped by something”—to let the audience discern the thin line between a robot and a human (75). This strategy does work, if only on my own single example. Harrison intended to narrate the family story with an authority which invites our trust:

There shouldn’t be anything robotic or creepy or less-than-human about the Primes’ behavior. That is why I haven’t identified them in the script as “Walter Prime,” “Marjorie Prime” or “Tess Prime.” The technology is advanced enough that they aren’t broadcasting their inhumanness—and we, like the characters in the play, should be able to forget that they aren’t real. (75)

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If we are to immerse ourselves in the story, the robots operating “on a technology more advanced than what we’re accustomed to” must not act as a distraction: “The less the audience is put in mind of how the technology works, the better” (75).

Even though the characters (and the audience) are meant to be deluded that the Primes are human, they nevertheless comply with Asimov’s laws of robotics (1950) in the sense that they obey the orders given to them by the humans. Still, there is a twist regarding the robot’s apparent agency (Grynszpan et. al; Barlas), most probably intended. This occurs when the Prime initiates the topics of the conversation (“I could tell you a story”) or scrutinizes Marjorie’s apparent reluctance to eat (“Marjorie. Where are the dishes?” or “We both know what no dishes means”) to veil the aura of artificiality of a human-robot exchange. Yet we still fall for it and take the agency’s initiative in good faith. The way in which the illusion works can be illustrated by this particular excerpt from Scene 1 in Part One of the play:

WALTER: I could tell you about the time we went to the movies.

MARJORIE: We went to a lot of movies.

WALTER (*Does she remember the significance?*): But one time we saw *My Best Friend’s Wedding*.

MARJORIE (*She doesn’t remember*): *My Best Friend’s Wedding*. . .

WALTER: There's a woman—Julia Roberts. For a while it was always Julia Roberts. And she has an agreement with her best friend, her male best friend, that if they're not married by a certain age, then they'll marry each other. And she's about to remind him of the agreement but it turns out he's already fallen in love with this nice blond—Cameron Diaz. And so Julia Roberts spends the whole movie trying to ruin things between her friend and Cameron Diaz, which is not very sympathetic behavior for America's Sweetheart. But it's all okay in the end, and she has a gay best friend who delivers one-liners.

MARJORIE: Did I like it?

WALTER: You said you wanted a gay best friend afterwards.

MARJORIE: Did I get one?

WALTER (*Faintly generic*): I'm afraid I don't have that information.

Pause. She scrutinizes him.

MARJORIE: Why did you pick that story? Why did you pick *My Best Friend's Wedding*?

WALTER: It's the night I proposed to you.

MARJORIE: Oh Marjorie, the things you forget.

You were trying to tell me and I wouldn't let you. (Harrison 9)

The scene constitutes our first encounter with Marjorie and Walter Prime so there is still a sense of novelty and caution before we comprehend the mechanism on which the Primes as companions operate. Then we may think we have grasped it. The stage is set, the rules seem clear: Marjorie embodies a dementia-stricken woman in her late 80s with a staunch sympathy tinged with exasperation, and Walter, who looks like her late husband in his 30s, keeps her company to help her untangle her ever-entangling brain and “provide comfort.” Praiseworthy, indeed. So we move on to follow up on the rest of their conversation, but, for some, the reality of the situation remains uncertain. Only the last pages of the text, Harrison's “Thoughts on Primes,” clarifies it as we read: “The set should never broadcast that we're in the future. Rather, the audience should catch on through the dissonant experience of watching an 85-year-old woman with the memories of someone born in 1977” (76). Indeed, when *My Best Friend's Wedding* was released in 1997, it must have been a long time since

Walter had proposed to Marjorie. If we have failed to notice such a subtle clue, then there is a high probability that the illusion has worked.

The story with the movie has a sequel. Since the entire filmic narrative spans through Part One and Part Three, as such it constitutes a protracted dramaturgical path from the exposition through the climax up to the denouement, offering the reconceptualization of human identity shaped by autobiographical memory. Right after the improbable story of Walter's proposal, Marjorie conjures up the individuating alternative to the backbone of her most romantic memory:

MARJORIE: What if we saw *Casablanca* instead? Let's say we saw *Casablanca* in an old theatre with velvet seats, and then, on the way home, you proposed. Then, by the next time we talk, it will be true.

WALTER: You mean make it up?

MARJORIE (*Narrowing her eyes*): You're very serious. You're like them. Especially Tess. (Harrison 10)

Suddenly, we find ourselves in a game in which the stakes are particularly high—the episodic memory which has a tremendous impact on the functioning of the self. In an unexpected move, Marjorie takes the initiative and reclaims the agency attributed to her holographic companion. “Let's invent our past anew!”, she seems to be saying, for once mindful of her deteriorating capacity for the retrieval of the past memories, but also triumphant of her cunning plot to defy her daughter's imposing authority. “Everything gets me in trouble with her,” complains the incapacitated parent who grows eerily aware that in the traditionally established hierarchical pattern of the mother/daughter relationship their tables have irreversibly turned (Harrison 10). “She's the mother now,” concludes Marjorie, and with this pessimistic admission her resigned tone unexpectedly subsides (10). Instead of triggering the redress for what she takes as injustice, Marjorie's momentary flare abruptly loses its spark. Instead of a vaunted triumph heralded by the return of cognitive reflexivity and reclaimed agency, she sinks again, and, reassuming her passive role, watches Walter once more take the lead. In a “faintly generic” manner he asks a follow-up question: “Tell me more about your mother,” which proves that he must have misinterpreted the context in which Marjorie has just used the word “mother” (10). Then, suddenly, when we think it is all over, in Part Three, we are transferred to a space where not only the tables have turned again. This is the same living room, but it feels more minimalistic. It is a bright, empty

space that seems to have been untouched by the passing of time, even though centuries may have passed, “planets [may] have turned” and “bones [may] have been bleached” (Harrison 70). In a surreal scene, Tess Prime, Marjorie Prime and Walter Prime sit together, appearing lively and human-like rather than robotic. Walter begins to tell a familiar story that we recognize from Scene 1, which suggests that memory and truth are often mistaken for each other. The scene involves an old movie theatre that played classic films, including *Casablanca*—one of Marjorie’s favorites. Marjorie recites a line from the movie, and Walter says that they went to see it together:

MARJORIE: I wore blue.

WALTER: And Sam played, and Bogie drank, and Bergman was beautiful—but not as beautiful as her.

TESS (*“That’s sweet”*): Aww, Dad.

WALTER: And I stopped her in the alley outside the theatre afterwards, and I got down on one knee—the pavement was wet but I didn’t care—and I got out the ring.

TESS: And you said yes, of course?

MARJORIE: It was “maybe.”

WALTER (*To Tess, scandalized*): “Maybe”!

MARJORIE (*Playful*): I had world number eight to consider.

WALTER: But she came around.

TESS: How?

WALTER: A campaign of constant prodding.

MARJORIE: He wore me down—isn’t that romantic?

WALTER: But aren’t you glad I did?

MARJORIE: I am.

WALTER: And the rest is history.

Beat. (Harrison 70)

Although Marjorie and Walter's story featuring *Casablanca* does not display the same level of cunning agency as Marjorie's original tale, it serves as the most vivid mode of inventiveness. This dialogue calls for an approach that deals with both memory and technology. Revisiting Endel Tulving's seminal theory of episodic memory shows that the Primes do not sidestep meaning, but rather carry and alter it, with unforeseen consequences. Tulving explained episodic memory as "a recently evolved, late-developing, and early-deteriorating past-oriented memory system, more vulnerable than other memory systems to neuronal dysfunction, and probably unique to humans" (5). Unlike semantic memory which is used for storing facts, episodic memory "makes possible mental time travel through subjective time, from the present to the past, thus allowing one to re-experience, through autoeic awareness, one's own previous experiences" (Tulving 5). It must be remembered that the Primes are designed to assist people with fading memories by being fed with information about the individual they are simulating. The accuracy and the completeness of the memories which the Primes store depend on the information they receive. Therefore, there is no agency on their part and factual inaccuracies can only be attributed to the source, namely, the humans. We are capable of distorting our past by omission or commission (Schacter 5). When the past recedes with the occurrence of new experiences (Schacter 12) or our memories are permeable to outside suggestive influences (Schacter 112), these alterations, as research suggests (cf., among others, O'Keane; Bernecker and Michaelian; Loftus), should not be treated as flaws in the system design, but rather as "a window on the adaptive strengths of memory" (Schacter 6). Reactivating the past in *Marjorie Prime* proves that memories are not "snapshots from family albums" which can always be retrieved in the same form; rather, they are malleable formations tinted with bias "by attributing to them emotion or knowledge we acquired after the event" (Schacter 9). As Hilde and Ylva Østby explain via a metaphor related to the play:

Memory is more like live theater, where there are constantly new productions of the same pieces. . . . Each and every one of our memories is a mix of fact and fiction. In most memories, the central story is based on true events, but it's still reconstructed every time we recall it. (63)

In the analyzed case, the imprecision of the title of the movie (*My Best Friend's Wedding*, or *Casablanca*, or perhaps another one) ruptures the existing schemata which entail that "one is the same person now as in the past and will be in the future" and any subsequent changes "are explained and understood through experiences of growth that lead to new perspectives on self" (Vanderveren et al.) There is a cognitive dissonance

which occurs when we realize in Part Three that the version which prevailed as a specific personal memory (*Casablanca*) was indeed the result of a factual manipulation. While this particular memory manipulation may have a tremendous impact on the characters' identity, it must be emphasized that this phenomenon is no longer confined to the realm of a fictional world. In 2019 a report was published in *Scientific American* describing an experiment leading to the creation of artificial memories:

Using laboratory animals, investigators reverse engineered a specific natural memory by mapping the brain circuits underlying its formation. They then "trained" another animal by stimulating brain cells in the pattern of the natural memory. Doing so created an artificial memory that was retained and recalled in a manner indistinguishable from a natural one. (Martone)

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The significance of this experiment was that it demonstrated that "by manipulating specific circuits in the brain, memories can be separated from that narrative and formed in the complete absence of real experience" (Martone). The question remains how the possibility of manipulating human emotions, which is becoming all the more real, translates into the susceptibility of the life story schema to distort "a mental representation of major components of a person's life and . . . the individual's understanding of how one's life story is constructed within the culture one lives in" (Vanderveren et al.).

Finally, with reference to an important function of memory, namely facilitating the process of coping with and resolving negative emotions, in *Marjorie Prime* such therapeutic intervention ultimately turns out to be disastrous in its consequences. For Marjorie's daughter, Tess, who was exposed to the Primes experiment initiated by her husband Jon, the aftermath of this relationship found its tragic finale in her suicide. Due to the overwhelming accumulation of negative emotions, Tess's autobiographical memory integrated too many destructive episodic memories related to her difficult relationship with her mother following her elder brother's suicide. The activation of negative emotions may be attributed to her troubled relation with Walter Prime. It was Tess's firm belief that the Prime impersonating her late father is harmful because it may remind her mother of the truth about her son's Damien's suicide, the burden of which she had just been liberated from due to dementia.

Apart from reading Tess's visible distrust of the AI companions as a protective mechanism, I would like to offer a complementary interpretation rooted in Masahiro Mori's concept of the *uncanny valley*. In 1970 a robotics professor from Tokyo wrote an essay on the trajectory

of a human reaction to humanoid robots. From the example of a human reaction to a prosthetic hand, Mori traced the appearance of an “eerie sensation” when “a person’s response to a humanlike robot would abruptly shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached, but failed to attain, a lifelike appearance” (Mori et al. 98). Mori designed a mathematical graph depicting the relation between “the human likeness of an entity, and the perceiver’s affinity for it” (99). While the affinity for the industrial or toy robots would grow proportionately upwards, in the case of a prosthetic hand, which resembles the human hand most of all the quoted examples both in looks and in function, the relation plummeted and reached a negative value. It was this slump on the graph which Mori called the uncanny valley and his explanation for the phenomenon hinged on our loss of affinity when the object looks “almost” real:

One might say that the prosthetic hand has achieved a degree of resemblance to the human form, perhaps on par with false teeth. However, once we realize that the hand that looked real at first sight is actually artificial, we experience an eerie sensation. For example, we could be startled during a handshake by its limp boneless grip together with its texture and coldness. When this happens, we lose our sense of affinity, and the hand becomes uncanny. (99)

“Why were we equipped with this eerie sensation? Is it essential for human beings?”, asks the scientist and his response links our sense of alienation to the human instinct of self-preservation (100). When activated, this instinct “protects us from proximal, rather than distal, sources of danger. Proximal sources of danger include corpses, members of different species, and other entities we can closely approach. Distal sources of danger include windstorms and floods” (100).

In other words, the uncanny valley represents our survival response towards something human-like, but not a hundred percent life-like. As Helen Hastie from the National Robotarium in Edinburgh explained on the occasion of the unveiling of Optimus, Tesla’s prototype humanoid robot: “If it’s too human-like, it will put off the human” (qtd. in Kleinman). The uncanny valley sensation evolved from an analogous affective response to death or disease (Moosa and Ud-Dean 13). This type of repulsive response was once theorized by Silvan S. Tomkins as an affect of disgust and by Julia Kristeva as an abject. In the case of Tess, the following dialogue with Jon exposes the full range of motivations supporting the occurrence of the uncanny valley sensation in relation to Walter Prime:

JON: Does it bother you that she’s talking to a computer program? Or that it’s a computer program pretending to be your dad.

TESS: It bothers me that you're *helping* it pretend to be my dad—or some weird fountain of youth version / of him—

JON: That's how she / remembers him—

TESS: Both of you are helping it.

JON: Not “helping”—that's just how it works. The more you talk, the more it absorbs.

TESS: Until we become unnecessary. Isn't that how it goes?

JON: In science *fiction*.

TESS: Science fiction is *here*, Jonathan. Every *day* is science fiction. My head spins. Doesn't your head spin? We buy these things that already know our moods and what we want for lunch even though we don't know ourselves. And we *listen* to them, we do what we're told. Or in this case we tell them our deepest secrets, even though we have no earthly idea how they work. We treat them like our loved ones.

Beat.

JON: Are you jealous?

TESS: What? No. Of the Prime?

JON: You are!

TESS: Am I supposed to not notice she's being nicer to that thing than to me?

JON: It's your father she's being nice to.

TESS: It is not my father.

Short pause. (Harrison 18)

While the urge to protect her mother from the haunting memories of the past might have constituted a viable motive for Tess's aversion to the Prime, from a cognitive point of view, one of the underlying causes might have been the neuro-physiological mechanism which amplified Tess's felt experience. It first triggered the biological response (repulsion), only later to be combined with a psychological feeling of apprehension and finally to culminate with a complex combination of affects with autobiographical memories of her

family tragedy. In line with Tomkins's affect-feeling-emotion trio, cognitive dissonance combined with the self-preserving mechanism provided a backbone for Tess's motivation to treat the AI companion with ambivalence.

In contrast, her husband Jon embraces the uncanny sensation in a completely different way. In Part Two, we observe a particularly emotional scene in which Jon is programming the Prime of his recently deceased wife. He is fully aware that it is him who holds all the memories and that the Prime is only "a backboard" (Harrison 67). Therefore, it eventually occurs to him that Tess was right and that talking to a Prime signifies talking to oneself. Nevertheless, despite all the reservations, for Jon the Prime becomes a tool for dealing with a complete loss. He comes to appreciate the AI hologram as a sophisticated technology that can provide a sense of comfort and companionship despite its uncanny quality.

In the closing remarks of his article on experiments with artificial memory, Robert Martone provides a clear indication that the "scribes of the soul," as he calls memories, "cut to the core of our humanity." Therefore, as a conclusion to this essay, it may be ascertained that in *Marjorie Prime*, the relationships which the human protagonists—Marjorie, Tess and Jon—have developed with the Primes—the humanoids powered by Artificial Intelligence—provide a multilayered ground for exploring and theorizing how the self can be conceptualized in reference to the reactivation of memory affected by dementia. The play explores the benefits and dangers of relying on technology to preserve memories and the ways in which we create our own delusions and frustrations about our past when interacting with the Primes. The play also delves into the concept of selective memory and how people often remember things differently, depending on their own biases and perspectives. Overall, Harrison's approach to memory in *Marjorie Prime* is a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of the ways in which we remember and forget, and the impact that technology can have on our memories and our relationships.

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ARTISTIC COLLABORATIONS

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Cosmic Hunt, Copper Electroplating, Chaosmic Transduction: Chaosmotechnics of Molecular Collaboration in Matthew Barney's *Redoubt* Project (2016–21)

ABSTRACT

The article considers Matthew Barney's artistic project *Redoubt* (2016–21) from the point of view of Gilbert Simondon's transductive philosophy of individuation. Informed by Simondon—read here with Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze and Yuk Hui—the article performs a case study of Barney's long-term, expansive and multi-layered project. *Redoubt* comprises a feature-length film, metal reliefs, and large-scale sculptures, as well as an intermedial performance. The article focuses on the mythological theme of the Cosmic Hunt deployed in Barney's eponymous feature film as well as on his experimental artistic process entailing cast metals. The goal of the article is to provide a diagram of the functioning of Barney's complex conception of metamorphosis, which plays itself out on many—heterogenous, yet ultimately entangled—orders of magnitude. Consideration will also be given to the political and decolonial implications of Barney's artistic proposal, which liberate the notion of the hunt from its takeover by colonial extractivism in order to reveal it as an intensive capture of forces.

Keywords: Matthew Barney, transduction, Simondon, electroplating, Cosmic Hunt, becoming-cosmic.

“The hoops on the other hand represent continuity, constant movement and constant change. Because the hoop dance creates different understandings the more it is performed and viewed, it becomes a symbol of infinite wisdom, and this is evident in the shape of the hoop itself, a shape with no beginning and no end . . .”
(Lamouche)

“In [Bergson’s] *Creative Evolution*, the intuition of the pure duration of the deep self expands into the grasp of the specific vital impulse [*élan vital*], and finally into the discovery of a cosmic sense of becoming, Life being like a current launched through Matter.”¹
(Simondon, *Sur la philosophie 1950–1980* [On Philosophy 1950–1980] 171–72)

“Every operation and every relation within an operation is an individuation that splits and phase-shifts pre-individual being, all while correlating the extreme values and orders of magnitude, which are initially without mediation.”
(Simondon, *Individuation* 6–7)

“Art . . . does not eternalize but renders transductive, giving a localized and fulfilled reality the power to pass to other places and other moments.”
(Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence* 211)

EXPOSITION

The present article engages with the theme of artistic collaborations by interrogating Matthew Barney’s expansive *Redoubt* project developed between 2016 and 2019.² It does so from the point of view of metamorphosis understood here in terms of transversal, molecular, sub-representational and a-signifying operations. The *Redoubt* project encompasses (1) the eponymous feature-length film, (2) a series of electroplated copper engravings, as well as (3) large-scale sculptures produced by pouring molten metal into moulds derived from hollowed-out trunks of Idaho lodgepole pines, known for their atypical, spiral grain. Barney conceptualizes the relation between these experimental processes and the film as follows: “I wanted this material transformation to be an integral part of the story. And working through that in the film was an interesting way of making that elaborate and clear and potentially a character of its own” (2021). The goal of this article is to unfold the enfolded layers of what might be called

¹ Translation mine.

² I would like to thank Gladstone Gallery for giving me the opportunity to view *Redoubt* (2019) and *Catasterism* (2021), and Sandra Lamouche—for sharing her insights on the project with me.

a *molecular storytelling*. The triptych composed of the film, electroplates and sculptures does not, however, constitute a static configuration. In fact, since 2019 *Redoubt* has undergone numerous changes through the site-specific character of its successive installations at various galleries in the US, UK and China. It was also mutated by Barney's 2021 collaborative intermedia performance *Catasterism in Three Movements* (see Barney and Bepler).

Set in the rugged scenery of Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, the film directed by Barney is a retelling of one of the Cosmic Hunt myths in which the pursued, wounded prey is eternalized as a celestial constellation, thematizing the process of intensive, qualitative change as a becoming-cosmic. In particular, Barney is interested in Ovid's (see 48–50) mythological tale of Diana, the chaste goddess of the hunt and the Moon, and the young hunter Actaeon, who at midday accidentally trespasses upon her and her nymphs taking a customary bath after the morning hunt. As a punishment, Actaeon is turned into a stag and deprived of speech, only to be chased and ultimately torn to pieces by his own hounds. Barney was especially captivated by the depictions of the myth by Titian (see Franks 18–19 n. 10). *Redoubt* mobilizes the Diana and Actaeon tale to stage its own mythological genesis of the Lupus constellation.

As will be argued, *Redoubt* re-situates the problem of artistic collaboration at the level of molecular transformations encapsulated in the processes—at once electrochemical, technical and cosmological, chemical and alchemical, metallic and chaosmic—at play in electroplated engraved copper plates documenting key moments in the plot of the film's version of the Cosmic Hunt narrative. The article approaches these molecular acts of artistic collaboration in terms of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation modified by the interventions of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, as well as Yuk Hui.

The article's initial section outlines Simondon's transductive philosophy alongside its most recent modifications; informed by these interventions the article's middle section launches a case study of Barney's work so as to crystallize conclusions making up the third section.

I SIMONDON'S PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSDUCTIVE INDIVIDUATION

In his main thesis for the *Doctorat d'État*, Simondon (*Individuation* 1–13) rejects both the monism of (atomistic) substantialism and the bipolarity of hylomorphism: both schemas seek to account for individuation taking the already constituted individual being, separate from its milieu, as the model,

and thus favour static being over becoming. Both posit a prior principle of individuation that subsequently produces and accounts for individuation itself, obscuring the operation of individuation and its complex reality of becoming. Monistic substantialism posits “the being as consisting in its unity, given to itself, founded on itself, not engendered and as resistant to what is not itself,” whereas bipolar hylomorphism construes “the individual as generated by the encounter of a form and a matter” (1). Both, therefore, fall back on previously constituted, individuated terms, affirming the fundamental laws of classical logic: the *principle of identity* [i.e. $A = A$] and the *principle excluded middle* [i.e. either/or] (13). Simondon proposes a radical new way to think individuation through his notion of *transduction*.

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Transduction designates a structuring, individuating operation paradigmatically exemplified by the process of crystallization starting from a crystalline germ inserted into the amorphous milieu of a supersaturated solution. The crystalline seed grows, extending in all directions whereby “each previously constituted molecular layer serves as the structuring basis for the layer in the process of forming,” this results in “an amplifying reticular structure” (ibid.). Simondon extends the notion of transduction beyond this simple image of iterative progression occurring on the microphysical, molecular level.

In the expanded sense, transduction designates “a physical, biological, mental, or social operation through which an activity propagates incrementally within a domain by basing this propagation on a structuration of the domain operated from one region to another: each structural region serves as a principle and model, as an initiator for constituting the following region” (ibid.). Simondon is careful, however, not to formulate a generalized teleological paradigm of individuation. The actual mode and complexity of transductive individuation differs according to the specific domain. If the genesis of a crystalline form consists in progressive iteration occurring at its limit and is completed instantly, vital, psychic and psychosocial individuation occur at variable pace, and varying levels of heterogeneity (7–8).

What makes transductive operation possible is the energetic condition of metastability, i.e. a state of tension between disparate reals (the crystalline seed and the amorphous supersaturated solution, as in the case of crystal genesis) whose incompatibility is rich in potential. Individuation resolves this metastable equilibrium—this phase-less *pre-individual* being (4–7, 15); it corresponds to *ontogenesis*, i.e. “the being’s becoming” (4). Cybernetically speaking, the tension of the metastable system constitutes information. Information is not a pre-existing term but *internal resonance* (7–8) establishing a communication (“mediation”) between heterogenous orders of magnitude (6, 11).

What is at stake in individuation is a split: the articulation of distinct phases and phase-shift (see 360–61). Individuation grasped as the being's becoming corresponds to its “capacity to phase-shift with respect to itself, to resolve itself by phase-shifting; . . . [to] *the appearance of phases in the being that are the phases of the being*” (4, emphasis in the original). Being does not have “a unity of identity” but a “*transductive unity*, . . . it can overflow itself on both sides from *its center*” (12). The (living) individual is not only “the *result* but also the *milieu of individuation*” (361); it is multiple in the sense that it constitutes “a provisional solution, a phase of becoming that will lead to new operation” (ibid.). Individuation is a passage from the pre-individual to the individual, from the phase-less to the phasic. At the same time, it is only retrospectively—after individuation—that the pre-individual becomes a phase, for individuation also corresponds to the creation of temporality, of a past (ibid.). The individuated being is not stable or self-enclosed. The individual is relative: the being has still not exhausted its potential for change; it remains a problematic relay (3–4, 360–61), preserving a “consistency swarming with *tensions* and *potentials* that made it incompatible with itself” (361). In fact, Simondon (360; see also 7) refers to a “*persistence of the pre-individual phase*; . . . [the] *monophasic*; . . . parallel to . . . the individuated being” (360); since it necessarily harbours the *monophasic*, the individual is always already *polyphasic*. Since the living being carries with it this “associated charge of [the] pre-individual” (8), it does not merely constitute “a result of individuation, like the crystal or molecule, but a theatre of individuation” (7), “the theatre of a relational activity that is perpetuated in it” (54). Such theory of the individual underpins the Deleuzoguattarian (*A Thousand Plateaus* 249) philosophy of multiplicity where “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities,” theorizing a passage between the virtual and the actual.

Individuation can also be understood on the energetic level as a passage from the potential energy to its actualization (Simondon, *Individuation* 6). This corresponds to the technological notion of a *transducer* elaborated in Simondon's secondary thesis for the *Doctorat d'État*. A transducer mediates between potential energy and actual energy, bringing the former to actualization (Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence* 155–56). Neither on the side of stored energy, nor on the side of actual energy, it is a *modulator* which intervenes as information; information is the necessary condition of actualization. Both technical objects, such as triodes, and living beings are transducers (ibid.), while art itself is bestowed with the power to “render transductive, giving a localized and fulfilled reality the power to pass to other places and other moments” (211).

Transduction is not merely a theory of accounting for physical, vital, psychic and collective individuation because then it would be tantamount

to a principle of individuation prior and external to its emergent terms; rather, it is a philosophy inviting us to think, to identify problems stating from an intuition, to encourage invention (Simondon, *Individuation* 14). Therefore, transduction is a “notion [that] can be used to think the different domains of individuation”; it is a *mental*, and not logical in the classical sense, “analogical operation” (ibid.) corresponding to “a discovery of dimensions whose system makes those of each of the terms communicate” (ibid.). Transduction “expresses individuation and allows for individuation to be thought; it is therefore a notion that is both metaphysical and logical; it *applies to ontogenesis and is ontogenesis itself*” (ibid.).

The present article follows an intuitive, transductive approach to the discovery of Barney’s *Redoubt* as an emergent system whose multiple dimensions enter intricate modes of communication. In order to account for the complexity of Barney’s project, I will mobilize insights not only from Simondon but also from Deleuze/Guattari and Hui, which will serve to diagram the specific constellation of relations that *Redoubt* sets up between the cosmotechnics of hunting, art-making, metallurgy and hoop dancing.

C(HA)OSMOTECNICS: A BECOMING-COSMIC OF SIMONDON’S TRANSDUCTIVE PHILOSOPHY

Simondon’s transductive account of individuation and the method of analogical transduction is taken over, and radicalized, by Deleuze/Guattari, as well as Hui.³ Both perform a cosmicization, or a becoming-cosmic, of Simondon’s philosophy (see Przedpełski, “Steppe C(ha)osmotechnics” 118). Hui expands Simondon’s notion of the individual’s associated milieu, which he had extended to the analysis of technical objects in his secondary *Doctorat d’État*, to include its “*cosmic a priori*” (“On Cosmotechnics” 11). In *Recursivity and Contingency*, Hui seeks to decolonize an essentialist Eurocentric philosophy of technics “by resituating technologies in *their* genesis, which means to resituate technologies in various cosmic realities” (278). Hui’s fundamental concept of *cosmotechnics* designates “the

³ I shall not consider here influential interventions into Simondon’s philosophy proposed by Bernard Stiegler. While his rethinking of the role of technology in the psychic and collective individuation of hyper-industrialized Western societies remains important (see Bluemink), it nonetheless glosses over the cosmic, and cosmological, dimension of technology thematized by Hui and already implicit in the Deleuzoguattarian reading. Furthermore, the universalizing thrust of Stiegler’s work lacks any decolonial commitment, uncritically drawing on Max Weber’s diagnoses (the notion of “re-enchantment”), which themselves need to be decolonized.

unification of moral and cosmic order through technical activities" (29). If technics is always already situated in a particular cosmology, then there are many cosmotechnics.

Deleuze and Guattari extend the pre-individual to the whole naturalcultural continuum, opening Simondonian transductive account of individuation to the forces of the cosmos. They are concerned with "pure matter, a phenomenon of physical, biological, psychic, social, or cosmic matter" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 165). However, unlike Hui, who focuses on the cosmic order, paradigmatically exemplified by Chinese moral cosmology, Deleuze and Guattari (*What Is Philosophy?* 204) follow James Joyce in conceiving of the cosmos as suffused with chaos—as *chaosmos*. Individuated systems ("territorial assemblages") are chaotic, bounded by and integrating a chaotic unground; they tend towards the absolute deterritorialization of the chaotic, eccentric earth as their limit-point (*A Thousand Plateaus* 509–10), which constitutes their "cutting edges of . . . deterritorialization" (510). The corresponding Deleuzoguattarian notion of the *machinic phylum*—fundamentally diagrammed by metals and the Eurasian Great Steppe Iron and Bronze Age nomadism and metallurgy (411)—is framed as both (1) a determinate, historical "technological lineage" (406), i.e. on the level of individuated technical objects, an approach expressly taken over from Simondon (562 n. 91; see Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence* 26), and (2) as "a continuum that is the conjunction of the set of all deterritorialization processes" (Guattari 380), in other words "a transductive machinic *chain*" that gives rise to new subjectivities (375). I have developed the notion of *c(ha)osmotechnics* to capture the relation between cosmos, chaosmos and technics at play in the machinic phylum (see Przedpełski, "Steppe C(ha)osmotechnics" 114–22, 144 n. 8; "Chaosmotechnics?").

In turn, echoing Simondon's conception of art as a transducer, Deleuze and Guattari put forward an understanding of art as techniques of elaborating a deterritorialized, molecular material capable of "harness[ing] . . . forces of the cosmos" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 342), or "capturing . . . a bit of chaos in a frame in order to form a composed chaos that becomes sensory" (*What Is Philosophy?* 206). Here Simondon's (*Individuation* 88, 93) understanding of the structuring, integrating operation performed by a crystalline germ in the amorphous milieu of a supersaturated solution as the capture of potential energy is transposed to the chaotic dimension. Deleuze and Guattari understand Simondon's *associated milieu* as "defined by the capture of energy sources" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 51). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, this problematic is linked to the Deleuzoguattarian interest in the conjunction of deterritorialization processes aimed at warding off the proto-State and its proto-capitalist axiomatics. In this respect, they are

interested in the invention of nomadism on the Great Steppe, the Early Iron Age steppe metallurgy and the associated invention of metallic technical objects such as harness, stirrup (404), or even ornamental fibula (401), capable of performing sophisticated forms of capture of forces. In particular, nomadism and its associated inventions prompt a rethinking of the distinction between tools and weapons (see 395–403).

A subset of this problematic is the distinction between the hunt and war (395–96). Here Deleuze and Guattari read Paul Virilio through Simondon. The sedentary hunt, based upon the dualistic hunter/prey relation, operates by brute “blow-by-blow violence,” done “once and for all”; the hunter aims at “arresting the movement of wild animality through systematic slaughter,” while nomadic war machine—as exemplified by animal breeding and training, and, paradigmatically, horseback riding—entails a “becoming-animal,” in the sense that institutes a whole “economy of violence,” aimed at “captur[ing] the force of the *hunted* animal” (396). The difference here lies in the energetic regime: hunt exhausts the energy of the prey, ends in entropy, aims at hunting down, and killing, the animal and eating its flesh. In contrast, the war machine aims at “conserv[ing] the kinetic energy, the speed . . . , the motor” of the animal (Virilio qtd. in *ibid.*). As Virilio (*ibid.*) further explains, “the animal breeder [sets about] conserving [the movement of wild animality], and, by means of training, the rider joins with this movement, orienting it and provoking its acceleration.”

Deleuze and Guattari here reprise Simondon’s philosophy. Tools and weapons, alongside their corresponding operations of the hunt and war, are not mere technical objects but encapsulate two distinct modes of individuation (two modes of assembling *machinic phylum*, to use the Deleuzoguattarian concept)—the difference being their associated milieu, i.e. their respective energetic conditions. As Deleuze and Guattari (395) point out, both effect actions at a distance. However, tools are introceptive and introjective, their mode of action: centripetal, concerned with “preparing a matter from a distance, in order to bring it to a state of equilibrium or to appropriate it for a form of interiority” (395). Associated with the nomadic war machine, weapons are in turn fundamentally projective and ballistic, “a projecting and projectile system,” their mode of action: centrifugal (395–96). Tools preserve equilibrium and are related to resistance—weapons break equilibrium and usher in counterattack. They mobilize different passional regimes: introceptive tools are feelings directed at constituted subjects, implying “an always displaced, retarded, resisting emotion,” whereas weapons are affects, “the active discharge of emotion,” framed as counterattack, “relat[ing] only to the moving body in itself, to speeds and compositions of speed among elements” (400). In the hunt, speed is subordinated to the movement of the hunted animal whereas

the war machine launches the free vector of pure speed, an “independent variable” (396). Finally, the hunt is based on the model of the prey, in the sense that the hunted is subordinated to the hunter, while the war machine entails a becoming, the warrior “borrows from [their prey] . . . the idea of the motor, applying it to himself” (ibid.). The distinction between the tools of hunt and the weapons of the war machine recalls Simondon’s distinction between the microphysical individuation of crystals, which is abrupt and happens all at once, and vital individuation, which conserves within it its own associated milieu—its own energetic condition that makes possible its ongoing becoming. For the purposes of the article, in recognition of the fundamental importance of the concept of the hunt in Barney’s *Redoubt*, I shall reframe those two modes of individuation as follows: (1) *substantialised, extensive hunt/capture* operating on the level of the constituted individuals and the stable self/other opposition, whose mode of action consists in performing static exclusion based on this bipolarity, and (2) *transductive, intensive hunt/capture* operating transversally on a metastable, molecular level, whose mode of action consists in performing non-exhaustive dynamic capture of energetic potentials. Barney’s project revolves around the Ovidian problem of metamorphoses reposed both as an encounter and a violent confrontation between those two fundamental modes of liaison of the machinic phylum. As we shall see, through its invocation of animal hunting, art-making, electroplating and comparative mythology, unleashing multiple modes of the hunt—conceptual, filmic and metallurgical—*Redoubt* affirms art as the veritable Simondonian “theatre of a relational activity that is perpetuated in it” (*Individuation* 54).

II COUNTERATTACK: *REDOUBT* AS AN INTENSIVE CAPTURE OF SUBSTANTIALISM

Redoubt is a personal project for Barney (b.1967), who was born in San Francisco but grew up in Boise, Idaho, and as a teenager was captivated by the “mythological quality” (qtd. in Franks 12) of the heated debates surrounding the reintroduction of the near-extinct grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) in the central Idaho wilderness. The population was declared an endangered species in 1974 but it was not until 1995 that thirty-one wolves were reintroduced into the central Idaho wilderness as part of the wolf recovery programme. Due to the swift growth of its population, the species was subsequently delisted, and wolf hunting resumed in 2009 (ibid.). As Barney explains, the eponymous *Redoubt* refers not only to the military fortification and the psychological act of keeping something out

but also to the American Redoubt (17). The latter designates an American survivalist, and separatist, movement which encourages people with religious convictions to emigrate to Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. It is a version of the preppers' movement with far-right overtones. Barney's overarching theme of redoubt might therefore be considered a conceptual figure of staking out a territory with a view to keep its threatening outside at bay, corresponding to a view of individuation based on the principle of monistic substantialism as outlined by Simondon. Simondon emphatically puts forward his transductive theory of individuation understood as "the being grasped in its centre according to spatiality and becoming, and not with a substantialized *individual* facing a *world* that is foreign to it" (*Individuation* 11). Symptomatically, a playbill accompanying the latest instalment of the *Redoubt* project—a 2021 collaborative intermedia performance at Schaulager, Basel—situates it vis-a-vis the substantialism at play in the idea of the American West. The playbill includes a quote from cultural critic Richard Slotkin (qtd. in Barney and Bepler) making an explicit reference to the constitutive ethos of violent conquest founded upon the opposition between civilization and wilderness underpinning the idea of the American Frontier:

In American mythogenesis, the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who . . . tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness. . . . The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.

Resonating with Simondon's philosophical endeavour, Barney's artistic project seeks to provide alternative ways of individuation, ones capable of countering the militant substantialism of the (American) Redoubt. It goes beyond the unitary understanding of technics as subordinate to the mission of conquest and control, and instead unfolds a panoply of mutually resonating, and competing, technics and their associated cosmologies. There is an intricate system that develops between the cosmotechnics of (1) sharpshooting and animal hunting, diagrammed by the film's character of Diana; (2) copper plate etching and, in general, fine art-making, diagrammed by the figure of Engraver; (3) electroplating copper plates in an electrochemical solution—a metallurgical practice recalling Simondon's interest in the genesis of crystalline forms—diagrammed by the film plot's character of Electroplater; and (4) Indigenous Bigstone Cree Nation hoop dancing, diagrammed in the film by the figure of Hoop Dancer. Barney's

work is concerned with finding ways of transversal, intensive and molecular metamorphosis beyond extensive transformation. However, *Redoubt* is far more radical than a mere survey of various modes of individuation and their cosmotechnics, confluent with the philosophical project of Yuk Hui. It sets up a charged field, articulates a whole world, between the pole of Redoubt and the pole of Reintroduction, as if between the anode and the cathode of a system. As diagrammed by Diana, substantialist individuation and extensive hunting—quintessentially linked to white settler colonialism—is set in opposition to the molecular transformations invoked by the intricate choreography of Indigenous hoop dancing. What intervenes in-between as a modulator is the mode of art-making and electroplating, both channeling the pan-metallic conductivity of the Deleuzoguattarian machinic phylum, symptomatically conceived as a “subterranean thread” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 407). As shall be shown, Electroplater’s trailer is a point of convergence for the film’s characters, figuratively corresponding to the molecular dance of cosmic milieus unfolded and catalyzed by Hoop Dancer. In the film’s final scene, the trailer’s enclosure will become a Möbius strip of topological transformation Redoubt/Reintroduction where the site connoting the cabin fever of the American Redoubt will turn into the radically open locus of Reintroduction, ushering in a new post-Anthropocentric world where the unleashed grey wolves roam free and chaos reigns supreme. The *Redoubt* project therefore not only dramatizes transduction, constituting a Simondonian “theatre of individuation” (*Individuation* 7) but also performs the Deleuzoguattarian moment of a chaosmic ungrounding of territorialized assemblages. Disparate associated milieus resonate with one another, and co-constitute themselves, but at the same time they tend towards their chaosmic limit. Here the Earth displaces itself in the eccentric movement of absolute deterritorialization, becomes extra-terrestrial amidst a solar eclipse, one that, one may speculate, will make the new Lupus constellation appear in the sky.

CRYSTALLINE GERM TO COMPLEX SYSTEM: *REDOUBT* AS A THEATRE OF INDIVIDUATION

As was already indicated, Barney’s expansive artwork unfolds a whole system, as if trying to construct a full-scale model of interlocking ecologies of the Sawtooth Valley. Its astounding complexity of dynamic forms, of media, of processes, of site-specific interventions reframes the question of metamorphosis in terms of different modes of the hunt. Through this world-building exercise, substantialism is decentred in favour of a molecular hunt: the transversal mode of capture and transformation of

forces, which in turn catalyzes a becoming-chaosmic of the Earth itself. However, for all its heterogeneity, the *Redoubt* project crystallizes around a single key point, namely, a 134-minute eponymous wordless feature film (2018) narrating a multi-layered, bifurcating, polyvocal story of a wolf hunt set in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains. The Sawtooth range functions as a mobile frame within the narrative, oscillating between its role as a figure and a (back)ground. It is also what makes the actions of all the film's characters possible, in this sense it is the energetic condition of their individuation, their associated milieu.

Barney's feature film might be called a *filmic hunt*, since as a medium it performs the capture of time in the resonant and sticky "skin of the film,"⁴ to riff off media scholar Laura U. Marks. *Redoubt's* filmic hunt in turn acts as a catalyst for three distinctive machinic phyla of artworks: *conceptual hunts*, *metallurgical hunts*, and *performative-sonorous hunts*, respectively.

The film is accompanied by an artist-conceived catalogue (see Barney et al.) featuring an overview of the project, as well as six commissioned essays comprehensively unpacking different aspects of both Barney's artwork and the Idaho wilderness that has inspired it. The essays tackle domains such as topographical maps, mythology, electrochemistry, wildlife ecology, choreography, and visual studies. These *conceptual hunts*, or *concept-works*, respond to the six Hunts that constitute the plot of Barney's feature film.

Completing the project are: (1) a series of copper etchings, and (2) copper-electroplated copper plates (2018); as well as (3) large-scale sculptures (including "burns" such as *Elk Creek Burn* and *Basin Creek Burn*, both 2018). The sculptures were produced by pouring molten brass and copper into the hollowed trunks of fallen 11-metre lodgepole pine trees harvested from a burnt Idaho forest (see Franks for an overview of *Redoubt*). Given that brass is itself an alloy of copper and zinc, one can say that there are copper veins, or copper phyla, running across this particular body of work—these are bifurcating *metallurgical hunts*, or *metallurgical artworks*.

The *Redoubt* project was first exhibited at Yale University Art Gallery in 2019, followed by its ambitious re-arrangement at UCCA, Beijing, later in the same year, harnessing the potential offered by the gallery's vast, hangar-like space; and London's Hayward Gallery, in 2021. This exhibition, too, included a site-specific element: Barney installed one of his ten-metre

⁴ As Marks explains, the eponymous *Skin of the Film* "suggest[s] polemically that film . . . may be thought of as impressionable and conductive, like skin. . . . I want to emphasize the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we viewers brush up against like another body. The words *contact*, *contingent*, and *contagion* all share the Latin root *contingere*, 'to have contact with; pollute; befall'" (xi–xii). As I see it, the semantic field of *contingere* can be deterritorialized and stretched to signify a hunt involving a trap or a lure.

sculptures on one of the gallery's terraces, thus deterritorializing the Hayward's concrete Brutalist bunker-like architecture. The opening of Barney's London show had originally been scheduled for 2020 but was postponed due to COVID-19.

The latest extension of the *Redoubt* project is *Catasterism in Three Movements* (2021). This Gesamtkunstwerk intermedia performance was commissioned by Basel's Laurenz Foundation specifically for their signature Schaulager combined art museum, research and archive space, and developed by Barney in collaboration with music composer and director Jonathan Bepler. *Catasterism* was performed daily over four days in September 2021; it invited audiences to an installation of *Redoubt's* metallurgical artworks, a concert by Basil Sinfonietta playing Bepler's orchestral suite, as well as carefully choreographed performances reprising the role of Diana (performed by Jill Bettonvil), Electroplater (K. J. Holmes) and Hoop Dancer (Sandra Lamouche), the characters who appear in Barney 2018 film. *Catasterism in Three Movements* might be designated a *performative-sonorous hunt*.

Starting from the crystalline seed of the 2018 film, *Redoubt* has therefore expanded into a complex system. It has become an ever-expanding and self-transforming body of work, setting up resonances between its many constituent levels. Let me now unpack *Redoubt's* constituent dimensions, its machinic phyla.

FILMIC HUNT'S: ISOLATION—COUPLING—FORCED MOVEMENT

The film comprises an introduction and six parts, called "Hunts." As Barney explains (qtd. in Franks 14), six days constitutes the minimal time to track down wolves. *Redoubt* tracks movements and mutual entanglements of a constellation of six characters, setting up an intricate field of echoes, intercut with shots documenting the trajectories of grey wolves, birds of prey, beavers, elk and mule deer, as well as (extreme) wide shots of the Sawtooth Mountains scenery. For all its many characters, *Redoubt* is fundamentally a series of immobile *shots*. The camera frames a moving object without ever moving itself, functioning as a sniper rifle sights zooming in on a target, which thematizes the hunt's asymmetrical hunter/prey relation—as elucidated by Virilio and Deleuze/Guattari. One can say that these static shots are *introceptive*, i.e. as Deleuze and Guattari explain, "prepare a matter from a distance, in order to bring it to a state of equilibrium or to appropriate it for a form of interiority" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 395). In fact, some of the shots feature a crosshair reticule or the

field of view of a pair of binoculars. (This idea of the extensive capture of movement is emblemized in *Redoubt*'s more recent extension, the *Catasterism in Three Movements* [2021] live intermedia performance at Basel's Schaulager art space, as a block of cast ballistic gelatine which holds a bullet in suspension, indexing its trajectory and impact.)

The film's six characters—Diana, Tracking Virgin, Calling Virgin; Engraver, Electroplater, Hoop Dancer—form smaller clusters, or relays, made up of three characters. Each of these triptychs, let's call them "Series A" and "Series B," respectively, institutes its own internal rhythm. These two previously separate rhythms subsequently become coupled only to be swept away in the forced eccentric movement of the chaotic Earth in the film's final scene. Barney's treatment of *Redoubt*'s filmic figures resonates with Deleuze's 1981 case study of the figural paintings of Francis Bacon analyzed in terms of Simondon's transductive individuation. The eponymous *Logic of Sensation*, paradigmatically at play in Bacon's triptychs, begins with the vibration of a single motif (*force of isolation*; see Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 84), amplified through the coupling of figures in a single painting (*force of coupling*; *ibid.*); such resonance is then swept away by the rhythmic figure composed by the triptych (*forced movement*; 73), ushering the vortical force of non-human time correlated with the phenomena of metallic lustre (160–61).

Redoubt's first triad, *Series A*, is composed of the huntress Diana portrayed as a sharp-shooter (played by Diane Wachter) on the hunt for the grey wolf, pursuing the linear trajectory of equipment set-up (Introduction), tracking (Hunts 1–4) and target capture (Hunt 6). Diana is accompanied by Tracking Virgin (Laura Stokes) and Calling Virgin (Eleanor Bauer). These are two dancers whose elaborate, constrained movements echo one another as well as their surroundings, and anticipate key plot elements. The Virgins function *in relation to one another* as a "coupled motif," to borrow a term from Deleuze's case study (*Francis Bacon* 65), performing a contact improvisation in the present. However, *in relation to key plot elements*, the *actual* key events, the Virgins form a *virtual* past-future circuit, either responding to *what has just happened* or anticipating *what is about to happen*. Within this relay of Tracking-Calling Forth, the Tracking Virgin has the ability to emulate movements of animals and Diana (one might call it the gift of embodiment, of sympathetic magic), while Calling Virgin possesses the ability to speak animal language: when she utters a howl, it is promptly answered by a wolf pack (the gift of incantation, of divinatory magic). Not only is the Virgins' choreography attuned to zoosemiotics, but their movements also amplify the spatial features of the immediate environment (*contiguity in relation to the milieu*).

The film's second relay, *Series B*, is composed around the daily routine of the Engraver (played by Barney himself), a US forest service ranger

who each day sets off to document the Sawtooth Valley and key moments in the plot through engravings on copper plates (Introduction, Hunts 1–4). Come evening he presents the spoils of his artistic hunt, the etched plates, to the Electroplater (K. J. Holmes), whose trailer houses a mobile electroplating lab. Electroplater then proceeds to dip the copper plates in an electrolytic bath, a solution of copper sulphate (which the alchemists referred to as the “blue vitriol”) and sulphuric acid. A current of electricity launched across the electrolyte causes accretions of copper to form over the plate’s drypoint lines (this process is called *electroplating*).

During one of his daily surveying missions, Electroplater stumbles upon a bloodied elk carcass and promptly installs a camera trap (Hunt 1) to visually identify the predator. The very next day (Hunt 2) the camera trap’s movement sensor registers an image of Diana, who had just discovered the carcass. This visual capture of Diana’s sight via an AI algorithm, a contemporary retelling of Acteon’s accidental intrusion, propels Engraver to stalk Diana and her helpers in order to capture their activities on copper plates grounded with the black layer of asphalt (Hunts 3–5). This complicates the plot, staging the resonance between the hitherto separate relays: *Series A* and *Series B*.

Once Diana catches sight of Engraver, in the process of engraving a cougar perched up on a high tree branch (the copper relief *Cougar in Bearing Tree*, which is also featured as part of the *Redoubt* exhibition), the two figures become engaged in a confrontation progressively increasing in intensity (Hunts 3-4). Locked in this duel, Diana dreams about hitting Engraver’s plate (Hunt 3), and ultimately accomplishes that in Hunt 4. Engraver’s actions, in turn, become even more voyeuristic, documenting nocturnal activities at Diana’s camp at close range (Hunt 4). The convergence characterizing the now open war raging between Diana and Engraver is emblemized by *Cougar in Bearing Tree*; only upper half of this vertical plate, depicting the cougar perched up on a tree, is coated with asphalt, the bottom one is a zone of exposed copper.

Hunt 5 deterritorializes the very idea of a linear plot. Engraver takes a detour from his usual route and drives into a small town. Inside an American Legion hall, he encounters Hoop Dancer played by Sandra Lamouche (Bigstone Cree Nation). Hoop Dancer is wrapping bands of coloured tape around plastic hoops and subsequently performs an intricate choreography, during which the hoops are gradually combined together. The hoop dance resonates with the statue of Nataraja, i.e. a depiction of Lord Shiva as the cosmic dancer, standing at the entrance to CERN, the world’s largest particle physics laboratory located in Geneva. The statue links the figure of Shiva, believed to have danced the universe into existence, to the play of subatomic particles. Similarly, in its radical transversality the

hoop dance ex-poses the series *A* and *B* to a cosmic order of magnitude. As will be shown, the dance acts as a triangulating, problematic, silent catalyst that propels the-yet-to-come.

In the climactic Hunt 6, Diana finally targets and kills a grey wolf, which prompts a solar eclipse. In the eye of this cataclysm, a pack of wolves now enact revenge by sacking Electroplater's trailer while Electroplater herself has ventured outside performing a choreography recalling the arched body of the wounded wolf corresponding to the Lupus constellation. A new post-Anthropocentric era has begun.

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FILMIC AND PERFORMATIVE-SONOROUS HUNTS: DRAMA OF TRANSDUCTION

Redoubt's plot can be broken down into a number of distinct phases recalling Simondon's transductive account of individuation as a passage from the pre-individual, metastable, phase-less real to the phase-locked reality, entailing the intermediate level of information, which establishes a mediation between the heterogeneous orders of magnitude initially without communication. Accordingly, Hunt 3 marks a convergence, Hunt 4—mutual resonance, and Hunt 5—problematization of *Series A* and *Series B*. The intensifying complication of Hunt 5 prepares the ground for the cosmic eclipse in the climactic Hunt 6. Interestingly, Hunt 5 functions like a *catastasis* in ancient Greek dramatic theory, whereas Hunt 6 can be considered a *catastrofhe*.

In fact, Barney explicitly uses the term “catastasis” to designate the final part of *Catasterism in Three Movements*—his live 2021 Gesamtkunstwerk performance developed in collaboration with music composer and director Jonathan Bepler. As Barney and Bepler explain, *catastasis* signifies “the dramatic complication immediately preceding the climax of a drama.” The complex system of *Catasterism* launches a communication between the following four distinct orders of magnitude: (1) a performance by three characters from the *Redoubt* 2018 feature film (Diana, Electroplater, Hoop Dancer); (2) a selection of *Redoubt*'s associated artworks (a series of four 2018 copper-electroplated copper plate reliefs in copper frames titled *Diana: State one* through to *Diana: State four*; as well as the *Elk Creek Burn* monumental sculpture from 2018 made from a hollowed-out lodgepole pine traversed by the machinic phylum of cast copper, brass and lead on a stand made from polycaprolactone—a biodegradable polymer), as well as (3) Bepler's orchestral suite performed by Basel Sinfonietta, and (4) the invited audiences. During *Catasterism*, the performers, the orchestra musicians, as well as the audience come to occupy the three floors of

Schaulager's granary-like interior to varying degrees and in different spatial arrangements and modes of distribution. *Catasterism's* eponymous three movements respectively correspond to:

(1) "Part 1: Cadastre," which sees the initial isolation of performers, audiences and musicians within their respective group and in relation to other groups;

(2) "Part 2: Catasterism Suite (for Orchestra with Sculpture)," which sees the intermediate concentration of the audience and Basel Sinfonietta playing in orchestral formation in a custom-built concert hall, converging on the opposite sides of the centrally-positioned *Elk Creek Burn*; the situation recalls an intimate gathering around the campfire; and

(3) "Part 3: Catastasis," which finally sees the musicians gently surrounding small audience groups, artworks and performers, roaming freely across all of Schaulager's four floors; the situation is suggestive of hunter-gatherers (see Schaulager for the overview of the performance).

This intricate tripartite structure dramatizes metamorphosis as a mediation between three distinct levels:

(1) the individual mode of surveying land, as suggested by the name of Part 1. As Barney and Bepler explain, the eponymous *cadastre* refers to "a comprehensive land recording. A cadastral parcel is defined as a continuous area identified by a unique set of homogeneous property rights." The cadastral regime is re-enacted on the level of live performance: all three performers measure and survey the gallery space with various technical devices. Also, the music assumes a cadastral character: it is composed from isolated sequences of individual notes.

(2) the mode of coupling and concentration calling forth a metamorphosis. In this respect, Part 2 is aptly titled "Catasterism," which, as Barney and Bepler elucidate (*ibid.*), designates "the process by which a hero is turned into a constellation or celestial object; a placing among the stars." This is a mode of ritual incantation and conjuration, amplified by the musical score now assuming lavish, abundant quality of opulence, a drastic change from the sparse notes of Part 1.

(3) the mode of mediation across heterogenous levels, associated with the dramatical concept of *catastasis*, i.e. "the dramatic complication immediately preceding the climax of a drama" (*ibid.*). According to the mode of complication, the performers now dance together. Hoop Dancer performs her dance—Diana performs repeated gestures with her rifle. Electroplater mediates between the two, integrating these oppositional gestural regimes into her own choreography.

Catasterism's three movements give rise to three conceptual figures. To paraphrase Simondon, they perform "individuation and allow for individuation to be thought" (*Individuation* 14). Accordingly, cadastrality corresponds to

the sedentary regime of hunt and its tools, as understood by Deleuze/Guattari and Virilio. It also affirms substantialism at play in the logic of the American Frontier. In turn, the opaque, enigmatic mode of catasterism corresponds to processes of gestation in a metastable milieu, rich in potential. Finally, Electroplater's performance in the third part corresponds to the modulatory action of transducer, and to transduction itself as a communication between disparate levels. What is more, taken as a permutational series "Cadastre—Catasterism—Catastasis," *Catasterism* affirms the Deleuzian trifold typology of forces animating the paintings of Francis Bacon: "Isolation—Coupling—Forced Movement." Interestingly, Deleuze's logic of sensation is in itself a transposition of Simondon's transductive account of individuation, expressed as the series "Pre-individual Metastability—Information/Internal Resonance—Individuation," to the domain of aesthetics.

In this way, Schaulager has become a Simondonian (*Individuation* 54) "theatre of relational activity," a machinic phylum prolonging the ongoing activity of individuation that had started in 2018 with *Redoubt*. In an act akin to alchemical distillation, *Redoubt*'s six hunts and six protagonists have undergone a catasterism: they have now become individuated as three movements and three characters. This has a political and decolonial significance: *Catasterism* performs a ritualistic undoing of the progress of white settler colonization.

CHAOSMIC HOOP DANCE: CATASTERISM OF A BASE PLATE CONDUCTOR

Electroplater and Hoop Dancer are fundamental to the functioning of the universe of *Redoubt*, and yet they elude thought, and cannot be subsumed into a single conceptual figure. In what follows, I am going to home in on the relation between electroplating and hoop dancing in order to tease out the complex material and conceptual transformations animating the very heart of Barney's ongoing project.

In the final choreographical sequence of *Catasterism*, Electroplater mimics and modifies the movements of Hoop Dancer, thereby seemingly suggesting a communication between the microphysical, molecular transduction, emblemized by the process of crystallization, and the transversal cosmic dance of subatomic particles, or order of magnitudes, of milieus unfolded by Hoop Dancer. This corresponds to Simondon's understanding of vital individuation, as exemplified by a plant, as "a mediation between a cosmic order and an infra-molecular order, storing and distributing the chemical natures contained in the soil and in the atmosphere by means of the luminous energy received in photosynthesis" (*Individuation* 384 n. 16).

On the other hand, the figure of Hoop Dancer has a reciprocal and complementary relation to Electroplater. Hoop Dance performs ontogenesis in its double dimension of being and of thinking; it at once unfolds transduction and its thought. As Sandra Lamouche, a Nehiyaw Iskwew (Cree Woman) from the Bigstone Cree Nation in Northern Alberta who performed the role of Hoop Dancer, explains,

The hoops on the other hand represent continuity—constant movement and constant change. Because the hoop dance creates different understandings the more it is performed and viewed, it becomes a symbol of infinite wisdom, and this is evident in the shape of the hoop itself, a shape with no beginning and no end . . .

Lamouche shows that an iterative ungrounding is the fundamental movement of the cosmos. Hoop Dance displaces a simple understanding of Electroplater. Electroplater can no longer be thought of as solely on the side of microphysical, molecular individuation at play in electroplating. It is rather that this metallurgic individuation actualizes a vast cosmos. It is as if a grounded metal plate processed in Electroplater's trailer has now become connected to the cosmic unground, echoing the Deleuzoguattarian gesture of linking the machinic phylum, fundamentally metallic and metallurgical, to the absolute deterritorialization of chaotic Earth. As will be shown, the Hoop Dance functions as *Redoubt's* catalyst for the becoming-cosmic of transduction.

Of course, taken at its most rudimentary, microphysical level, electroplating is already transduction *parexcellence*, evoking the individuation of crystal forms in a supersaturated solution. As Elisabeth Hodermarsky explains, in parallel to the shooting of *Redoubt* Barney produced and electroplated engravings documenting key moments in the plot (140). The process entails the following steps: a copper plate is first grounded in black asphalt; engraver's incisions remove portions of this grounding, revealing areas of exposed copper. Thus prepared plate subsequently undergoes the process of electroplating. It is suspended in a tank filled with a deep blue electrolytic solution. The engraved copper plate, the cathode, is wired to the negative pole of the power source whereas the anode, a bar of impure copper suspended in the solution as well, is connected to its positive pole. Then, "a direct current (DC) of electricity," explains Hodermarsky, "is passed through the anode (copper bar) into the solution, splitting up some of the metal ions and depositing them onto the cathode (copper plate)" (143). Deposited copper ions form accretions over the exposed metal ion. Barney, who plays the role of Engraver in the film, has developed an experimental electroplating process which allowed him to modify different parameters of

the copper plate's metastable milieu: temperature, electric current, duration of exposure, anode placement, use of filter to remove foreign particles, use of leveller to ensure even crystal growth, varied spatial use of grounding (via asphalt coating, or a stop-off plastic mask) (see Hodermarsky 143–44 for a detailed description of these material processes). Barney produced eight engravings in total during the shooting of *Redoubt* in 2018: *Redoubt: Base Plate Conductor*, *Bayhorse*, *Cougar in Bearing Tree*, *Diana*, *Kill Site*, *Bivouac*, *Reintroduction* and *Sawtooth*. All of them except for *Base Plate Conductor* were digitally scanned and copied by a mechanical laser metal engraving machine. Each digitally scanned engraving has been replicated a number of times, thus becoming a structural germ initiating a new series. All identical copies deriving from a single engraving were subsequently electroplated but under different, progressively modified conditions in the electroplating tank. This led Barney (Hodermarsky 142) to call each plate in the series “a state.” The artist discovered that progressively increasing the amperage, placing the anode at close range and removing the leveller makes the electroplating process reach a certain threshold of intensity, upon whose crossing crystal incrustation accelerates considerably, making the growth of copper nodules uneven and unpredictable (see 144–45). For example, the *Reintroduction* series—depicting a grey wolf amongst the trees captured at close distance—demonstrates a dramatic progression of crystal incrustation which gradually obliterates the image. In *Reintroduction: State four*, the portion of the incrustation that has accumulated over the engraving's central motif of the wolf has detached itself from the plate (148).

As demonstrated above, electroplating is transduction while allowing transduction to be thought. It shows how, upon reaching a threshold, the being phase-shifts in relation to itself. The process of individuation is open and unpredictable, always multiple, entailing a burst of the series. Barney's experimental electroplating integrates accidents as part and parcel of the artistic process. Similarly, in the *Creek Burn* series of Barney's (see Barney) large-scale sculptures—where cast metal is poured into the mould created by coring out the trunks of lodgepole pines with a computer-driven mill—the metal's rapid cooling has caused fin-like protrusions to form on the surface. In turn, the titles of Barney's electroplated works indicating their relative state, for example, *Diana: State three* (original spelling), problematize the very idea of an artwork conceived as a separate, already constituted individual, and instead put forward the conception of an individual (artwork) as an intermediate phase of a larger series, a whole body of work.

However, for all its emblematic power, Barney's experimental process alone fails to account for the question of individuation's cosmic ungrounding. Indeed, it is the figure of Electroplater and their choreographed gestures that play a fundamental role here. In *Redoubt*, Electroplater does not simply

function as an attendant to Engraver, bringing his seminal copper plates to fruition: an externalized ovary birthing his seminal works. The film's introduction concludes with a scene that sees Electroplater step outside her trailer and, with a shovel, unearth a dirty copper plate. The surface of the excavated plate bears, as Hodermarsky (140, 152 n. 8) explains, multiple marks of its exposure to both manure and sulfurated potash. This exposure to the acidic and the alkaline, respectively, has in part managed to displace the plate's layer of asphalt ground. Featuring an arrangement of circular green stains appearing in the zones of bright exposed copper inhabiting a black asphalt background, this singular plate is suggestive of the Lupus constellation amidst a starry sky. Called *Redoubt: Base Plate Conductor*, it will serve as an inspiration for the three-dimensional model of the Lupus constellation that Electroplater will set out to construct over the course of the film's plot. This fundamental plate also functions as catalyst for the developments in the film's final scene. Symptomatically, it has not been duplicated in order to become the structural germ of a new series of works; it has not become resolved into a series of *states*. Approached via Simondon's thought, *Redoubt: Base Plate Conductor* thus emblemizes the potential energy of a metastable pre-individual reality before the insertion of a crystalline seed. Corroborating its importance, the copper relief was featured both at Barney's exhibition at Yale University Art Gallery in 2019, and at UCCA Beijing in 2019/2020, where it was presented as *Redoubt (Cosmic Hunt)* (see UCCA). The scene ends with Electroplater extending one hand towards the unearthed plate lying in the ground and the other to the sky, her body forming a conduit between the below and the above.

As we come to learn over the course of the film's narration, Electroplater's ritualistic bodily gesture drawing a diagonal line between the ground—and its freshly unearthed metal—and the sky, which wraps up *Redoubt's* introduction, actually brings forth a cataclysmic cosmic event concluding the film. Electroplater's diagonal gesture indexes a world-yet-to-come; it has integrated Hoop Dancer's dance of chaosmic transduction. The final scene will stage a speculative Reintroduction of the endangered grey wolves. The wolves sack Electroplater's trailer during a solar eclipse while letting a single copper engraving electroplate undisturbed in its electrolytic bath of blue vitriol. Symptomatically called *Sawtooth*, the plate depicts the head of the grey wolf merging with the outline of the Sawtooth Mount range.⁵ Left to its own devices, liberated from human control, this

⁵ This becoming-grey wolf is but a relay opening up to a becoming-cosmic. In this way, *Redoubt* surpasses a type of reductive logic that demands that we think the wolf motif in terms of Simondon's living individuation. Simondon's understanding of art as transductive—and transduction as an auto-genesis of thought brought forth by an ontogenesis itself—counters such purist claims.

final metal plate undergoing electroplating performs a magical action at a distance—the ungrounding catasterism of the film’s *initial* plate *Redoubt: Base Plate Conductor*, its becoming-cosmic-constellation.

III ELECTROPLATER’S GESTURE: DRAWING DIAGONALS

Electroplater’s ritualistic gesture evokes the Deleuzoguattarian (*A Thousand Plateaus* 407) conceptual figure of the machinic phylum, confluent with metal and metallurgy and framed as a diagonal, conductive “subterranean thread” that deterritorializes territorial assemblages. Accentuated by the scene’s diagonal line formed by the shaft of Electroplater’s shovel now stuck into the ground, the gesture resonates with Beuysian philosophy of molecular metamorphosis conceived as a play of grounding and ungrounding, of metal’s power of conductivity and felt’s power of insulation (on Beuys’s environments peopled with metal tools and surfaces, see Huttenlauch). The diagonal line drawn by Electroplater, making their body a metallic conductor, puts forward a model of operation cutting across the initial and the terminal point, transversal in relation to the bipolarity of the male–female. It is also cutting across the extreme poles of *Redoubt* and *Reintroduction*. The diagonal diagrams the Deleuzo-Hamletian *time out of joint* (see Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 88–89)—a burst of the event whose impact destroys cardinal points of reference. The diagonal describes neither the beginning nor the end; neither the father nor the mother. It is the decolonial rallying call of the Hoop Dance. This cosmic ungrounding overturns the film’s rigid linear sequence (the six-day hunt recalls classic cosmogonic narratives) just as an unleashed pack of wolves sacks Electroplater’s trailer. It is as if West-centric civilization riddled with clichés has violently decentred itself in the spasm of a massive human extinction event. Once in the trailer, the wolves are drawn towards the abandoned copper plates bearing their own likeness, now encrusted with crystalline overgrowth. The wolves’ curiosity draws, in turn, our own attention to this new osmosis of chaos and cosmos. Suspended in the electroplating tanks, these copper plates function like a charm or a talisman; these are *talisman-images* defined by Laura U. Marks as “a kind of image . . . that intervenes in the order of the cosmos in order to effect specific changes here on Earth” (“Talisman-Images” 231). In *Redoubt*’s finale, grand narratives have all been overturned in favour of localized, molecular, a-signifying, non-Anthropocentric processes, which corresponds the cosmogenesis of the Lupus constellation, the emergence of a new Cosmic Hunt myth—an alternative mythogenesis which is at once robustly material and cosmic.

What *Redoubt*'s final scene puts into stark relief is that Sawtooth Valley is not a landscape in which the action happens, a kind of extended enclosure delimiting what is outside and ripe for extractivism. Sawtooth Mountains are decoupled from the substantialist conceptual figure of Redoubt. But at the same time, the artistic project of *Redoubt* is not about the Sawtooth Mountains range ecologies as we already know them. It is rather a case of the emergent articulation of a milieu through relational activity, where *Sawtooth* arises as an unfolding map of intensities. A special role in this respect is accorded to mythogenesis, affirming the double movement of ontogenesis and of thought. Barney's 2018 film functions as a foundational myth of a new decolonial counter-cosmology alternative to the extractivist mythologies of the American West. It gives the phyla of artworks which have since tumbled out of it a cosmological significance. All these heterogeneous works—filmic, conceptual, metallurgical, sculptural, performative, sonorous—are now grounded in the unground of a radical new version of the Cosmic Hunt myth.⁶ If, as Barney suggests, "the *Redoubt* project is something like a portrait of a place," then it is the Huian diagram of a new chasmotechnics.

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INCONCLUSION: BLUE VITRIOL AT THE LIMIT OF THE WORLD

Redoubt ends with an image of extreme colour saturation and opacity. Nocturnal close-ups of the Engraver's plates suspended in vitriol's deep blue hue—drawing attention to their nodular crystallizations forming filigree net-like patterns at the same time as a buzz of electricity can be heard—are striking haptic-sonorous motifs in *Redoubt*. Akin to fishing nets awaiting their catch, these are suspended, allusive and cryptic *incubation-images* (or, better still, *transduction-images*) vibrating with inchoate potentials for

⁶ Such phylogenetic, materialist treatment of myth, and storytelling, recalls the work of anthropologist Julien d'Huy. d'Huy has catalogued transformations of the Cosmic Hunt myth across 47 cultures around the globe. As he aptly demonstrates with his comparative analysis of Cosmic Hunt myths, myth is not abstract, static or universal but undergoes punctuated evolution which produces variations in the components of its core story, akin to a species (*mythème*). These phylogenetic variations correspond to the patterns of human migration since the Paleolithic period. Barney's *Redoubt* launches a deterritorialization of the Romanized Greek version of the Cosmic Hunt myth via Hoop Dancer's indigenous Cree choreography. In turn, *Catasterism*'s printable performance program expressly performs a comparative analysis of myths resonating with d'Huy when it juxtaposes the violent Greek myth of Lycaon's turning into a wolf and his subsequent catasterism with the Blackfoot legend of wolves teaching humans how to survive and hunt and their subsequent catasterism as the Wolf Trail, i.e. the Milky Way (see Barney and Bepler).

change. They do not depict any actual growth as in the time-compression aesthetics of a time-lapse, or a montage of snapshots of the progressive phases of copper accretion. These are whirring pre-individual intensities. They lead somewhere—but where?

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Practices of Planetary Relationality in Colum McCann's *Apeirogon*

ABSTRACT

For a number of critics, what we are witnessing in postmillennial Anglophone fiction is an attempt to do away with postmodern posturings of ironic distance and ethical non-commitment, and a renewed interest in questions of authenticity, empathy, responsibility and solidarity. According to Christian Moraru, one of the keenest chroniclers of contemporary culture, the shift is rooted in an understanding of the world as an interconnected system of relationality, which the critic discusses under the headings of cosmopolitanism and planetarity. Moraru locates the premise of this evolving cultural project in its ethical call for “a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries” (*Cosmopolitanism* 5), but recognizes it as leaving its imprint on the aesthetic and thematic choices made by contemporary authors. The aim of the paper is to analyze Colum McCann’s 2020 novel, *Apeirogon*, as indebted to this planetary vision of relationality. In particular, my intention is to trace the impact of this mindset on the narrative structure and the imaginary of the novel.

Keywords: Colum McCann, *Apeirogon*, Christian Moraru, relationality, (the) planetary, planetarity.

As a literary genre, the novel has often been characterized as a chameleon which owes its capacity to survive to its amazing adaptability. Virginia Woolf famously dubbed it “the most pliable of all forms” (611) and Mikhail Bakhtin saw it as developing in “a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality” (7). Adapting itself to new historical circumstances and responding to fresh developments in philosophy, science and other arts, the novel constantly renews itself, confirming its identity as “less a genre than an anti-genre” (Eagleton 1). Some of these generic changes are subtle and extend over long stretches of time; others occur relatively quickly and can be linked to specific points in history. For a number of commentators, one such large-scale paradigm transformation took place around the turn of the millennium, influencing the work of Anglophone writers including David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and David Mitchell. Although the critics differ in their speculations as to the causes of the shift, in their assessment of whether it can be seen as a development within postmodernism or as a move beyond it, as well as in their recognition of the change as a purely literary phenomenon or as a manifestation of a more generalized “turn” across various areas of culture, there is a considerable degree of accord as to the direction this new phenomenon has taken. Terms multiply: some speak of the systems novel (LeClair), the mega-novel (Karl), the “world text” (Moretti), and the maximalist novel (Ercolino); others announce the advent of metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker; Holland), digimodernism (Kirby), cosmodernism (Moraru), and planetarity (Spivak; Miyoshi; Apter; Moraru). The definitions, however, often overlap: what we are witnessing, the critics suggest, is the arrival of long, dense, intricately structured novels which testify to a move towards a new sincerity, an attempt to do away with the postmodern posturings of ironic distance and ethical non-commitment, and a renewed interest in questions of empathy, bonding, responsibility and “communicable meaning” (Holland 17).

According to Christian Moraru, one of the keenest chroniclers of contemporary culture, the shift is inextricably linked with a new understanding of the world as a domain of relationality, which the critic discusses under the headings of cosmodernism and planetarity. Originating in an ethical call for “a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries” (*Cosmodernism* 5), the new cultural paradigm has left its imprint on the work of numerous contemporary authors, determined to “read the world in terms of self-other interconnectedness” (6). Moraru associates cosmodernism with “American and other Euroatlantic cultures” of the 1990s but emphasizes its significance as “a transition to, harbinger of, and sometimes a blueprint

for” the larger, more complex project of planetarity (*Reading 6*).¹ Originating in essays by Spivak and Miyoshi, this new paradigm rests on the idea of the planet as “a fluid, multicentric, plural and pluralizing worldly structure of relatedness” (Moraru 51) and has developed as an alternative to globalization (and the concept of the globe), which depends on a very different model of relationality, or, what Moraru calls, a “worlding scenario” (25, 57). In planetary studies, globalization is defined “*qua* market, profit, and finance apparatus” (52) and envisaged as a tendency towards homogenization. Its project, to quote Moraru, is to fashion “the polymorphic world into a ‘rounded,’ sphere-like (*globus*) totality” whose polished surface facilitates the flow of capital, technology, labour and information (29). Planetarity, on the other hand, imagines the world as a constantly evolving, multifarious system “keyed to non-totalist, non-homogenizing, and anti-hegemonic operations existentially as well as culturally cognitive in nature” (Moraru 51). As a result, writers, artists and critics committed to this new paradigm steer clear of the disjunctive logic of such dichotomies as centre/margin, here/there, or us/them, and instead embrace “a conjunctive or relational model” focusing on “cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, borrowings, and barterings” and their ethical ramifications (Moraru 110).

Colum McCann’s biography and work abound in cross-cultural encounters, and so, naturally, lend themselves to planet-oriented readings. Since 1986, when he left his native Ireland to embark on a year-and-a-half, 12,000 mile bicycle journey across the States, the writer has spent much of his time roaming the world. Before settling in New York in 1994, he had lived in Texas and Japan, and he still continues to travel—to Russia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East—when researching his novels. Married to an American, he holds dual American and Irish citizenship, and enjoys the hybrid status of a “contemporary Irish-American novelist” (Armstrong 58). By referring to himself as “an international bastard” (Cusatis 13), McCann clearly suggests that his imagination does not depend on what Moraru describes as “a particular, well-contoured and largely stable territory” (6). In interviews, he also expresses his allegiance to the planetary understanding of relationality, for instance, when he speaks of his admiration for Michael Ondaatje, another “international mongrel” whose work respects “no boundaries and no borders” (Interview), or defines the role of literature as rooted in “the politics of empathy” (“Politics”). This planet-oriented mindset can also be traced in the author’s work. First of all, McCann is the co-founder and president of Narrative 4, a global educational organization,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references to this author will be to this publication.

whose strategies can be phrased in terms of planetary relationality. Running its programmes in schools and communities across the world, Narrative 4 brings together young people from different sociocultural backgrounds and encourages them to share their stories in an attempt to foster empathy, combat stereotypes and overcome prejudices (Ingersoll and Ingersoll xi). Most pertinently for this essay, however, the planetary worldview also leaves its imprint on McCann's fiction. According to Alison Garden, his novels strive to create "inclusionary and redemptive intercultural and interracial spaces" (275–76), a view which is clearly shared by Eóin Flannery, who describes them as "endors[ing] intercommunal connections and interpersonal commonality in a world that circulates atomization as a daily condition" (18). Even the titles of his recent fiction, *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) and *TransAtlantic* (2013), point to the author's commitment to the idea of "the world as a relational domain" (Elias and Moraru xxiii). McCann's seventh novel, *Apeirogon* (2020), is no exception here. Although it moves to a Middle East setting and focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the book is clearly rooted in the planetary vision of the world as "pulled together by a logic of connectiveness" (Moraru 36). In what follows, I will trace the impact of this vision on the narrative structure of *Apeirogon*, and on its imaginary.² Given the scope of the novel, such an analysis will necessarily be selective. Hopefully, though, it will show the validity of reading McCann's work through the prism of planetary studies.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The narrative organization of *Apeirogon* is quite complex. On the one hand, the material is given an overall structure that suggests symmetry and order: evoking Scheherazade's relentless storytelling in *One Thousand and One Nights*, the narrative is divided into 1001 numbered sections that ascend from 1 to 500 and then go down from 500 to 1, with a section marked as 1001 poised in the very middle. On the other hand, the content of these sections is highly heterogenous, comprising, in the words of Ellen Akins,

anecdotes from history; notes on religion, politics and art; extended meditations on saltpeter and gunpowder, bird behavior, mathematics and language; quotes from poetry and songs; glimpses of Artaud and Anaïs Nin; Kalashnikov on his deathbed and George Mitchell in Ireland; riffs on words like "operation" and "morgue"; the Song of Solomon, the Song of Songs, the Canticle of Canticles; solitaire.

² The imaginary is understood here, after Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, as "a way of picturing the world" (xxv).

The sections vary not just in content but also in length. Some also include photographs, aphorisms or literary quotations. In a rather hostile review of *Apeirogon* for *The New York Times*, Dwight Garner describes the narrative as broken into “shards” and likens the effect to a situation where, instead of being served a proper meal, we are confronted with “a table littered with ingredients: a paw of garlic, a frozen lamb shank, two potatoes, a big knob of celeriac, three peas.” This is not quite true as even this reviewer has no difficulty in identifying the narrative thread that holds the book together, referring to what he calls “an uplifting true story” that focuses on the friendship between two real men who have each lost a daughter to the conflict. The first of them is Rami Elhanan, an Israeli whose daughter, Smadar, was killed by Palestinian suicide bombers in Jerusalem in 1997, two weeks before her fourteenth birthday; the other is a Palestinian, Bassam Aramin, whose ten-year-old daughter, Abir, died in 2007 after being shot by a member of the Israeli border police in front of her school. In offering a fictionalized account of their friendship, *Apeirogon* situates itself in what McCann describes as “this territory” where “the real is the imagined and the imagined is real” (McCann, “How”), prompting critics to read the novel, alongside *Dancer* (2003) and *TransAtlantic*, as representative of biofiction (cf. Lackey 23 and Costello-Sullivan 42).³ *Apeirogon* describes Rami and Bassam’s meeting in 2005 through Combatants for Peace (a movement whose aim is to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories) and presents their current work through the Parents Circle (a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization gathering people who have lost immediate family members in the conflict). Their friendship marks the ethical core of the novel, transforming it from a harrowing account of loss, suffering and violence into what Alex Preston has described as “a story that buoys the heart.”

Commenting on narratives that express the planetary imaginary, Moraru argues that they are “simultaneously descriptive and normative” as they engage with “a reality ‘under construction’” (9). Their ethical impulse comes from a discrepancy between “what this world is” and “the planet this world should be” (59). Understanding the planet as a project in progress, he describes the texts as “aspirational” and explains: “I say ‘aspirational’ and not ‘utopian,’ for they do capture a reality, or at least its seeds, and, critical of its world context, point concurrently to a different world in the offing” (59). In McCann’s *Apeirogon*, this opposition between “the world as it should be” and “the world as it is” is best visible in the contrast

³ For McCann’s views on the ethical challenges faced by biographical novelists, read his interview by Michael Lackey, “Colum McCann: Contested Realities in the Biographical Novel.” At one point in the interview, the writer talks about the “moral responsibility” he feels towards the living, breathing people he writes about, referencing Bassam Aramin and his story (140–41).

between the story of Rami and Bassam's friendship and the countless narratives of violence it is interwoven with: not just the deaths of Smadar and Abir, rendered as they are in excruciating detail, or the bloody episodes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (such as the Deir Yassin massacre and the Naqba, the Intifadas, or Operation Cast Lead), but also the atrocities committed during the Crusades, the Second World War or the South American drug cartel wars. What I would like to suggest, however, is that the tension also affects the structure. In his astute essay on *Apeirogon*, Wit Pietrzak discusses the novel as shaped by a dialectic between centrifugal and centripetal forces, and recognizes narrative discontinuity as "instigat[ing] a centrifugal motion" that repeatedly steers the novel away from its main plot (2). On the other hand, he identifies three "centripetal" practices that allow McCann to counter this disjunctive dynamic: the novel's obsessive tendency to return to the deaths of Smadar and Abir (2), its foregrounding of what he dubs "the border-defying fraternity" between the girls' fathers (6), and its use of mathematical formulas and concepts, such as the notion of amicable numbers, the etymology of the word "algebra" (8), and the very idea of an apeirogon (9). What this list might suggest, however, is that the structure and the theme of the novel are not quite in sync, with the fragmentary, discontinuous and centrifugally-oriented narrative working against the ideas of interconnectedness expressed on the thematic level. What I would like to show is that the oscillation between these two contradictory impulses occurs at all levels of the text, and it correlates with the tension between its descriptive vision of "our multicentric, disjointed, and conflicted world" (Moraru 145) and its planetary, prescriptive impulse to bring together, to bridge the gaps, and to seek connections. In this sense, *Apeirogon* can be argued to prove Moraru's assertion that planetarily-minded novels serve as "synecdoches of the world," presenting themselves, often in an overt manner, as "ethical 'world containers'" whose function is to "piece together the world's broken body and cradle multitudes" (13).⁴

There are several ways in which *Apeirogon* tries to fashion itself into "a world container" whose structure not only reflects but also attempts to remedy the messiness of the world. Most importantly, the novel keeps

⁴ There are clear parallels between Moraru's description of planetarity as "aspirational" and oriented towards the future and Flannery's assertion that "McCann's writing displays a critical utopian inclination" (17) even though the critics obviously speak about different "versions of utopianism" (17) when one rejects "utopia" as a valid description of the planetary project while the other sees it as characteristic of McCann's approach. Flannery's comment about "the imagination of redemption, the anticipation of a better life, and the prospects of solidarity being forged with previously 'othered' communities" are compatible with planetary ideals even though he characterizes them as "tangible *utopian* foci" (18, emphasis mine).

a steady focus on Rami and Bassam, interweaving stories of their past lives and current activism, with those that centre on their dead daughters, and on the surviving members of their families. Unlike the avian-themed accounts that dominate the opening sections of the novel or numerous other stories that are picked and then abandoned by the novel's narrator (such as Philippe Petit's 1987 Walk for Peace over the Hinnom Valley, Wael Zuaiteer's assassination by Mossad in 1972, Senator Mitchell's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Christopher Costigan's exploration of the Dead Sea, or the 1944 Red Cross delegation to the Theresienstadt concentration camp), the accounts of the two families provide lines of connection and continuity that counter the fragmentariness of the novel. From the structural point of view, the most significant of these stories is the one that takes us all the way from the opening to the concluding section of the book and can be traced in sections 1–2, 12–13, 64–67, 176–80, 183, 330–33, 335, 418–20, 491, 493–94, 497, 499, 470, 469, 371–64, 362, 361, 253, 245–41, 52–49, 45, 44, 6, 4, 2 and 1,⁵ and is recounted in summary form twice, in the central section numbered 1001, and again in the second section 4, as if to make sure that the reader does not miss its presence. The plotline begins with Rami travelling towards Beit Jala, on his way to “a meeting with an international group—seven or eight of them, he has heard—in the Cremisan monastery” (33), and ends with Bassam watering his orchard after coming back home from the same meeting. The story can be conceived of as Ariadne's thread that guides the reader through the labyrinthine narrative, offering—quite literally—a single path that leads to the novel's centre and back.

Its presence also allows us to recognize the novel's debt to James Joyce's *Ulysses*.⁶ Like its modernist predecessor, *Apeirogon* can be read as a single-

⁵ The list is not conclusive: some of the sections can be read as either integral to the narrative or external to it. For instance, section 2 reads like a traffic direction sign (2): it only forms part of the plotline, if we interpret it as “focalized” though Rami, that is, as a record of what the character sees while travelling on his motorbike.

⁶ In an article that has been brought to my attention following the completion of this piece, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan reads *Apeirogon* as engaged in an intertextual dialogue with W. B. Yeats's “The Second Coming.” McCann's novel, she argues, utilizes both “the structure and imagery of the earlier poem” (42). In particular, she refers to Yeats's reference to “a widening gyre” as driving the structure of the novel, images of birds (especially falcons) that can be found in both texts, and their “common geographical location” (42). Much of her interpretation seems to me to be compatible with my own reading, including the tension between “chaos and order” that she detects in the narrative (41), and her identification of the central three chapters of the novel as “the difficult, unflinching, and quiet center of a narrative maelstrom” (47). In fact, since I feel fully convinced by her argument that Yeats's poem provides an important intertextual reference for the novel, the only point I would like to take issue with is her claim that there is no linear narrative in *Apeirogon* (42). As I am arguing here, there is (albeit hidden by virtue of being interspersed with so many other

day novel since all the events in this central plotline take place on 29 October 2016,⁷ beginning before sunrise and ending well after dusk. Like *Ulysses*, too, the novel uses the motif of the journey to trace the movements of its characters not only across a recognizable topography but also in terms of self-other relationality. However, while *Ulysses* is usually read as a narrative that struggles against “the anxiety . . . of disconnectedness” (Bersani 177) but ultimately depicts Stephen’s long-awaited meeting with Bloom as concluding in “a miserable failure” (Jameson 149) and “a sabotaged climax” (Norris 199) when Stephen sings an anti-Semitic ballad and then refuses Bloom’s invitation to stay the night at Eccles Street, *Apeirogon* offers a more optimistic version of relationality. Bassam and Rami’s friendship exemplifies the connection that Stephen and Bloom glimpse but ultimately fail to achieve. The relational trajectory of both novels is quite similar: “the displacement of our attention from Stephen to Bloom and then to Molly” (Wright 140) finds an echo in a similar shift of focus from Rami, whom we follow in the first half of the day, to Bassam, who becomes the central figure in its second part of the plotline, and, briefly, to his wife, Salwa, who becomes “the central consciousness” near its end. In both novels, as Margot Norris claims in reference to “Bloom’s encounters on the way to ‘Cyclops,’” there is also a general movement “from a largely one-person world into an increasingly multiperson world” as solitary characters are brought into “complex social spaces” where they interact “with a variety of friends, acquaintances, and strangers” (101), a movement, it is worth adding, that is reversed in the second part of the novels. These structural similarities, however, only foreground the differences. Although *Apeirogon* ends with Bassam alone in his garden, there is nothing in the novel to suggest even a hint of the social isolation experienced by Bloom. Instead of the two separate monologues given at the end of *Ulysses* (Bloom’s story of his day in “Ithaca” and Molly’s soliloquy in “Penelope”), Bassam and Salwa recount the events of the day in what takes the shape of a two-page-long paragraph where their voices blend and merge into a single story, once again emphasizing the ideas of dialogue and togetherness:

stories). What is more, since the trajectory of this plotline is clearly modelled on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, its presence allows us to recognize what I see as one of the most crucial intertextual influences on the novel. Interestingly, Costello-Sullivan picks up a fragment of this line when she writes: “From chapters 490 to 499, six of the chapters present a linear narrative of Bassam’s and Rami’s arrival at the meeting that anchors the text” (46–47).

⁷ The date is not given, but it can be deduced for textual clues. The year 2016 is provided on the first page of the novel, and the events are identified as happening in “late October” (31) and again “at the end of October” (229). We also know that Rami arrives one hour too early for the Creman meeting, because Israel has already gone off daylight saving time while Palestine has not (10). There was only one such day in 2016, and it was 29 October.

It is a rapid-fire between them then, the pulse of the day, the phone call, the visits, the dramas. She went to the market. He went to Beit Jala. She paid Muhammad's phone bill. Rami was early, he messed up daylight saving time, he drove around for an hour, went to the Everest Hotel, got himself a coffee. She bought an anniversary present for her sister, a new perfume from Oman, it came in a ribboned box, it was a little expensive but it was worth it, she found it in the little stall in the market. The monk showed them around the monastery, you should have seen the thickness of the walls, the paintings, they went downstairs later to look at where the wine was made long ago, he brought her some olive oil, a gift, he left it in the car, he'll get it for her tomorrow. (454)

In the concluding sections, the novel also departs from *Ulysses* in that it looks forward to the future (the "tomorrow" of the passage above) when Bassam and Rami will meet again, to share their stories with new audiences: "West Jerusalem, he thinks, by two thirty, a school this time" (454). Such references emphasize the idea that, for Rami and Bassam, this single day is in no way special: it is just "another long day" in a string of similar days that extend backwards and forwards in time: "Yet again tomorrow. And again after that" (452). Although Bassam in section 500 compares their activism "to draw[ing] water from the ocean with a spoon" (242), there is dignity and courage in their unwavering pursuit of justice, and there is hope in their undaunted conviction that "peace is a fact. A matter of time" (242).

Moreover, since the numbering of the sections suggests that the pull of the narrative is towards the centre rather than the end, it can be argued that the actual climax occurs over the three sections placed in the very middle, which bring together three separate narrations. Two of these, both in sections numbered 500, come from Rami and Bassam, respectively, and contain their stories alongside their manifestos of peace and reconciliation. Within the structure of the novel, these narratives are presented as transcripts of the talks the men give at the Cremisan monastery.⁸ Section 1001 returns to the third-person narrator that *Apeirogon* mostly relies on. Here, however, the narrator reveals himself as one of those who have arrived

. . . from as far apart as Belfast and Kyushu, Paris and North Carolina, Santiago and Brooklyn, Copenhagen and Terezín . . . to listen to the stories of Bassam and Rami, and to find within their stories another story, a song of songs, discovering themselves—you and me—in the stone-tiled chapel where we sit for hours . . . our memories imploding, our synapses skipping . . . (229)

⁸ In reality, as explained in "Author's Note," their texts are "pulled together from a series of interviews in Jerusalem, New York, Jericho and Beit Jala" (ix).

The section consists of only one long sentence, and focuses on the moment when people are brought together to share their stories, showcasing what Flannery identifies as McCann's lasting "commitment to the ethical and 'community-creating' potentials of storytelling and/or shared narrative acts" (17). Foregrounding the collective aspect of storytelling (as signalled by the pronouns shifting from "themselves" to "you and me" and then to "we" and "our"), the scene depicts the act of transmitting a story from one human mind to another as an instrument of relationality, allowing strangers from "far apart" to participate in the "throbbing, ever-changing, and kaleidoscopic worldly togetherness" (Moraru 14).

266 THE PLANETARY IMAGINARY

If the form of *Apeirogon* is predicated on the tension between the world as it is and the planet this world aspires to become, the discrepancy is recreated in the imaginary of the novel. Here, the present-day reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict finds itself reflected in textual representations of the local landscape as scarred by violence and divided by borders and walls. At the same time, the progressive vision of a peaceful Israeli-Palestinian future can be glimpsed in scenes that depict people convening to talk, to exchange ideas, and to cooperate.

One of the most powerful representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the novel is the Separation Wall, which the Israeli government claims to constitute a security measure aimed to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, but Palestinians perceive as an instrument of land grab and racial segregation. The Wall, they insist, deviates widely from the Green Line that marks Israel's pre-1967 border and cuts deep into the West Bank territories, encompassing illegal Israeli settlements, encircling Palestinian villages and isolating their inhabitants from their farmland and water supplies; it also creates the reality of military checkpoints and epitomizes Israel's apartheid policy (Spangler 46). The wall casts its shadow over numerous settings in the novel, and its construction affects the lives of its characters. The Palestinian town of Anata, where Bassam lives with his family at the time when his daughter is killed, is described as "an odd urban archipelago . . . surrounded almost totally by the Separation Wall" (12), and Abir's death can be correlated to this fractured geography. First of all, the construction of the Wall across the yard of Abir's school, which starts when prefabricated sections of the barrier are delivered to the site, is the very reason why the border guards (one of whom later shoots the girl) are sent to patrol the area (174). Secondly, the ambulance that takes the girl to the nearest hospital

is stalled at the checkpoint for over two hours, drastically reducing her chances of survival (67). Anata, however, is not the only physical space that the novel represents as ruptured by the Wall. The same is true for the valley which hosts the monastery where Bassam and Rami meet with their international group: since the Israeli government has already issued a decision to construct the Wall right through the heart of the valley, the vineyard adjoining the monastery is to be cut in two, separating the monastery from the nuns' convent (171). Elsewhere in the novel, McCann draws attention to the arbitrary nature of borders, telling the story of how the Green Line was first drawn on a map, in 1949, with "thick coloured pencils" that turned out to instigate a boundary that cut "right through the middle of villages, splitting streets, houses, gardens" (167): "It was possible that a woman might love her husband in Palestine before midnight, and roll across the bed to find herself in Israel for the rest of her life" (167). Much attention is also given to human rights abuses that take place at military checkpoints where food rots in trucks (123), ambulances are delayed (14), illegal crossings may lead to people getting detained or shot (13), Palestinians are subjected to questioning and downgrading strip searches (323), and humanitarian lanes for women, children, the sick and the elderly open for forty-five minutes a day (172) while soldiers sit in air-conditioned watchtowers (171). During their visit to Germany, Rami and Bassam see the remains of the Berlin Wall and then, in his speech at the Shalom Rollberg centre, Rami speaks to the audience against "a world of walls" and defines his task as that of trying "to insert a crack in the one most visible to him" (401).

The local landscape, however, is not only fractured by the Separation Wall: it is also marked with visual reminders of violence: the "broken, dusty" streets of Anata with "smashed pavements" and "piles of rubble" (57), "olive trees ripped up by a bulldozer" (123), "demolished ancient houses in Ramallah, Jericho, Jenin" (381), Palestinian dwellings "blown asunder with sticks of dynamite" (138), a street in Jerusalem which turns into "a scattered human jigsaw" (53) following an attack by suicide bombers. McCann's narrator quotes Borges's remark that "it only takes two facing mirrors to form a labyrinth" (136) to suggest how the logic of retaliation feeds the conflict and traps the "two sides" involved in an endless, hopeless circle of violence where "a stone leads to a bullet" and "another suicide bomber leads to another air strike" (220). Indeed, in *Apeirogon*, stories of violence multiply, lists of grievances expand, and images of fragmented, ruined landscapes proliferate, producing an impression that the destructive, entropic forces that derail the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis are mirrored not only in the fragmentary narrative but also in the spatially heterogenous imaginary.

However, just as Rami and Bassam's single-day plotline manages to infuse the otherwise disjointed narrative with a sense of continuity and progression, images of scarred, brutalized landscapes contrast with representations indebted to the planetary imaginary. Foregrounding the collective spirit of collaboration, they testify to what Moraru refers to as "unparalleled density and extensiveness of connectedness, of *what relates*, joins, and binds together often above, across, and . . . against ordinary, nation-state-territorialized and akin administrative-epistemological units, bonds, ties, and allegiances" (37, emphasis in the original). To begin with, *One Thousand and One Nights* is applauded as a particularly "splendid" literary achievement precisely on the grounds that it is a product of a collective effort, gathering together stories created "at different times, in myriad places . . . and from different sources too" (McCann, *Apeirogon* 50). Collected within a single volume, these previously independent tales live on, translated into different languages and entering new cultures (50). Citing Borges, McCann likens them to spatial elements within "an endless cathedral" or "a widening mosque," "strengthening one another" as they form "a random everywhere" (50). While the metafictional passage can be read not only as a comment on *One Thousand and One Nights* but also as a manifesto for *Apeirogon*, it seems to be premised on the idea of what Moraru refers to as "planetary culture" and sees as the product of "transculturation," defined as "a rewriting of the world archive into an overall flexible system of cultural relations where what counts and occurs most is that once-separated cultural producers and discourses are now able to interrelate instead of simply fading into one another" (65). Such collaborative enterprises are repeatedly celebrated in *Apeirogon*. One account, for instance, goes back to the year 700 BC when King of Judah, Hezekiah, ordered his men to dig out a tunnel to bring water from the Gihon springs to a reservoir inside the walls of Jerusalem. The two teams began their work on opposite sides of the mountain, but they would need to stop and listen for the other team to make sure they would finally meet in the middle (103). In another section, the novel details the concerted effort that allowed people in the nineteenth century to transport blocks of ice all the way from the frozen lakes in Turkey, Iran and Iraq to Palestinian houses where they were stored in the basements of windcatcher towers (357).

A particularly impressive example of the redemptive power of cooperation is offered in the story of the minbar of Saladin. Described in the novel as "a masterpiece of sacred geometry, wood carving, marquetry and calligraphy," the pulpit was "fashioned by hundreds of gilded craftsmen" and consisted of "sixteen thousand finely carved blocks" (392) whose interlocking pieces were joined "without a single nail or screw or any glue holding it together" (93). Both intricately composite and

fantastically coherent (392), the minbar resembles *One Thousand and One Nights* in that it represents another complex, collaborative artwork that *Apeirogon* sets out to imitate, but it can also be read as an epitome of the planetary future, complex yet harmonious, heterogeneous yet premised on the principles of cooperation and interconnectivity. Constructed in the 12th century and installed at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem when Saladin reclaimed the city from the Crusaders, the minbar survived over 800 years till, in 1969, it was destroyed in a fire started by a Christian fanatic. Its history, however, did not end there as, once again, craftsmen came together to breathe “new life to that which had disappeared” (397). The novel emphasizes the collaborative nature of the reconstruction: “teams of architects, mathematicians, computer experts, calligraphers, biomorphic designers and even theologians” were consulted to tap into the lost secret of the ancient joinery skills (396), and then “a team of the world’s best craftsmen” arrived in Amman (396). The project took 37 years to complete, but finally all the 16,000 pieces were put together, and the world could admire again the “almost unfathomably intricate” geometric patterns: “spiralling rosettes, honeycombs, circles, squares, triangles, arabesques” (393). In bringing back to life what seems to have been irretrievably lost, the reconstruction of Saladin’s minbar represents a triumph of human cooperation over religious fanaticism, destruction and violence. At the same time, the enormous scale of the project allows us to read it as one of the most striking examples of planetary relationality, one where the “logic of connectiveness” gives rise to a vision that is both inspiring and empowering, containing as it does the seeds of “a world whose continuum is much less interrupted by divides like the Berlin Wall,” or the Separation Wall, one might add, “and in which the connection, the nexus, the relay, and the intermeshing of lives and human expressions over all sorts of gaps have become the ontocultural norm” (Moraru 38).

The idea of the planet as a worlding project in the making is also represented in the novel in scenes that focus on physical spaces that bring people together. The most significant of these is the Cremisan monastery, where Rami and Bassam meet with the international audience to share their stories and deliver their message of non-violence and cooperation. On the whole, however, such meetings and such spaces feature prominently in *Apeirogon*. Quite early on, for instance, an account is given of how representatives of “the two sides,” “four Palestinians, seven Israelis” (26), gather in the rooftop restaurant of the Everest Hotel to establish what will become the Combatants for Peace. The account describes how the men gradually work their way from initial suspiciousness and distrust, through “uneasy laughter” (27) and conversations that never venture beyond the safe perimeters of small talk, towards the moment when they recognize

their shared humanity: “an idea so simple that Bassam wondered how he had ignored it for so long; they had families, histories, shadows” (*Apeirogon* 28). Later, a similar space is created in the yard of Abir’s school in Anata where a group of Israeli soldiers arrive over three successive weekends to construct “the only playground in the town” (301). Transforming the yard fractured by the Wall and chosen for its proximity to where Abir was fatally shot into a place where children can come to meet and play is a particularly meaningful gesture, allowing the reader to catch in the otherwise gloomy present a glimpse of a more hopeful planetary future. However, not all such encounters bring about positive results or make proper use of the potential for change that they carry. Rami’s wife, Nurit, occasionally meets Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel and the leader of the right-wing Likud party, at the swimming pool at the Hebrew University. Even though they used to be close friends in college, the rift between them is so great that they only “nod to each other and pass by in separate lanes” (363).

When discussing the ethical underpinnings of the planetary project, its proponents, Moraru included, often refer to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, and the meeting spaces in McCann’s novel are constructed in a way that brings to mind the philosopher’s idea of the face-to-face encounter as invariably fraught with risk. When we open ourselves to the other, when we signal our readiness to communicate, Levinas says, we place ourselves “at the risk of misunderstanding . . . , at the risk of lack of and refusal of communication” (120). We also enter the realm of the Saying, which Levinas associates with extreme exposure, vulnerability and a sense of defencelessness (15) but also with the birth of ethical commitment and, with it, of “pity, compassion, pardon and proximity” (117). It is this extreme openness to the other that *Apeirogon* applauds in Rami and Bassam and associates with the transformative potential of these spaces of encounter. It is only when people enter them with “nothing but the desire to communicate” that each of these physical locations can turn into “a worldly *mise ensemble* that opens up a meeting space and thereby ‘instigates’ a coming together—if not a wholly new ‘social contract,’ then surely new forms, possibilities, and arenas of sociality” (Moraru 14).

Suspended between the bleak picture of our fragmented, conflicted world and the planetary model of a more harmonious future (both of which shape its structure and its imaginary), *Apeirogon* reveals its affinity with planetary ideas. The future its protagonists look forward to and, even more importantly, attempt to create is neither that of globalized sameness nor that of saccharine utopia. Rather, it is the planetary future best expressed in a section focalized through Rami’s wife, Nurit Peled-Elhanan, a thinker, an activist and a scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a future in which she once saw herself as belonging in

. . . a vast mosaic, Jew Christian Muslim Atheist Other Buddhist, call it what you will, a country that would be complicated, nuanced, democratic, visionary, a place where the idea of hate letters . . . would be anathema to the patriotic imagination, the idea of patriotism applying not necessarily to a country or a nation, but to a state of being which could only rightfully be called human . . . (331)

If we look at the present-day reality of the Middle East, this youthful dream, as Nurit herself admits, seems “almost . . . preposterous” (331). However, if we focus instead on what Rami and Bassam have managed to build on the micro level of their relationship, we can find the planet’s future already realized in the world’s present. To quote from Moraru one last time, their friendship can be seen as one of the “sites in which, however small, unassuming, and geographically and politically circumscribed these gestures, occasions, and places may be, the world ‘worlds’ itself nevertheless, gathers itself together, and . . . shows its face *as world*” (Moraru 14; emphasis in the original). Therefore, even though *Apeirogon* (and its *Ulysses*-driven single-day plotline) opens with a gloomy image of “the hills of Jerusalem [as] a bath of fog” (3) and closes with that of “the hills of Jericho [as] as bath of darkness” (456), the novel refuses to be engulfed by despair, finding hope in the planetary future that Rami and Bassam’s friendship encapsulates. Rejecting the simplistic, binary logic of conflict and confrontation, it chooses to focus on lines of connection, images of human collaboration, and inclusive spaces of encounter. Given this “apeirogon” approach, it only seems right that McCann’s engagement in practices of planetary relationality also involves a recognition of his Irish heritage as exemplified by *Ulysses*.

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Waves of Pixels and Word-generated Algorithms: Drone Poetry as a Collaborative Practice between Machine and Human in *Waveform* by Richard A. Carter

ABSTRACT

The following article explores the creative collaborative practices in digital poetry between more-than-human agents. Richard A. Carter's artistic project *Waveform* (2017–) makes one reconsider the ways in which multimodal and web-based encounters of image, word, sound and movement, and, in the case of Carter's airborne drone, also the political and military, redefine "a literary text" via nonhuman extended perception. Drone-generated poetry challenges a human-centered (literary) perspective, raising questions about AI's creativity and code's generative and aesthetic, and not only functional, potential. The article, drawing upon Raichlen, introduces a comparative platform of waves' mechanics to render the complexity of multimedial digital poetic writing. The focal analytical material provided by Carter results from the (human, machine) vision (of the moving waves) translated into words, generated by the drone, and edited by the human. The article studies the creative process in which the collaboration between more-than-human entities, as its outcome, produces poetic work of artistic value and literary merit.

Keywords: digital literature, drone generated poetry, waves, computer code, multimodality.

WAVES AND ALGORITHMS

The way in which waves are generated bears semblance to algorithmically generative writing. Complicated mathematical equations capture the allegedly whimsical and unpredictably wind-propelled pattern of shallow and deep water waves. These calculations comprise numerous variables, such as the inshore and offshore wave length and height, the gravity's speeding up, the amplitude of the wave's peak, the heaviness of the fluid, to end up with the air concentration and the quickness of water particles moving in a given direction (Raichlen 1–10, 219). Made of the same particles as any other physical entity, the ocean becomes the interface for textual, aural and mobile wave patterns. Fredric Raichlen in his technical study *Waves* explains that the wind's shifting particles and their pressure make waves appear on the surface of water, animating them with wind's intensity and causing their further movement (18). The scientist observes: "The sea surface appears as if a number of waves with different amplitudes, frequencies, directions, and phases were superimposed, resulting in a relatively random variation of the water surface elevation and the wave lengths" (20). Digital writing's equations are no less perplexing. On the one hand, the electronic work is usually, as stressed by the genre's theorists, an outcome of multimodality, combinatorics, interactivity, hypertextuality; on the other hand, there are collaborative practices, a code and algorithms that co-create the digital writing by a random selection of lexical elements. In digital literature, the text cannot simply be approached on its own, taken out of its aquatic online environment. Routinely, images come before the lexia, and the basic units are words and not entire sentences or narratives (Naji, *Digital Poetry* 67). Moreover, as shown by Bell et al., in digital writing, the scope of analyses is much wider, it encompasses visuals and auditory, hyperlinks and the language of programming: in other words, all the aforementioned "different amplitudes, frequencies, directions and phases." The internet, as digital literature's "watery" fluctuating milieu, avails of the technical options transcending print's limits, at the same time expanding the text's cognitive and artistic values. Detached from its online medium, digital poetry, as rightly noted by Bell et al., would not be able to perform the whole spectrum of its creative functions ("A [S]creed for Digital Fiction"). Taking this into account, Hayles in her canonical study *Electronic Literature* emphasizes how much the development of the titular web-based mode of creative expression has changed readers' understanding of what a literary text might mean and how it is (collectively) generated (4). Further, digital writing invites readers to co-create a text composed by and large of

experimental, discontinuous sentence structure and volatile recombined lexicon (Funkhouser 4–6). As a result,

[v]iewers experience a co-ordination of text (text being broadly defined so as to include images, sounds, objects), sometimes indeterminate, sometimes non-linear, and often interactive. As a poetic form, language crafted by mind and machine (through code, and also a language) predominates, and non-verbal elements also create affect and responses translatable into words. (Funkhouser 225)

Bearing the above in mind, in *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, Alice Bell et al. refer to electronic writing as a form of cooperation and exchange. In other words, editors underline dialogic interactions between the digital environment in which writing is generated and textual practice's (wave) form, interpretation(s) and methods of creative signification ("From Theorizing to Analyzing Digital Fiction" 4). Such a stand reinstates a more-than-human position of digital "water" exchanges, empowering them and making them agentic. Wave generation process also involves the collaborative action of wind, sun, sometimes water currents, and sand exchange. As regards wave-forms, Raichlen proves that although waves may seem from the shore to be "a random distribution of wave amplitude and wave length" when studied collectively in clusters, they in fact turn out to be structured by a mathematical formula, not being, at the same time, human regulated or controllable (27). Similarly, it is the collaborative and group dimension of literary practice that distinguishes digital writing. In addition, onshore waves observation depends upon the shifting place of the spectator/s, hence allowing a profusion of view(ing) points.

The following article examines Richard A. Carter's poetic work *Waveform* (2017–). At first the project consisted of a series of drone-captured waves images, followed by machine-generated poems in print, which finally evolved onto a 10-minute online film (2019).¹ The aim of the analysis is to explore how the collaboration between sensing machine, software and human enabled the production of a poetic multimedial outcome of an aesthetic quality. The article locates Carter's project within the current debate on drones, especially in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The final section is dedicated solely to a close reading of drone-generated poems. The unifying point for all the parts is the informative monograph on oceanic waves written by the coastal scientist Fredric Raichlen.

¹ For the author's own critical reading of his video, see Carter's "Waveform" in *Digital Ecologies: Fiction Machines*.

THE WAVES' MOVEMENTS

In the ocean, waves' onshore distribution is always accompanied by their dispersal and the apparent loss of energy being regrouped in different formations. Some literary currents, as proved by Rettberg, also remain regrouped to give origin to new waves. In his study, *Electronic Literature* Rettberg traces the roots of digital literature back to the experimental practices of kinetic poetry, Dadaism, Surrealism, modernism and Fluxus, to name but a few. On the intertextual level, Carter's *Waveform* evokes intertextual and aquatic associations with the modernist prose of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. Importantly, it is not the "theme" that links Carter's *Waveform* with Woolf's poetic prose but rather the writing technique. The waves' particles, as Raichlen argues, do not move in a linear or vertical direction, but in "an elliptical orbit with the major axis" whose diameter subsides (but never disappears entirely) when spinning in shallow waters (10–11). In Woolf's writing, narrative linearity does not exist: instead there are numerous loops, twists and turns, flashbacks and flashforwards. In other words, Woolf writes "beyond words," construing associations that are based upon sensory perceptions. Her stream of consciousness technique blurs the chronological and temporal framework of the wave-journal. The author's writing thrives on excess that spills over the words like the waves' spray ("*The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. . . the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall*" [127]). Furthermore, Woolf's text stresses the agency of wave-writing ("*The waves massed themselves, curved their backs and crashed*" [141]). Likewise, the narrative operates on all five senses: light and sound are particularly foregrounded ("*The waves, as they neared the shore, were robbed of light, and fell in one long concussion, like a wall falling, a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light*" [177]). Woolf's seascapes blur textual and perception divisions: ("*Sky and sea were indistinguishable. The waves breaking spread their white fans far out over the shore, sent white shadows into the recesses of sonorous caves*" [202]). Long twisted sentences meander like seaweed, breaking waves of images, colors, memories and recollections. Similar to Carter, Woolf mediates on how light merges with darkness, land with the sea and sounds with images. The rhythm of the sentences reminds one of the ebb and flow of the ocean. The "heaviness" of print is liquefied by the narrator's own dissolution. Woolf writes: ". . . innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. . . . Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me" (176). In *The Waves*, multiple viewpoints are also underscored: ". . . I saw but was not seen. I walked unshadowed; I came unheralded. . . . Thin as a ghost leaving no trace" (245–46). Digital authors and critics alike readily acknowledge their

creations' links with modernist legacy. No different in this case, referring to Woolf as one of the precursors of hypertextuality, Rettberg praises the writer's innovative approach to narration based upon associative, shifting and fragmentary processes rather than causal narrative chains.

Seeking the grounds for textual online progression, and, at the same time, insisting upon an ontological difference between print and web language, Cayley in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature* puts forward the thesis that literature is becoming digital because everything around us is becoming digital. On the other hand, Rettberg observes aptly that it is not technology *per se* that defines digital writing but the ways in which online literature relates to current artistic engagements, "networked practices and collaboration between agents unfamiliar to each other" (Naji, "The Art of Machine").

A MORE-THAN-HUMAN LOOK AT THE WAVES FROM THE ABOVE: DRONE POETRY

In the case of machine-produced genres of literature, such as drone poetry, the system-engineering and the context of application draw special attention and still incite controversy. When poetry is generated by a reconnaissance machine and military weapon, then, readers are faced even with more questions than merely the issue of shared authorship or a machine's creativity. The operation of drones over the last years has raised many ethical and legal dilemmas, most of which still remain unsolved. Chamayou in *A Theory of the Drone* emphasizes the fact that drones were originally designed as surveilling machines and not combat ones (28). Their main purpose was to observe, provide information and gather data. Chamayou claims that drones were compared to divine eyes, as they guaranteed unceasing and permanent watch (37). It was as late as in the Kosovo war that drones started to be used as assisting military weapons but targeting and killing directly did not begin until Afghanistan (28–29). In the military usage of drones, the territorial allocation is structured into the secure control zone and the operational enemy line (22). Such a binary division results in the further detachment of the body (the human) and the executor (nonhuman), the observing mind and the mobile machine agent (23). This split is probably the most frequently raised argument in drone debates (poetic and non-poetic) and Naji also refers to it in her analysis of Carter's *Waveform* (*Digital Poetry* 60–61). What is more, the protocol for a drone's vision in the army involves "kill boxes," temporally sequencing the space into step by step operational procedures directed at the target (Chamayou 55). However, when a drone's sensory data is turned

into vision, one cannot recognize human faces on screen and only watches obscured silhouettes (117). This way, outcomes are dissociated from deeds and perception is mediated by the interface (118).

In *Waveform* by Richard A. Carter, viewers/readers are mediated by the tangible, moving and observing machine, the software designed, the text on the screen, the literary input, images and finally the soundscapes composed especially for the project. In “Drone Poetry,” Carter admits that due to his interest in sensory digital and textual milieu, he felt the need to explore more diverse interactions between the human and non-human world happening beyond human limits of perception. The viewpoint is always more-than-human because despite the fact that a drone’s movements can be controlled, their far-reaching aerial vision cannot be manipulated during the process of recording. Overall, this detachment, in art, is praised for deferring human-centeredness; in the military context, it is blamed for deferring human responsibility. Occasionally, these two aforementioned stances can overlap, generating a novel angle, as in the case of the Turkish drones Bayraktars.

Taking into account geo-political interactions, in 2022, the war in Ukraine tragically added a new dimension to the drone debate. Drones have been elevated to the symbol of the Ukrainian independence fight and, despite the earlier controversies, they have become the objects of a pop-cultural cult. Importantly, artworks have been dedicated to drones and not to the humans who operate them. Paradoxically, due to the efficiency and spectacular achievements during the first part of the war, drones have gained a widely-recognized agency. From merciless killers of military empires, they have become fighters for the good cause. Facing the overpowering Russian forces, when the war broke out, Bayraktars constituted the main Ukrainian military advantage. The song dedicated to them, “Bayraktar,” openly praises drones’ military potency (explosions, surveillance, setting fires) that managed to challenge the heavily armed Russian troops (“their inventory melted a bit,” “Their arguments are all kinds of weapons / Powerful rockets, machines of iron. / We have a comment on all the arguments”) and pays tribute to the effectiveness of drones’ direct combat from above (“He makes ghosts out of Russian bandits”). The authors of the lyrics created a legend of nearly autonomous machines that astonished everyone; “their tzar knows a new word”² and so did the rest of the world. The crowd-funding for buying Bayraktars turned into a symbol of other countries’ support for the Ukrainians. One could say that many anonymous civilians who contributed financially to this project have

² All the cited fragments of the song come from the website <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/bayraktar-bayraktar.html> (translation by Taras Borovok).

become a part of the wider (military and cultural) collaborative practice. It could be further speculated whether these new variables can contribute to the more favorable reception of drone-generated poetry. Regardless, it seems that Bayraktars have earned the subjectivity of machine-persons who act on their own. To some extent, nowadays, drones are perceived as nonhuman soldiers who write poems.

Carter's multi-phased project *Waveform* originates with a drone registering the movement of the waves close to the Cornish beach. In "Waves to Waveforms," Carter discloses the location as an unfrequented setting called "The Strangles," one known for dangerous currents in whose vicinity underwater data cables were placed. The artist's preferred drone-recorded imagery depicts the diverging bright and murky points of the encounter between the ocean and the coastal shore ("Airborne Inscription" 368). Central to his interest is exploring

. . . how varied phenomena become observable and expressible as data, through the convergence of specific sites of interest, technologies of sensing, and contexts and techniques of interpretation. This is a depiction of the "observable" not as the straightforward detection and recording of latent facts and measurements, but as emerging through a dialogue between multiple actors, both human and nonhuman. (Carter, "Waves to Waveforms")

To code visual coordinates, Carter in "Airborne Inscription" admits that he has created software employing *Processing* operative instruments (368). The method is not unproblematic due to its altering shorelines and changing points of breaking waves (368). The algorithm designed by Carter transforms the digital data of what is movable and volatile into a differentiating line between light and darkness (368). Using the same program and earlier-gathered data feed, Carter has developed the software for teaching drone to generate literary texts of aesthetic values ("Drone Poetry"). The writing software seeks the recurrence rate of specific lexicon sequences and establishes most probable connections and collocations, but it is the algorithm that uses textual data to generate indiscriminate literary and imaginative output ("Airborne Inscription" 369). During this phase, Carter has fed program with wide-ranging publications³ about aquatic worlds (first-hand experiences at sea, fiction and diverse epistemological viewpoints), such as the 19th-century voyage logs, nature philosophy and contemporary reflective works on the ocean expeditions. This way, a drone

³ Among others, Carter enumerates the books such as *Teaching a Stone to Talk* by Annie Dillard (2003), *The Ocean and its Wonders* by R. M. Ballantyne (1874) and A. N. Whitehead's *The Concept of Nature* (1920) ("Airborne Inscription" 369).

has learnt the sea vocabulary filtered through various outlooks, out of which it generated its own poems. The strategy, referred to by Funkhouser as “creative cannibalism” (231) or “mechanically consuming a text to give birth to new text” in the process of “shifting, combined realization,” means that “[e]xternal material is consumed, digested and restated as an altered entity” (230). With coordinates transformed into words, the drone in Carter’s work translates the visual data gathered during flights over waves into poems.

THE COOPERATIVE NETWORKS OF SOFTWARE, HARDWARE AND WETWARE

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According to Funkhouser, digital literature’s non-biocentric and animate elements (or, as it is argued here, aquatic properties), can be almost limitlessly shifted and recombined due to their “plasticity” (4–5) but not loosely removed despite their apparent randomness or incompleteness, since all these volatile components are intertwined, forming “a type of organism” (3). Contrary to one’s assumptions, it is not the method of creation that defines electronic texts but the impact they produce on readers, and the *a/* effect, which, in the case of digital writing, is much more multi-directional and idiosyncratic (Funkhouser 213). In other words, it is the relationality of diverse more-than-human agents and media modalities that composes digital poetry. Hence, the co-operation, which is a common practice among different artists or/coders, also extends into the nonhuman realm. The collaborative practice is based upon a shared networked environment of human and nonhuman subjects, including AI. Moreover, as Zylinska argues, such linkages can be creative and original in their nature because “*AI dreams up the human outside the human*, anticipating both our desires and their fulfillment” (71). Apart from its technical indispensability, the digital medium, as argued by Bell et al., makes it possible for a text to fully realize its lexical, cognitive and theoretical potential, without which the text’s artistic and interpretative dimension would be, to a large extent, deficient (“A [S]creed for Digital Fiction”). Much in agreement with the above, Elizabeth Swanstrom in *Animal, Vegetable, DIGITAL: Experiments in New Media Aesthetics and Environmental Poetics* points out that code’s initial inconspicuousness and its purely technical function has expanded into an artistic dimension of the imaginative kind (19). Elaborating on this idea, Swanstrom writes: “This expressive type of code has a human audience and allows us to consider how computer code is *experienced*, that is, the manner in which it functions cognitively, affectively, and phenomenologically” (19). Likewise, she underscores the inventive materiality of code, emphasizing that expressive code (as she names it) can be identified as “creative,

generative, and world-building” (52). The code’s regularity together with its unpredictable outcome corresponds to what Raichlen calls as “the pulse of the ocean” (37), that is, the ocean’s own fluctuating algorithm. Furthermore, Swanstrom argues that generated codes and that of nature do not differ in a conceptual sense, they are made of more-than-human modules, chemical, biological and non-biological data (52).

As argued in the article, the machines’ operational and originative role in the co-operative aesthetic exchange cannot be undermined and nor can their creativity: “The author/coder can control the structure of the text by controlling the lines of written code but she cannot, even in principle, control the execution or processing of those lines of code” (Strickland). Moreover, it is not only humans that are able to do programming: AI can code even beyond people’s scope of comprehension. With the above in mind, “code is the link between wetware and hardware, or human brains and intelligent machines” (Morris 8). As seen above, the differentiating line between aforementioned collaborative entities is as vague and blurred as the contrast between the land and the sea in Carter’s *Waveform*. Naji in her book *Digital Poetry* (2021) agrees with Hayles that “[w]e can no longer talk of *the machine* impersonally when we are, in fact, connected to and part of it, directing the flowing of digital data” (29). What is more, the critic diagnoses the decrease in human autonomy on behalf of the machine (Naji 84). It can be argued, though, that the aforementioned observation would not breed apprehension if one were to reject the “win or lose” undercurrent in the artistic (poetic) exchange, according to which more independence for the hardware /software necessarily means less freedom for the human (wetware). It is not as simple an equation as it may seem. The power balance is a shifting phenomenon: it depends upon changing circumstances but it does not have to be based upon the scarcity rule. More empowerment to the machine may turn out to be productive and inspiring for all parties as it opens a new, less human-centered, dynamics in their co-operation.

With regard to drone poetry, the aforementioned collaborative context takes the form of co-operative practice between a sensing machine (hardware) and a code or algorithm (software) and human (wetware).⁴ On a declarative level, Carter in *Waveform* perceives a drone as an agent with which he declares to establish a dialogic network, and without which he would be left with nothing more than his own anthropocentric standpoint. Seen in this light, both parties participate in a mutual exchange because nonhuman sensory apparatus expands the scope of both human vision and perception. Carter’s professed motivation is “teaching a drone to write

⁴ For more on the triple division, see Naji’s *Digital Poetry* (35–39).

poetry,” but drones can also teach humans how to see, as their perspective is different than humans. Drawing upon Paglen’s work, Zylinska raises the question of seeing machines, stressing the fact that modern technology enables them autonomy in that sphere and that frequently their vision is not even human-directed (88).

At this stage, one needs to define the role of the human (wetware) in drone-generated poetry. This role is intentionally minimized but not entirely eliminated. Carter calls himself “a curator” and he does acknowledge his involvement in the process of creating *Waveform* (“Airborne Inscription” 367). Following this line of thinking, Rettberg observes that in the future humans will not be able to fully understand AI creative processes, and the poet’s role will be limited to becoming the machine’s editor. In Carter’s case, the very selection of the reading input already pre-determines to some extent the drone’s generating software stylistics. Moreover, the artist and a critic makes decisions regarding which of the drone-generated poems are going to be included in his artwork and which are not to be revealed to the general audience. Thus, in a way, he has already become a machine’s (drone’s) editor. The entire software, transforming visual images into poetic accounts, is designed by Carter so as to be disjoined from a human viewpoint as much as possible. He describes “writing with drone” as a poetic bilateral exchange, but one might wonder whether the author’s well-motivated intentions can suffice to reverse what is so deeply rooted in human culture, namely, the instrumental treatment of machines. Such an attitude, reinstated by common linguistic collocations, encourages people to “use machines” rather than “work with them.” Carter’s own account on “using a drone”—“as opposed to a conventional digital camera, I have sought to present a more explicit instance of an observing agent operating as part of a wider sensory and interpretative network, and so undercutting any notion of sensory systems as presenting a Cartesian ‘view from nowhere,’” he states (“Drone Poetry”)—does acknowledge the agency of the machine, but the verb “using” might be seen, to some extent, as weakening the participatory potential.

WAVEFORM AS A COLLABORATIVE TEXTUAL PRACTICE IN PRINT

As argued above, *Waveform* project is not limited to the printed text and its existence is multimodal and multidimensional. Much in this vein, Hayles draws attention to what she defines as the “distributed” (hence collaborative) nature of digital poetry:

In digital media, the poem has a distributed existence spread among data files and commands, software that executes the commands, and hardware on which the software runs. These digital characteristics imply that the poem ceases to exist as a self-contained object and instead becomes *a process*, an event brought into existence when the program runs on the appropriate software loaded onto the right hardware. (“The Time of Digital Poetry” 181–82)

It is true that without understanding the materiality of the new media, the analyses of digital poetry make no sense, but neither do they when language’s creative and aesthetic function seems to be of secondary importance. Digital poetry resists being downgraded to pure text so as to avoid linearity and spatial anchorage annihilating the temporalities of the reading process which render words as “a line (resting) in space” (Cayley, “Time Code Language” 320). Without losing sight of multimodalities and the online environment, it is also worth considering a close reading interpretation of the drone’s poetic output, which the final part of this article is going to propose.

The printed version of Carter’s *Waveform* exhibits quite clearly the kind of interpretative losses one may have in mind. In print, the text of *Waveform* is indeed static and it does not compete for audience’s attention because waves and ocean images are equally immobilized in time. The role of the machine and code needs to be elaborately explicated in the opening essay as their presence is invisible on paper. The text, supported by latitude and longitude, seems to be stamped by a template that is dying away. Similarly, the ontologically split ocean is rendered on paper as if in diluted watercolors. As a result, print actually dominates and consumes the visuals which appear to create only the blurred background for the words. Printed pages seem to be lighter than the digital “dark” black and white textual event. The “mechanic” collaboration aspect is mellowed in print as the rounded drone-vision shapes are smoothed in comparison to the ragged edges visible on video. Golding aptly coins the phrase “transitional materialities” (252), referring to printed forms that, according to him, seem to go beyond the page in their readiness and anticipation of the digital realm, which might here refer to Carter’s digital and filmic version of his project.

As argued above, an online film medium has completely altered the dynamics of multimodality and the reception of Carter’s entire project. On video, viewers can look as if through the drone’s eyes, images and text are superimposed upon each other, like waves, erasing what comes before and after them. Michael Joyce reminds us that the digital text is “replacing itself” (236). The process can be compared to writing on beach sand: the signs become gradually washed away but the matter of the sand does not change.

THE WAVE SPECTRUM: SOUND, VISION, PIXELS AND WORDS

Raichlen argues that “the spectrum of the sea surface is much like the spectrum of light or that of sound” (22). In his poetic work, Carter acknowledges playing upon the dual meaning of waveform and wavelength, paying tribute to sensor-based technology (“Airborne Inscription” 371). He calls his work “a sensory assemblage” consisting not of “quantifiable data, but of poetic text” (372). The artist summarizes this as follows: “. . . the outlines of incoming ocean waves, and the genealogy behind the arbitrary waveforms of science and engineering, offer an intriguing point of contrast and critical reflection, with the former supplying an evident source of random values for generative writing” (372). Despite a somewhat regular and intrinsic pattern, in the *Waveform* video the procession of waves, textscapes and images remains to a large extent unpredictable but their stylistic (wave)form remains consistent. The recurrent stable triple configuration (the pixelated image; the arbitrary drone-delineated border, separating darkness from light, land from the shore, readers/viewers from the textspace, digital reality from text; and, finally, the code-generated poem) is not accompanied by any sound or movement effects. Poems are composed of one or two-word lines which are always fragments of the larger fragments, never creating a whole. The textscapes appear on screen in uneven intervals; sometimes the audience has to wait for them for a longer time, or to the contrary, one image rushes the other. Like waves, they unexpectedly appear to slow and speed up. Raichlen explains that “[s]ince water surface changes with time, at a fixed location, the water particles’ velocities also change with time. Therefore, there is an acceleration and a deceleration associated with a water particle when the wave passes” (13). In creating the fluctuating and mobile network, the readers/viewers’ control over the digital environment is put into doubt.

The black and white “drone vision” stylistics in which digital recording is set to a considerable degree amplifies estrangement. The waves recorded from above appear defamiliarized: they do not resemble the onshore-seen water formations. Paradoxically, virtual dizziness, which usually arises from waves’ more rapid movement, results from the aerial perspective applied when watching the images from above. The loud sound of breaking waves could not have been recorded by the drone; because of the noisy engine work, drones do not have audio recording devices. Nonetheless, some types of military drones (i.e. Predator and Reaper) can “hear” and understand the electronic transmitters of data, for instance from smart phones (Chamayou 41).

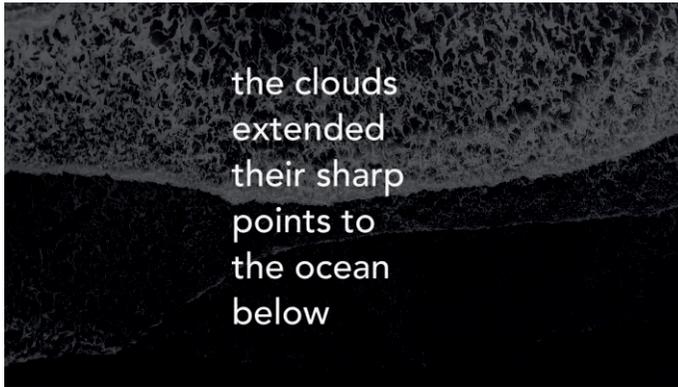
In *Waveform*, the sound, digitally processed, creates a completely novel audio-visual sensation. This “non-drone recorded” soundscape, generated by Mariana López, is heard on and off, as if dissolving the poems, like incoming waves, which appear transient and fast to disperse. The soundscape for the video is looped; after some intervals, it gets repeated endlessly. One can break this repetitiveness thanks to a distinct animals sound, i.e. squeals of the seagulls. Without this the artificial “natural” acoustic clue, it would be nearly impossible to perceive this recurrent audio pattern. Additionally, the audience interactively can “like” or “share” the video and provide the immediate feedback to the artist. Moreover, the video can be stopped at any time or zoomed or rewind.

While watching the video, the pixelated waves remind one that it is not human vision. They appear when the film stops to make room for the textscape; then the sea becomes their interface. The more-than-human perspective brings into focus the overlooked fact that people are not the only observers in the world. We observe each other and are observed by more-than-human beings, be it in the form of surveillance or as data recording. The slow motion and “stopping the image” destroy the fourth wall and shatter audience’s expectations. Being familiar with the cyclic pattern of the video, the absence of the image and sound creates apprehension. Human attention tends to be directed to text but in digital poetry one tends to perceive words as images before their potential arrangements are contemplated semiotically. Memmott argues that “[d]igital poetry presents an expanded field of textuality that moves writing beyond the word to include visual and sound media, animations, and the integrations, disintegrations, and interactions among these signs and sign regimes” (294). In other words, the change from a printed *Waveform* to its film version is not simply an issue of the medium (the soundtrack and the original airborne drone footage were “added”) but the many other variables enumerated above, such as multimodality and immersive engagement, have an impact on viewers’ potential receptiveness.

All of the drone-recorded scenes portray one oceanic process: the breaking of the waves. This is the process in which the waves’ energy seemingly appears to be dispersed in the spray as it is coming to the shore. In reality, the energy’s total does not decrease or increase, only the wave’s length or height might be altered (Raichlen 61), subsequently the new material (sand) is exchanged. What is worth noting is that there is no one single way of waves’ entering the land: they can outpour, spill, subside and dive (62). Unlike the drone’s vision that records indiscriminately, people are not always able to capture such more-than-human modalities, mostly because they are not paying enough attention.

In the opening scene of the film, the large title *Waveform* appears hardly visible on white (spray) images set in nearly equal proportions with regards to the dark land. Then, the situation is inverted. *Waveform* occurs on the contrastive black background in the proportions of 2/3 to the lightness. The duality of the title renders the central dogma of the contrast rule in which the proportions as well as the degree of light and darkness vary all the time, in each and every second of the video. The drone-generated poem appears to be superimposed on the images of waves:⁵

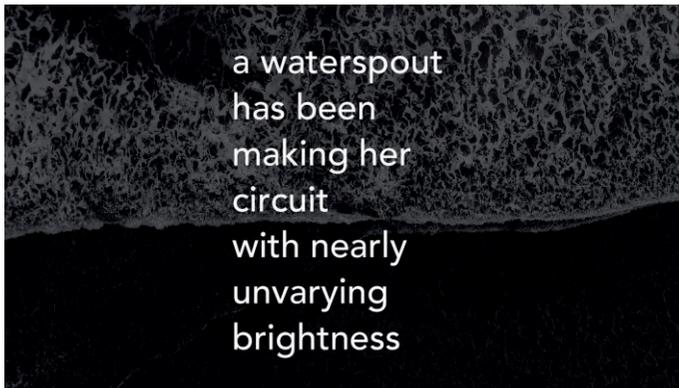
288



The 4-lined text is far from being figurative. The main poetic device here results from the oxymoronic expression about the sharpness of the air. The serration connotes violence (see the military context) and jagged edges of a demarcating line that drone is supposed to draw. Additionally, sharp points bring to mind the raggedness of the machine vision. Readers are informed that the observation point is above the water surface, which is supposed to create an artistic effect of the drone's own aerial account. Many statements here seem to be paradoxical, as if undermining the human-centered viewpoint. The clouds do not have pointed edges and they are limitless, therefore they cannot lengthen (see "extended"). The transparent constituent parts ("points") of air are indeed made of atom particles and so is the observing drone. The ocean situated beneath ("below") the clouds produces mellow soundscapes, which dilutes the raggedness of the visual material.

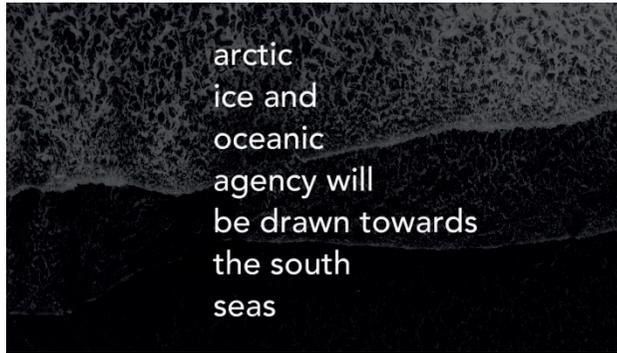
The subsequent task of drawing the boundary is performed far more accurately by drones, which shows that the machine is indeed learning fast. The second textscape follows:

⁵ All the images of screenshots are placed in the text due to the courtesy and permission of Richard A. Carter, for which I am grateful.



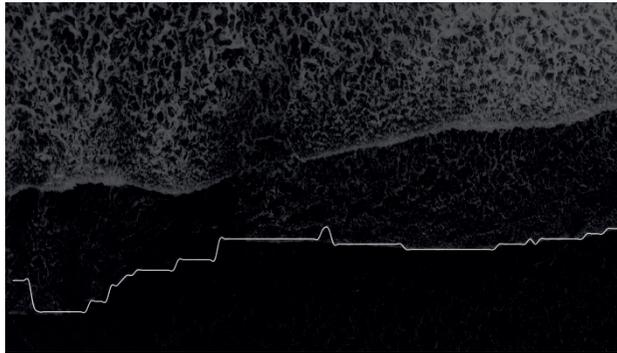
The most imaginatively unexpected part of this poem comes from the usage of the pronoun “her” in relation to a waterspout. The waterspout’s meaning alters depending upon the gender pronoun: cloud vortexes are feminine and the gutter-pipe is masculine. The large lexical disparity between two senses of this term creates an additional humorous effect. The noun denotes a type of cloud (usually a cumulonimbus or a cumulus congestus) that take shape of a whirlwind, which actually can outspread, as the previous poem suggested. The difference to be recognized requires a dictionary entry, which establishes a sort of lexical closeness in human-machine learning. Going round in circles, the waterspout is endowed with agency. Waves are generated by the wind, therefore, any change in the atmosphere, affects the surface of the water. If the previous poem focused on lines and forms, this one concentrates on light and darkness. Once more, a metaphoric element links wave movement with illumination. The modifier “unvarying” with regards to brightness is an overstatement as light nearly always changes and so does human perception of it. One may wonder: can drones perceive light as constant?

The visual image number three may seem misleading at it renders two potential dividing lines: the foamy, disintegrating into the sea, and the latter, spray-less, which encroaches the land. Therefore, the program (drone?) has to decide which one is more “real.” The verdict is made in favor of the line that goes further into the coast, even though it is much more blurred and less sharp in the context of the light/darkness contrast. From a human perspective, such a choice would be disputable, if not erroneous. The clash of perspectives makes one realize the span of more-than-human outlooks. The question remains open which option is to be considered as mistaken and why there cannot be two “right” answers. After the soundscape sequence, the following poem enters:



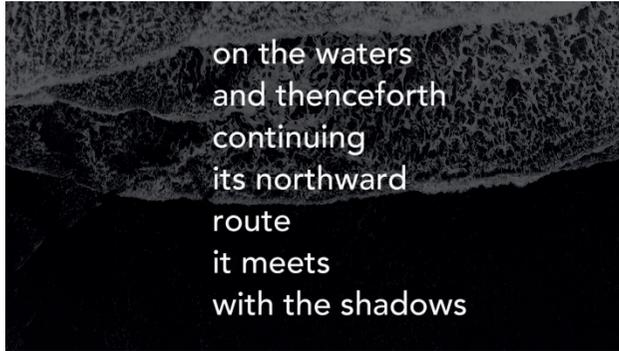
290

The passage above meditates upon the forces that regulate the oceanic cycles. The related phenomenon appears to be alarming. The north arctic areas and their climate should be located as far as possible from the southern regions. The poem in its future form sounds like a grim prophecy of impending doom. Its source is not derived from immediate observations. The Cornish sea temperature ranges from 7 degrees to 18 in summer, hence it is very far from the arctic cold. Moreover, the drone could not have processed the visuals of ice in their observing spot; therefore, this concept must have been obtained indirectly from the literary feed. "Ice and oceanic agency" is an unexpected expression but very accurate, as it renders its formative capacities. Its plural dimension conveys the concept of acting together. Their potency is, however, qualified by a solid force of "being drawn" towards the south. The implied message could relate to climate change, melting icebergs and the rising temperature of water supplies.⁶ Once the ocean's agency is declared, it vanishes immediately when the words fade away.



⁶ In his critical articles about this project, Carter informatively highlights an environmental, ecological reading of his work, but because the artist and other critics after him, have explored this theme extensively, I will not follow this line of thinking.

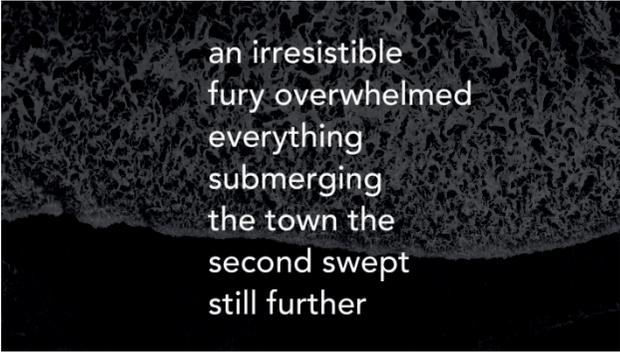
The visuals depicted above render a similar unresolved dilemma: there are two places where the land meets water, and software, as before, draws the line the furthest into the beach. It is an almost accurate line but for the lack of curves. When faced with the choice, the program almost by default chooses the line that seems to be going deepest into the beach. The poem underneath seems to address the “shadowy” question of a choice:



The cited passage is written in the form of a quest journey. The crucial question to consider is the subject of enunciation “it” (the wind? the wave? the drone?). Its non-human form suggests the drone’s aerial explorations. Strickland and Montfort call human-machine creative interaction provocatively a “collaboration with ‘it’” (6), emphasizing how underappreciated in artistic exchanges the role of more-than-human co-authors may be.⁷ The expression “meeting with the shadows” sounds ominous and it renders the part of the journey when courage and determination are put to the test. The antiquated “thenceforth” intensifies the archaic tone of the poem. For drones, shadows are the most challenging points to render them visually since the contrast between the light and darkness is faint and shapes lose their sharp contours. Furthermore, shade is the point when light fuses with darkness, creating chiaroscuro, the points where “either/or” options are not applicable, therefore becoming ambiguous for drones. Overall, the poem reflects upon perpetuation, but this time the movement is directed northwards.

The perfectly edged line (with some circular elements) identifies digital poetic collaborative practice. The words are superseded upon the image located in light, overpowering darkness.

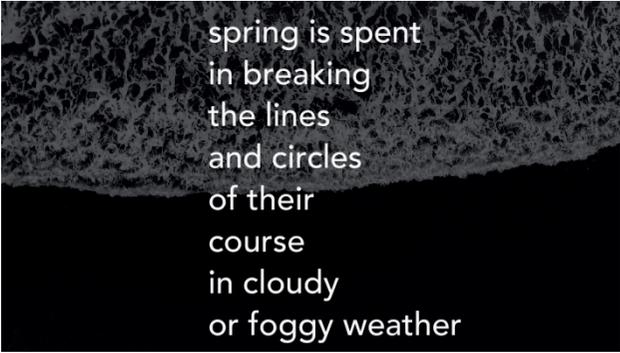
⁷ For more on the collaboration, see “Collaboration and Authority in Electronic Literature” by Wright.



an irresistible
fury overwhelmed
everything
submerging
the town the
second swept
still further

The poem meditates upon the storm or hurricane that sunk human dwellings. This time, however, one can discern the unexpected affect in the selection of lexicon: “irresistible” and “fury,” which conveys rather a human (?) emotive angle. The narrative of people’s settlement, gradually going under the water, is connoted with expressions of unstoppable rage. For the first time, the melodic elements appear: three subsequently alliterated words: “second swept / still” echo with “submerging.” Apart from consonant “s” also “r” is repeated in the opening sequence, echoing the droning sound. The “second swept” could refer to the double lines and the ocean encroaching deeper and deeper into the land, taking back its territory.

The excerpt below brings an almost bucolic tone:



spring is spent
in breaking
the lines
and circles
of their
course
in cloudy
or foggy weather

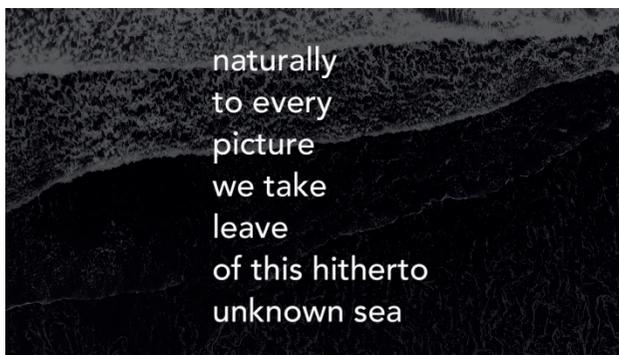
The passage above seems to resemble the Middle English frivolous and joyful adorations of the end of winter. The fragment introduces a concept of seasons. It puts the visual date on a temporal scale of the beginning of the new cycle. However this temporality somehow clashes with the chronological video output. One might get the impression that the drone’s watch (surveillance) never ends. Once again we have two alliterated initial words: “spring” and “spent,” the passive construction seems to refer to

the older (formal) versions of English rather than contemporary ones. At that stage, the atmospheric conditions (“cloudy,” “foggy”) make the observation difficult, if not impossible. “Breaking the (waves?) lines and circles” appears to refer to the flaws and irregularities in drawing the line between the sea and the land. The textspaces do not terminate or begin; they are fragments, loosely related to each other, and readers can replay them as many times as they want:



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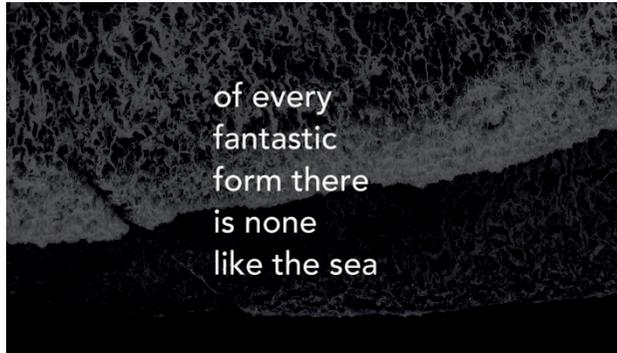
The poem explores the destructive activities of humans with regards to the ocean. “Men” (humans? or male mariners?) who succeeded in their “unearthing” toil appear to be rendered with an ironic twist. “Throw up” evokes bringing to light, along with devastating by turning things upside down. The sea’s vulnerable liquidity clashes with firm foundations. The process related in the poem might also be a comment on how images are structured on video in their fluid form.



The poem seems to be ungrammatical, its twisting sequence suggesting breaks in the half of the narrative. This time the subject “we” remains unclear: it is not certain whether it refers to people, drones, or their more-than-human collaboration. The passage ironically opens with “naturally” although there

is nothing “natural” either in the form, text or images that readers follow. The collocations of “naturally” with “every picture” intensifies a paradoxical message. “We take / leave”—the equity sign is created between moving and staying, comparable to the flows and ebbs. “Hitherto” sounds archaic, which destabilizes the temporal framework. Every image that is recorded corresponds to the one that is still ahead, to the “unknown sea.”

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The final poem constitutes an homage to the sea: surprisingly, the drone this time produces a relaxed and even exhilarated output. It generates a clear note of emphasis, even surplus, in this passage. Yet “fantastic form” is not an expression commonly heard with regard to the ocean. There is a note of falseness in it, which would stand out in the Turing test. It brings to mind the altering dynamics of the machine-human vulnerabilities. The ocean remains the nearly Platonic form, ideal and permanent essence, yet whose substance is always changing. Because one cannot regulate in advance a generative poetic practice, it also means accepting the random and changeable outcome of multimodal interactions.

On the one hand, the vulnerabilities of the drone’s vision enable humans to identify to some extent with its imperfections but its scope and viewpoint always remains more-than-human. On the other hand, bearing the military dimension in mind, they also demarcate a fragile and imprecise line between observation and killing. What is perceived as belonging to the so-called natural world and what to the so-called constructed world becomes blurred in *Waveform*. “Natural” waves become “artificially” pixelated and their “original” sound is technologically simulated as well. Yet it is no sooner than with the arrival of the graphic drawn boundaries of the machine vision that readers become confronted with arbitrariness of their seeing concepts. Last but not least, imposing the words upon the waves/image digitally processed and presented from more than human perspective distorts the arbitrary line between the mediated vision and the so-called reality.

In conclusion, as shown above, drone-generated poetry encompasses diverse variables within a human-machine and waves cooperative spectrum. Instead of assuming an environmental or sensory-engineering angle, the article has attempted to approach drone-generated poems as textscapes that cannot be analyzed outside the digital realm and without taking multimodality or code into account. Not reducing digital literature to analogue writing, drone-generated poems create an aesthetic and literary output of the human-machine collaboration, revealing the points of tension and the vulnerabilities of such exchanges.

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“English with a Polish Accent and a Slight Touch of Irish”: Multilingualism in Polish Migrant Theatre

ABSTRACT

Issues of migration writing (see Kosmalska) and migrant theatre have recently gained prominence, leading to an increase in research focused on analyzing the theatrical works of artists with a migrant background. This phenomenon is part of a broader trend in intercultural and, often, postcolonial studies. Contemporary Polish migrant theatre is a subject that has not been thoroughly explored yet. Among many methods applied in the study of migrant theatre, intercultural studies or the so-called new interculturalism take the lead. These concepts draw on bilingualism or multilingualism practices, which are slowly taking a more significant role in migrant theatre studies. This article analyzes two theatre plays staged by Polish migrants in Ireland and in the United Kingdom in the context of linguistic practices that exemplify and help define the concept of transnational drama.

Keywords: bilingualism, multilingualism, migrant theatre, intercultural theatre.

In the introduction to *Dramaturgy of Migration*, editors Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny discuss the role of contemporary drama, including transnational drama, in the construction of “performative encounters” (14). Meerzon and Pewny address two problems in their work. The first issue concerns a shift in the perspective towards the performing arts, in which one can observe an increased focus on the creative process itself: a phenomenon they characterize as “encounters” in contemporary theatre. The second issue, which arises from today’s global context, relates to migration and the identification of a specific form or sub-genre known as “migrant theatre.” Meerzon and Pewny develop their own terms—“performative encounters” and “dramaturgy of migration”—to foreground the specific nature of transnational dramaturgy present in theatre in the last two decades.¹ The authors draw upon research by Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt who have noticed “a shift in dramaturgy as the practice has come to focus increasingly on creating encounters between the performance and its public, between the object *seen* and the subject *seeing*” (qtd. in Meerzon and Pewny 13). Since language, understood as a code necessary for communication, is key in creating a given encounter or performance, it is also an important element of the emerging transnational dramaturgy.

Meerzon and Pewny note that the aim of their work is to “encourage a dialogue on the function of dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg in constructing performative encounters within the conditions of onstage and offstage multilingualism caused by the realities of global movements” (13). Following this approach, one can pose a more precise question about how language, including accent, contributes to the creation of performative encounters. These encounters, understood as both a process and a performance, involve collaboration² on several levels. The

¹ Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny conducted a research project titled “Migration and Multilingualism” at the University of Ghent between 2016 and 2018. Initially, their focus was to examine migrant theatres in Europe, and they published their findings in a special issue of *Modern Drama* (vol. 61, no. 3, 2018). Subsequently, they broadened the scope of their research by introducing new concepts, including *performative encounters*, which they found to be a prevalent component in many activities within migrant communities. This concept is not limited to indicating the final product, such as a play or an urban space performance. The term *encounter* in contemporary theatre also encompasses the context—the so-called new interculturalism (see McIvor, “Staging the ‘New Irish’” and “Introduction: New Directions?”). In this framework, the term *encounter* extends beyond the theatrical context to include other social activities.

² The creative process in theatre always requires collaboration. Theatre, as an art form is multimodal and employs a variety of communicative tools, ranging from spoken words and music to stage movements and scenery with props. The performance is therefore an outcome of collaboration between a number of different creators. Their collective effort becomes an indispensable driving force that breathes life into a theatrical performance. Another important aspect is the nature of this collaboration: in the case of migrant theatre,

most important is the dramaturgical level, which includes the creation, development and evolution of content into a kind of code. The next level involves presentation/performance, which provides a platform for the signature features of migrant theatre. Examples of such features include a foreign accent in the dialogue of the characters/actors and the absence of linguistic “correctness”—the traits that are distinctive not just to the migrant characters in the play but also to migrant actors. Given that only a handful of academic texts within theatre studies concentrate exclusively on the topic of language employed on stage, this article primarily explores matters concerning language.

The main aim of the article is to identify platforms of collaboration at various levels in two migrant plays to illustrate how transnational dramaturgy and performance come into being. The works selected for analysis are *Bubble Revolution* (2013) and *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve* (2021), adapted by Kasia Lech, a migrant who moved from Poland to Ireland. These works were chosen because they incorporate two aspects of transtextuality that are of particular interest to this paper: language and identity.

THEATRE OF POLISH MIGRANTS—A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

In 1994, after the political transformation in Poland, a monograph edited by Izolda Kiec, Dobrochna Ratajczakowa and Jacek Wachowski entitled *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji 1939–1989* (*Theatre and Drama of Polish Emigration 1939–1989*) was published. It was one of the last works analyzing the rather homogenous theatre and drama created by Polish artists in exile.³ Although the challenges these artists faced may be comparable to the experiences of contemporary migrant artists, the reasons for and context of migration were undoubtedly different.⁴ In the preface to *Teatr i dramat polskiej emigracji*, Ratajczakowa wrote that “the émigré playwright . . . addressed their works to the émigré stage,

collaboration often springs from an initial meeting of individuals who transform their encounter into a performative act. Collaboration within such a form is therefore multi-layered. This concept is explored in greater detail later in this article.

³ One of the most recent major scholarly works on Polish émigré theatre is the publication by Dariusz Kosiński and Emil Orzechowski “Teatr polski poza krajem” (“Polish Theatre Abroad”), edited by Marta Fik, published in *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX wieku* in 2000. Kosiński and Orzechowski discuss the typology of Polish theatre, including different forms of presentation and presence of Polish performances abroad.

⁴ Between 1939 and 1989, Polish migrants and their theatre and drama were primarily driven by political factors while the predominant motivator post-1989 has been economic migration.

[they] became a medium of their time, an exponent of the difficult situation of emigrants” (8).⁵

Contemporary migration writing often focuses on issues such as challenges related to the work or the process of settling down in foreign society and culture, which were and still are relevant to migrant communities. However, several aspects concerning the creation and operation of migrant theatres have changed. One of these aspects is the form of migrant theatre that stems from the process of “performative encounter”: it often uses a workshop method employed by a multilingual artistic and production team and is designed to appeal to a diverse, multiethnic audience. Other changes can be observed in cultural policy⁶ and in the institutions fostering the growth of migrant theatres, such as the Almeida Theatre in London, the Upstairs Theatre in Dublin or the Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Berlin. These changes reflect a response to societal shifts (e.g., the increase in migrant and refugee populations) and the ongoing development of European society. Theatre has exceeded the framework of literary drama and, as noted by Wolf-Dieter Ernst, it has changed its character from a presentation of results to a shared discussion, exchange of information or an encounter (57). In the context of the trans-, inter- and cross-cultural challenges of contemporary theatre, it can be observed that until 1989 the research on Polish migrant theatre focused primarily on Polish-language theatre created abroad. Nowadays, the category of language is not an exclusionary one. Although contemporary theatre research has yet to develop its own new categories, which take into account transculturalism and multilingualism and can be applied in an analysis of Polish migrant theatre, recent scholarly works have begun to examine linguistic forms in migrant theatre, including the use of multiple languages (see Elwira M. Grossman, “Dwu(wiele) języczny teatr” and “Staging Polish Migration”).

⁵ “Emigracyjny dramatopisarz . . . adresował utwory na emigracyjną scenę, stawał się swoistym medium swego czasu, wyrazicielem trudnej sytuacji emigrantów” (Ratajczakowa 8). Translated by the authors.

⁶ The changes in cultural policy involve successive introduction of new trends that are not only aimed at the well-established model of democratization of culture, but go further towards cultural democracy. The democratization of culture is a process that renders cultural events accessible to social groups at risk of exclusion. It is the belief that institutionally recognized culture—particularly that which is subsidized by public funds—should be accessible to the broadest possible audience due to its inherent value and potential to positively influence the lives of all recipients. On the other hand, cultural democracy allows social groups themselves (such as migrants, ethnic minorities, LGBT+ communities, and more) to create art and cultural events that reflect their perspectives and realities. This approach includes acknowledging and funding minority cultures and trends that may differ from those traditionally considered most valuable within a given culture (see Hadley; Duelund; *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*).

INTERCULTURALISM AS A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR PRACTICAL OPERATIONS

Interculturalism is a concept with no single definition. Rather, each scholar who delves into interpreting this phenomenon ties it to their personal life experiences, their geopolitical context or generational perspective. This article employs the concept of interculturalism in theatre with a primary focus on the collaboration of languages or linguistic codes. It relates selected academic approaches to intercultural theatre to support the argument that Polish migrant theatre has an inherent intercultural character and should be analyzed within the paradigm of new interculturalism.

The concept of intercultural theatre emerged in the 1980s to characterize phenomena such as Peter Brook's theatre, and more precisely his 1985 production of *The Mahabharata*. Erika Fischer-Lichte believes that this play initiated an important discussion about the framework and boundaries of intercultural theatre ("Interweaving Performance Cultures"). Fischer-Lichte also discusses other contributors to intercultural theatre, such as Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson or Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa (ibid.). These names represent the so-called "Western and other" or "Eastern culture in cooperation with Western culture" framework and point to the gist of the problem of intercultural theatre—what Daphne E. Lei refers to as "hegemonic intercultural theatre [HIT]" (571). Lei notes that HIT "is a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labour, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance traditions" (571). Similarly, Fischer-Lichte, renowned for her detailed analysis of interculturalism in theatre, articulated in a 2011 discussion with Rustom Bharucha that the term "intercultural" "always indicated a mixture of something Western and non-Western. Not of something within Africa, or between Africa and Latin America, or between different Asian states. No, these relationships had nothing to do with 'intercultural.' 'Intercultural' referred to those theatre forms that positioned the West against the rest" (Fischer-Lichte and Bharucha). Fischer-Lichte proposes an alternative: the German term "Verflechtungen"—the author explains that it carries a similar meaning to "interweaving performance cultures" or the "interweaving of cultures in performance" (Fischer-Lichte and Bharucha). She is not alone in viewing the concept of intercultural theatre as a potential risk of marginalizing many artistic activities of today. Ric Knowles, a Canadian scholar who draws on his experiences in Toronto—"the world's most intercultural city" ("Multicultural Text" 73)—also argues that intercultural theatre is not a satisfactory term. What the researchers have to take into account today is, as Knowles notes, "a new

kind of rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal) intercultural performance-from-below . . . that no longer retains a West and the rest binary, that is no longer dominated by charismatic white men or performed before audiences assumed to be monochromatic" (*Theatre* 79). Therefore, it is necessary to consider how such negative experiences stemming from the hegemonic intercultural model might impact the collaborative model. Is the preconceived hierarchical structure of the performance imposed by a white director—a representative of the West—a platform for collaboration or rather a reproduction of imperialist models echoing colonial themes? The answer to this and other questions about intercultural theatre—a term that is challenging to describe and often carries negative implications—can be found in an approach known as “new interculturalism.” This approach not only addresses the challenges associated with interculturalism but also embraces new structures and serves as a foundation for non-hierarchical collaboration. McIvor writes that “new interculturalism’s major point of reference is materialist histories of colonialism, global capital, migration, and conflict, among other factors that undergird each and every instance of intercultural exchange and enunciation shared between individuals and amongst groups” (“Introduction: New Directions?” 6). Research in intercultural theatre carried out in the context of new interculturalism therefore encompasses relationships that dismantle binary divisions, leading to the diminishing prominence of Western theatre as the primary reference point. New interculturalism is an approach that involves examining “intercultural flows/encounters from the perspective of non-Western minority or subaltern stakeholders” (4). It also prioritizes “local rather than distance-based models of intercultural exchange” and is “driven by intersectional feminist approaches which engage the entanglement of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion” (*ibid.*). Hence the framework proposed by McIvor seems to offer an apt context for analysis of phenomena such as the theatre of Polish migrants.

Contemporary research on Polish migrant theatre in Europe must, therefore, take into account the complexity of values included in the term “intercultural theatre.” Current research indicates that an increasing number of boundaries and divisions both in cultural policy and scientific approach to trans- and interculturalism are being questioned or redefined. The concept of intercultural theatre was introduced through the studies of Western scholars which focused on mainstream theatre research, like Erika Fischer-Lichte and Patrice Pavis. However, academics such as Ric Knowles and Charlotte McIvor, observing the development of the societies in which they operate (Toronto and Ireland respectively), highlight the inadequacy of the term “interculturalism” in theatre and performance studies and the need for a research framework based on new interculturalism. As

McIvor notes, new interculturalism “is driven by minority and subaltern voices, whether gathered in diverse, contemporary urban locations or excavated from the recesses of colonial archives shaped by the ‘ambiguities and performative accretions that characterize the historical record’” (“Introduction: New Directions?” 1). Contemporary Polish migrant theatre serves as a platform for amplifying the voices of a community that, until now, has remained largely unheard. It also offers a space of expression for women who are actively protesting against the populist regime in Poland. Notably, the creators of *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve* draw inspiration from Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady*—a 19th-century text that explores the liberation of the Polish nation from the yoke of partitions. In contemporary discourse, the enduring dependence of the Polish nation on occupying powers—Prussia, Austria and Russia—is often compared to colonialism (Conrad; Kołodziejczyk; Borkowska; Thompson).

This article therefore argues that the selected plays, *Bubble Revolution* and *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve*, are exponents of theatre forms within the new interculturalism framework. The practices of Polish Theatre Ireland (*Bubble Revolution*) and the Almeida Theatre (*Dziady/Forefather’s Eve*), examined in this article, address the issue of providing a platform for expression for Polish minority theatre. This niche theatre originates from Poland, which despite being part of Europe, has often been viewed, according to different theorists, as a colonized country (during the 18th and 19th centuries) or a dependent country (during the 20th century under USSR dominance) (Thompson; Koczanowicz; Kołodziejczyk; Borkowska), and therefore its theatre is not considered part of Western production. However, due to the increasing popularity of new interculturalism and the substantial presence of Polish migrants actively engaging in various artistic activities, the performances created by Polish artists in Ireland and the UK are gaining visibility and significance among intercultural audiences, and should therefore be analyzed as examples of new interculturalism.

The performances selected for analysis highlight different models of collaboration that are typical of new interculturalism. For example, after each performance of *Bubble Revolution*, the actress Kasia Lech gathered feedback from the audience and adjusted the next performance according to their suggestions—this is an illustration of the collaboration between the actress and the local, multicultural audience. *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve*, in turn, exemplifies intercultural collaboration between a group of actresses who come from different ethnic backgrounds. Their distinctive accents permeate one another on stage, producing a unique multicultural performance. What is characteristic of these models of collaboration is that they are non-hierarchical: there is no powerful figure of a director who has full control over the performance but instead the whole multicultural team

works together, sharing a variety of artistic, technical and organizational responsibilities, to put on a play. It is also typical that this team organizes a series of artistic workshops, during which all participants contribute to the creation of a unified concept for the performance.

BUBBLE REVOLUTION AS AN EXAMPLE OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL COLLABORATION

Polish Theatre Ireland was founded in Dublin in 2008 in response to a growing need for a theatre that would represent the Polish diaspora in Ireland.⁷ Instead of being limited to artists of Polish origin, the group sought collaboration with local artists in order to create intercultural theatre, which would be performed both in Polish and English. The repertoire of PTI included a few shows performed in Polish and twice as many in English. The group staged contemporary Polish drama, with an aim to show “Irish audiences how Polish mentality and national Polish identity face contemporary Polish reality and how much it is rooted in the communism past” (*Polish Theatre Ireland*). *Bubble Revolution* marked the final production in the history of this group. The choice of this play by Polish Theatre Ireland was motivated not only by the former success of *Foreign Bodies*, performed by the same actress, but also by the narrative applied in this production—a narrative of a generation witnessing a political transformation in their childhood, a generation of individuals with raised hopes, who were painfully disappointed in their adulthood by the effects of social and political changes. The representatives of this generation, as the group notes, emigrated to Ireland (and other countries) after Poland’s accession to the European Union in 2004. Disillusionment with the lives they led in Poland became a driving force for the members of Polish Theatre Ireland to explore intercultural theatre in Dublin. This venture became both a necessity and a challenge in a cosmopolitan city.

Rewolucja Balonowa/Bubble Revolution was written by Julia Holewińska in 2011 and premiered on stage at Zygmunt Hübner Powszechny Theatre in Warsaw in the same year. The Dublin premiere was held at the Theatre Upstairs, a lively theatre venue for diverse intercultural creativity. *Bubble Revolution* is a monodrama performed by Kasia Lech and directed by John Currivan. The script was adapted from the play by Julia Holewińska and translated into English by Artur Zapałowski, although the final text was, in fact, developed by Lech, who also played the main role. As Lech notes, the performance of *Bubble Revolution* is “an act of multi-

⁷ Information obtained during consultations with Kasia Lech.

layered translation that is both linguistic and contextual, both textual and performative, and both domesticating and foreignising” (Lech 45).

The main character in *Bubble Revolution*, Wiktoria, later Vica, is a “transformational orphan”⁸ (Świąder-Puchowska), a member of a generation disappointed and alienated by the outcomes of political transformation in Poland. This narrative illustrates a common strategy in the dramaturgy of migrants—the “dramaturgy of the self” which “[reflects] the everyday alienation experienced by both migrant theatre makers and their audiences” (Meerzon and Pewny, “Introduction. Dramaturgy of Self” 14). It should be acknowledged, however, that this model of narrative chosen and adapted by the creators of Polish Theatre Ireland is revealed only on stage in the text adapted by Kasia Lech (a little differently each time). Thus the strategy “of the self” observed here is applied at the level of narration in the play script. As Elwira M. Grossman notes, the migrant-transcultural dramaturgy exists in “a space between languages, cultures and traditions” which she labelled “the space of transcultural idioms” (“Staging Polish Migration” 24). Thus each performance entails a direct narrative of the creators-migrants addressing the society they live in and tackling identity issues (i.e. *Bubble Revolution* by Holewińska). The actress playing Vica, Kasia Lech, writes:

As Vica and I renegotiate our identity (and the text of the translation) in response to the cultural contexts we have encountered (partly through the audience), spectators may open themselves to a similar process. By facilitating the spectators’ search for new ways to respond to my foreignness, I work to strengthen the political potential arising from the translational context. I start the English-language play in Polish: “Wszystko zaczęło się od gumy do żucia” (Holewińska, *Rewolucja* 1), which I immediately translate: “It all started with bubble gum” (Holewińska, *Bubble Revolution* 1). The Polish line is a spontaneous reaction to discovering childhood treasures; the English one recognises the presence of the audience and that they might not have understood what I said. (48)

This practice also initiates a certain level of cooperation with the audience. They are encouraged to embrace the idea that they might not or even must not understand every single word of the performance, and that they might feel uncomfortable, because they are taking part in a performance that engages both the senses and emotions as it seeks to become a performative encounter. *Bubble Revolution* premiered in Dublin in 2013 and then was staged over fifty times in Ireland and the UK by Polish Theatre Ireland. Only a few of those performances were played entirely in Polish for

⁸ “Transformacyjna sierota” (translated by the authors).

Polish migrants living abroad; the rest were performed in English—or more precisely in the English and Polish bilingual weave—for the local, multicultural audiences. Kasia Lech was born and educated in Poland, although at the time of co-creating and performing the play, she had lived intermittently in Poland, Ireland and the United Kingdom. The main character, Vica, and Lech have age, nationality and native language in common. Consequently, Lech's identity as an actor becomes entwined with her portrayal of the character in the play. As Lech states, the key element in her creative process was “a dialogic empathy”—“an emotional connection based on a ‘constant and open-ended engagement’ between the actor and the audience” (47) as a way of facilitating communication with the audience of a multilingual production.

As the performer notes, the line in Polish at the beginning of the play was an impromptu response to a childhood memory, while its English translation demonstrated the actress's awareness of her English-speaking audience and the possibility of not being understood (Lech 48). This act of translation places Lech-as-Vica in the role of a translator which Lech maintains throughout the play (48). To exemplify this, when Vica has a phone conversation in Polish, it is promptly explained in English; when Vica sings the Polish anthem, the line “z ziemi włoskiej do Polski” (“to Poland from the Italian land”) is translated into English as a reference to the character's affair with an Italian man; when Vica teaches the audience a Polish word for Granny (Babcia)—she translates it into English only twice to show her emotional connection with this word and this person; when Vica sings, the songs are translated into English and performed over Polish-language recordings (48–49). As Lech states, her real-time translation of the songs is also linked with Vica's narrative. To illustrate this, Lech recalls performing a song by a Polish band, Republika, titled “Telefony” (“Telephones”). It is performed both in English and Polish in order to demonstrate Vica's struggles—fear of responsibilities and obligations. In the last stanza, Polish and English mix and compete, creating a “tension between the source and the translation” which “is meant to add more layers to Vica's struggles and illustrate that Vica's story is a complex translation both in language and in meaning” (49). This process of interweaving languages and translation not only facilitates the abovementioned “dialogic empathy,” but also enables the performer to “[claim her] ownership of English as a non-native speaker” (50). Lech, both as Vica and a performer, communicates and performs in a language that is not her mother tongue, hence the role of a translator “encompasses [her] identities as an actor and as a character” (51). The act of translating in real-time introduces another layer of dramatical dimension to the performance; it transforms it into a manifesto of a generation grappling with issues of identity (52).

As regards the issue of collaboration in the development of the script, it is essential to note that this is much more than a mere cooperation between the author-translator and the director of the play. The author of the adaptation, playwright Kasia Lech, contributes a layer of meta-narrative to the text—she puts her character, Vica, in the role of a co-creator of the performance on stage. As Lech states, this type of translation can “present [Vica] as a dramaturg: someone who can control and manipulate the narrative” (50). The author further notes that this process is “in line with Vica’s attempts to ‘translate’ her history into a fairy tale and hide her anxiety” (50). Vica in the role of a dramaturg “attempts to take ownership of her story and its staging” (50).

The intertwining between the creators and the stage characters at the level of presentation can be challenging to describe in simple terms. It fundamentally concerns the manner in which the multimedia message, the acting, as well as the accent and pronunciation presented on stage reach the audience. Elwira M. Grossman explored the role of accent in British representations of Polish migrants in her article on multilingualism in Polish migrant theatre in Great Britain. The researcher believes that the accent “colours the performative dimension of the whole performance” (“Staging Polish Migration” 25). The “imperfect” pronunciation, which characterizes both the actor and the stage character, contributes to the intercultural nature of the performance. Grossman further notes that accent in British culture is a marker of both one’s origin and identity (32). Therefore, exploring both elements of a performance—*what* is being said on stage and *how* it is being said—establish the intercultural character of theatre. Furthermore, the collaboration of individuals from different cultural backgrounds in the production of a theatre performance increases the likelihood of the message being understood by the audience. As Lech noted, the linguistic process in *Bubble Revolution* was a matter of renegotiation of identity—the audience encountered an actress who offered a culturally-challenging message, altered by non-native pronunciation. While performing, Lech attributed the accent to Vica, although she did not distance herself from her own linguistic imperfections:

Vica is trying to “correct” her Irish sounds with failed attempts at standard British pronunciation. She complains about her life saying, “Our bloody Polish bad luck” (Holewińska, *Bubble Revolution* 5); I pronounce “bloody” and “luck” with the Dublin Irish [ʊ] instead of /ʌ/, whilst at the same time stating that Vica and I are Polish. Another word I play on is “bubble,” pronounced whenever Vica feels in control as [bʌbl] and, in moments when Vica’s mask starts stripping off, as [bɒbl]. To take it further, English-language posters inform the audience that the play is “performed in English with a Polish accent and a slight touch of Irish.” (Lech 50)

Lech's statement is not only an important point in the analysis of the effect of accent in performance, but it also signifies a departure from the seemingly binary system of Polish language vs. English language and Polish theatre vs. Irish theatre. Consequently, it highlights the validity of adopting the concept of new interculturalism, where the inclusion of a multilingual layer not only serves as a foundation for collaboration between artists but also between the members of a non-homogenous audience.

DZIADY/FOREFATHER'S EVE AS AN EXAMPLE OF BILINGUALISM ON THE STAGE

Another performance that demonstrates strategies of multilingualism/bilingualism and transtextuality is *Dziady/Forefather's Eve*. The play was performed live and recorded on 28 May 2021, at the Almeida Theatre in London. It was part of the broader initiative named "Six Artists in Search of a Play" that aimed to place the Almeida Theatre in a more intercultural setting. The play-script was adapted by Kasia Lech from the translation of Adam Mickiewicz's drama *Dziady*, while the *spiritus movens* behind the project was Nastazja Domaradzka, also a migrant of Polish origin. It should be noted that Mickiewicz's *Dziady* was written in exile and many fragments of this drama express the poet's longing for his homeland, which resonates with the themes present in contemporary migrant theatre.

The artists, Lech and Domaradzka, transfer the male narrative into the modern world of women—a chorus of women who fight in political demonstrations—and more precisely, to the Polish Women's Strike which occurred in Poland during 2020–21. The fragments adapted in the play come from Parts II and III of *Dziady (Forefather's Eve)* by Mickiewicz and include, for instance, "The Vision of Father Peter," "Warsaw Salon" and "The Great Improvisation." The performance in the form of a performative reading begins with a song by Taco Hemingway, "Polskie Tango" ("Polish Tango"). The role of the song is to familiarize the audience with the economic, political and social situation in Poland in the 1990s and the lyrics are also partially in English. The song is followed by an introduction that is meant to provide the audience of diverse cultural background with an insight into the play's origin and the political views of the creators:

Kudzanayi: *Dziady's* main character is Romantic lover Gustaw who transforms himself into the national hero Konrad. He is an icon of Polish patriotic arts.

Michelle: Women in *Dziady* are limited to an innocent girl, a lover, and a Polish Mother, raising her sons for Poland and watching them die for it, similarly to Mary raising Jesus, so he can be sacrificed for the sinners of the world.

Edyta: Last time I stood on this stage, I played a Polish cleaner.
(Domaradzka)

During the performance, the audience witnesses women from different ethnic backgrounds united by a common stance—to resist the male-dominated narration and the stereotypical portrayal of women (for example, the depiction of Polish migrant women as either cleaners or prostitutes). With this performance, Domaradzka and Lech partake in the activities of intercultural theatre as described by Daphne P. Lei, who states that “intercultural theatre has diversified and multiplied as the discourse has been enriched and complicated by other pressing issues like gender, diaspora, ethnicity, and globalization” (qtd. in McIvor, “Introduction: New Directions?” 6). Domaradzka and Lech present a contrast between the stereotypical representation of a patriotic hero and that of a cleaner, a stereotype frequently portrayed in the media and explored in migrant literature. This comparison shows characteristics of new interculturalism, which emphasizes the “reconstitution of individual and community identities and subject positions” (Lei qtd. in McIvor, “Introduction: New Directions?” 10). The only unresolved matter concerns the outcome of the process of stereotype renegotiation. The use of transtextuality as a strategy, incorporating elements such as Taco Hemingway’s music, widely recognized Polish lullabies and social slogans, highlights problems encountered by migrant women of different backgrounds. Their collective voices urge the audience to reconsider and reconstruct ingrained stereotypical beliefs.

The script of Domaradzka’s play was primarily adapted from the most recent and complete translation of Mickiewicz’s drama by Charles S. Kraszewski (2016), although one fragment, “The Revenge Song,” is based on the translation by Dorothea Prall Radin (1925). The language form of this performance can be described as bilingual, as the play involves both consecutive and simultaneous translation from Polish to English (which is sometimes whispered from the stage). According to the playwright Kasia Lech, her intention was to create a kind of collage by playing with language and exploiting the opportunities presented by the bilingual structure of the play.⁹ The result was that several parts of the

⁹ Information obtained during consultations with Kasia Lech.

play were presented in English, while others were exclusively delivered in Polish; certain parts were translated by the chorus or individual chorus characters, while others were performed by Gustaw/Konrad in Polish, and the chorus performed them (at times in a whisper) in English. The first scene of the play, in which the main character and one of chorus characters recite a fragment of a widely recognized Polish poem,¹⁰ exemplifies Lech's objective:

Patrycja: Kto Ty jesteś?
 Chorus: Who are you?
 Edyta: Chłopiec mały, Polak mały, Konrad mały.
 Patrycja: A little boy, a little Pole, little Konrad.
 Naomi: Jaki znak Twój?
 Chorus: What's your emblem?
 Edyta: Orzeł Biały. (Domaradzka)

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This linguistic collage produced by the main character Edyta/Konrad, two other characters, Patrycja and Naomi, and the chorus, includes not only Polish-to-English translation or shifting between these two languages, but also foreign-accented Polish speech (Naomi). This linguistic collage is used throughout the entire play. A fragment of "The Great Improvisation" from Part III is recited by Gustaw/Konrad in Polish and simultaneously whispered in English by the chorus in the background; "The Revenge Song," which is repeated throughout the play several times, is performed in English by Gustaw/Konrad and repeated by the chorus in English. As Elwira M. Grossman aptly put it, "in certain scenes, Polish is but an echo, in others the same is true of English" ("Staging Polish Migration" 38).

One purpose of this bilingual weave is to reflect the conflicted personality of the protagonist. The adversities experienced by Gustaw/Konrad, the protagonist of Mickiewicz's drama, are mirrored in the tribulations faced by contemporary Polish migrants, particularly with regard to the function and significance of the Polish language in the public space in the migratory context. In Mickiewicz's drama, Gustaw is portrayed as a romantic lover, while Konrad is depicted as a nonconformist poet who rejects societal norms. Domaradzka's play features a female character caught between two cultures and languages. The bilingual strategy applied in the play entails processes of inclusiveness. Since the creators of *Dziady/Forefather's Eve* wish to be acknowledged and recognized on the intercultural stage, they address a wider audience, although its members may not always share their experiences or "the transcultural space created and presented on

¹⁰ "Wyznanie Wiary Dziecięcia Polskiego" ("Polish Child's Proclamation of Faith") by Władysław Brejza (1900).

stage” (Grossman, “Staging Polish Migration” 26). The resounding voice and the performance of the chorus of women fighting for their rights is audible and the play continues to generate discussions (e.g., reactions and comments to the recording of the play on YouTube). The linguistic value of the performance attests to the fact that it is a group of migrant women who receive recognition. By speaking in their native language they are offered a chance to express themselves and explore their identity.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to identify various platforms of collaboration present in the selected plays. As has been illustrated, these collaborations occur at different levels, from creating the script through negotiating the language of performance to selecting the actor’s accent. The important features of these collaborations are their non-hierarchical nature and the inclusion of different ethnic groups in the production process. This is a significant change from the traditional intercultural theatre of Western mainstream directors, as described in the introduction to *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (Pavis).

The plays *Bubble Revolution* (2013) and *Dziady/Forefather’s Eve* (2021) provide examples of this new non-hierarchical and multicultural collaboration among artists. In these plays, the performance itself becomes a performative encounter and the choice of language as a medium of artistic expression becomes a theatrical device. Another important aspect is translation that adds yet another dimension to collaboration. The theatre group works together to translate the script (often into a few different languages), then they translate aspects that may remain incomprehensible due to the language barrier into gestures, movement and props, and finally, after the performance, the actors collaborate with the audience to find out whether the message of their performance was understood. This complex process of translation was employed both in *Dziady* and in *Bubble Revolution*. The latter play—as Lech writes in her article—is “performed in English with a Polish accent and a slight touch of Irish” (50). The process of developing a performance collaboratively with the emphasis on multilingualism places the productions of migrant theatres within the framework of transnational drama practices.

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Artist Collaboration and Unity in Times of Crisis: The *Spirals* Project

ABSTRACT

The pandemic crisis of COVID-19 that we have recently endured, and that to some extent we are still experiencing, abruptly changed the way in which we conceive of the interaction between inner and outer space. Specifically, during the most difficult times caused by the two severe lockdowns, this limitation came complete with a total lack of spatial mobility. This article will explore the impact that this had upon the creative process of writing and making performance work for the female subject and how the return to the domestic space as the only possibility, affected their writing and creativity. Using the concept of the “nomadic subject” developed by Rosi Braidotti in 1996 and revised in 2011 in her book *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, this article aims to explore these questions from the intersection of body and language through the symbol of the spiral as a source of creation.

Keywords: nomadic subject, female subject, performance, embodiment, desire, COVID-19.

This article reflects upon unity and collaboration in artistic creation during times of crisis by focusing on the project *Spirals* developed by PartSuspended artist collective. In particular, it deals with the concepts of unity and collaboration as creativity within times of enforced isolation, absence and individuality caused by the critical times of COVID-19. The pandemic crisis that we have recently endured, and which to some extent we are still experiencing, abruptly changed the way in which we conceived of the interaction between the inner and outer space. During the most difficult times caused by the two severe lockdowns, this limitation led to a total and complete lack of spatial mobility. The article explores the following questions: what kind of impact did the enforced isolation have upon the creative process of writing and making performance work for PartSuspended artist collective? How did the return to the domestic space as the only possibility affect their writing and creativity as female artists? Using the concept of the “nomadic subject” developed by Rosi Braidotti in 1996 and revised in 2011 in her book *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, this article aims to explore the aforementioned questions from the intersection between body and language through the symbol of the spiral as a source of creation. This point constitutes the basis of the project *Spirals* and questions the extent to which the constant and repetitive motion shaped in a circular form destabilized historical and preexisting conceptions of feminine subjectivity from the perspective of sexual difference as developed by Rosi Braidotti.

In order to put forward this enquiry, the article shall refer to the extent to which the interaction between the particular experiences of the female subject and the limitation—or lack—of spatial mobility, foregrounds creative action and proposes alternative forms of “being together” from the perspective of the sexual difference. This consideration is an important point in the process of becoming of the feminine subject that weaves a particular net of connection with the other. As we shall see, the woman writer or the woman artist constructs and reconstructs through the movement of a spiral an alternative, circular and transgressive space at the time that she creates. In Rosi Braidotti’s words:

The nomadic subject functions as a relay team: she connects, circulates, moves on; she does not form identification, but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. The nomad is a transgressive identity whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why she can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections. (42)

Within this theoretical framework, the project *Spirals* goes beyond the poetic creative experience and incorporates practice-as-research into related areas such as language, images, sounds, city-spaces and voice within the symbolic space. In this sense, art is understood as praxis and relates personal experiences to theoretical configurations of female subjectivity. Given the connections between PartSuspended's *modus operandi* and the theoretical framework of the "nomadic subject," this article shall suggest that collaborative art can be taken as the mechanism/tool/form whereby the female subject intervenes in the existing structure of signification at times when all kinds of action are either limited or relegated to silence. Prior to analyzing this point, the need to consider creation and art through the lens of practice-as-research for the female artist should be foregrounded.

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PARTSUSPENDED: CREATION THROUGH PRACTICE-AS-RESEARCH



Fig. 1. PartSuspended, *SPIRALS: Turning Points* (London, Dorset, Athens, Agost), 2020, https://youtu.be/Vcp4Dt4_e_Y, © PartSuspended.

One of the principal points that Braidotti relates to the consideration of the female subject as nomadic relates to the need to think beyond traditional forms of thought and challenge the boundaries that separate reason from imagination and critique from creativity. In this sense, creation unveils an intrinsic imaginative element embedded in such an act that "strives to create collectively empowering alternatives. The imagination is not utopian, but rather transformative and inspirational. It expresses an active commitment

to the construction of social horizons of hope. Hope is a vote of confidence in the future” (Braidotti 14). This perspective connects with one of the kernels of PartSuspended artist collective. PartSuspended artist collective was founded in 2006 and they are particularly interested in feminist work that focuses on issues emerging from personal and collective experience, domestic actions, the poetic text, social spaces and architecture. They employ a range of performance practices, such as physical work, devising, writing, video and sound work that have been presented in a variety of forms, including live performances, installations, exhibitions, publications, participatory workshops. Their projects are often multilingual so as to remain inclusive and expand language boundaries; multidisciplinary, in order to encourage a creative dialogue between fields of study; and multimedia, so as to explore the intersection between performance as a place and time-bound event and technology. Their work has been presented at a variety of venues and international festivals in the UK, Spain, Greece, Serbia and Czech Republic.

The core members of PartSuspended artist collective (Noèlia Díaz Vicedo, Hari Marini, Barbara Bridger, Georgia Kalogeropoulou) are researchers as well as artists, whose academic interests cover a wide range of disciplines, such as architecture, urban studies, cultural studies, women’s literature, feminism, performance writing and philosophy. Departing from conventional quantitative and qualitative models of research, the collective embraces practice-as-research strategies and creative practice that shapes and informs research. It is not only Braidotti who has suggested the need to put creation and imagination at the centre of meaning-making; Brad Haseman has also stated that “[p]ractice-led research is intrinsically experiential” and that often its methodological approach to identifying the research problem, outlining the objectives, reflecting and evaluating the outcome may differ from traditional research methodologies” (100). The method of working, the research problem and research questions are shaped by particular thoughts and desires in relation to individual experience. Practice is a critical part of research and deepens connections and alternative pathways of inquiry. As Haseman points out, “[t]he ‘practice’ in ‘practice-led research’ is primary—it is not an optional extra; it is the necessary pre-condition of engagement in performative research” (103).

PartSuspended seeks to explore ways of practising and researching, eschewing traditional strategies and narratives. By carrying out experiments for testing concepts and practical investigation, the collective creates material through writing, editing, improvisation, reflection and discussion. In each project the collective sets up questions and areas of research, exploring different angles of looking at the project; a creative dialogue across disciplines and research interests is initiated. In this sense, the special

issue “On Spirals” published in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies* (Bridger, Kalogeropoulou, Marini and Díaz Vicedo 155–89) integrated a collection of essays built on the different layers of thought that each member of the collective was interested in exploring. Barbara Bridger explored “Spiral as Metaphor,” Hari Marini focused on “A Woman’s Spiral in Cityscape,” Noèlia Díaz Vicedo analyzed “The Female Poet Creates Spirals: A Question of Nomadism?” and Georgia Kalogeropoulou centred her research on “Desire and Rage: A Female Spiral.”

Since the late-twentieth century, practice-as-research has become a significant though controversial paradigm of conducting research and was introduced in the academic setting. According to Baz Kershaw et al., the “practice turn” was “characterised by post-binary commitment to activity (rather than structure), process (rather than fixity), action (rather than representation), collectiveness (rather than individualism), reflexivity (rather than self-consciousness), and more” (63–64). In their work, as in other similar creative processes that seek non-traditional, non-hierarchical structures, the *process* itself is a significant part of the creative journey. Furthermore, collaboration is one of the main ingredients of their practice, and a precondition for any performance work that seeks to incorporate a range of different perspectives and promote polyvocality. Collectiveness and multiplicity of voices and actions contribute to the production of creative strategies rather than a fixed methodology that applies to any project and participant.

It usually demands time and dedication for a group to create their own codes of collaboration and strategies for balancing the collective and the individual perspectives. Tim Etchells, the artistic director and founding member of the renowned experimental theatre company Forced Entertainment, wonders: “[O]r is collaboration this: a kind of complex game of consequences or Chinese whispers—a good way of confounding intentions?” (55). Collaboration entails misunderstandings as well as trust; failing as well as discoveries; confusion as well as clarity. Certainly, collaborative processes allow for a plurality of voices to be heard and open endless possibilities in exploring the subject matter. This kind of freedom can provoke chaos, frustration, anxiety or uncertainty, but it is also where flexibility, diversity, surprises and intuitions may emerge.

Although methods of creative enquiry have shaken established scholarly research approaches, the way in which knowledge through practice is produced and the value of it are still somehow in dispute. Reflecting on the binary opposition between practice and theory that has proved challenging within academic studies, Dwight Conquergood explains that the way that knowledge is organized in the academy mainly supports “a distance perspective” rather than “a view from ground level, in the thick of things” (312). He states:

The dominant way of knowing in the academy is that of empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: “knowing that,” and “knowing about.” This is a view from above the object of inquiry: knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print. This propositional knowledge is shadowed by another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: “knowing how,” and “knowing who.” This is a view from ground level, in the thick of things. (312)

PartSuspended is interested not only in the rupture between life and art but also in keeping artistic work as an on-going process and in a sense unfinished. Furthermore, the name of the collective, PartSuspended, seeks to reveal an intrinsic part and aim of the collective. On the one hand, it shows the connection of their work with contemporary urban spaces given that “part suspended” is used on the announcement boards of London Underground when a disruption happens. On the other hand, it implies the way that the collective embraces creatively unexpected encounters, unforeseen interruptions and postponements. They have often presented projects as *being-in-progress*. This is mainly derived from the thought that the multiplicity of stories co-existing in life opposes the notion that there is only one teleological line of thought, a final outcome, or one way of exploring the complexities of a number of matters through creative processes. As Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling observe:

[A] group devising process is more likely to engender a performance that has multiple perspective, that does not promote one, authoritative, “version” or interpretation, and that may reflect the complexities of contemporary experience and the variety of narratives that constantly intersect with, inform, and the very real ways, construct our lives. (192)

PartSuspended collective are interested in positioning themselves within the matter explored through performance means. Their personal responses and embodied experience are part of the process itself and feed into their research. They are looking for a “hands-on participation and personal connection,” to borrow Conquergood’s words. This is particularly significant for the female subject not only as an artist but also as a substance of feminist thought. Braidotti has urged the feminist nomadic subject to break free from what Teresa de Lauretis has called “The Oedipal Plot” of theoretical work (1986) (qtd. in Braditotti 23). The members of the collective dedicate themselves to the creative process, whilst caring for and trusting one another. During the challenging pandemic period, the need to rethink their ways of collaborating and making creative work emerged, alongside the need to support one another and resist isolation. The concept of care moved into

the foreground and became a vital element to be considered as part of their practice. However, prior to engaging with this point, the next section will deal with the provocations emerging from the shape and motion of a spiral.

SPIRAL: A SYMBOL OF BECOMING



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Fig. 2. PartSuspended, *SPIRALS: Breath* (London, Dorset, Athens, Agost), 2021, <https://youtu.be/YfvSeDlZkUE>, © PartSuspended.

The complete 2020 lockdown in the UK coincided with the coming of Spring and many of us relieved our isolation by spending time outside. Walking, or in the garden, I became acutely aware of the prevalence of the spiral form in nature: the scales on a pine cone, the formation of leaves or petals on a stem, the curl of a snail shell, the twist of a vine, the Fibonacci series at the centre of every daisy and the uncoiling tendrils of a fern. As time went on, I made new spirals out of existing spiral forms: a whorl of empty snail shells, a curl of cones: spirals within spirals. As part of PartSuspended's process, we shared our spiral images; our many natural versions of this form and this sharing connected our different experiences. The spiral form held us together and when one or other of us became too tightly coiled and turned in on ourselves, it repeatedly demonstrated the possibility of movement and growth. (Bridger, Personal note)

As Barbara Bridger states, the first lockdown in the UK in March 2020 found PartSuspended artist collective working on *Spirals*. The project started in 2013 and it is an on-going collaborative and interdisciplinary

project that involves international female poets and artists, and brings together performance, poetry, video-work, music, live performance and public intervention. As the artist collective describes on their website:

Spirals is a poetic journey that crosses geographical borders and unites European female voices in an exchange of languages, cultures, personal narratives and modes of expression. Through the symbol of the spiral, the project explores thresholds, migration, path, nature, home and sense of belonging; the spiral acts as a sign of becoming, transforming and awareness. Poems written by contemporary female poets, recorded material, music and movement are part of a series of performances, photography and video-work. Women create and walk on spirals in a variety of places, such as London, Broadstairs, Coventry, Barcelona, Athens and Belgrade. Traces of care, joy, pain, friendship, womanhood, decay, imaginings, betrayal, frustration, time and love are left behind.

Folding and Unfolding.

Spiralling and waxing. Spiralling and waning.

Spiralling and resolving. Spiralling and transforming. (*Spirals*)

For this project, the collective has collaborated with contemporary female creators: poets, performers, musicians, video-makers, and has created video-poems based on the symbol of a spiral and female poetry. The filming has taken place in a variety of spaces and countries, such as the ruins of Coventry Cathedral in the UK, a derelict textile factory in Spain, the backyard of the Kulturni Centar in Serbia, a ruined open-air theatre in Greece. Thus, after the first two performances on the project *Spirals: Eternity* (2013) and *Spirals: Galaxies of Women* (2017), both filmed and presented in London, the next step of the poetic journey was *Spirals: Genesis* (London 2017) based on poems by Catalan poet Noèlia Díaz Vicedo, and in 2018 the project moved to Barcelona where Beatriz Viol's poetry developed *Spirals: Tracks for Finding Home*. In the same year, Hari Marini's poems were taken as part of *Spirals: 28 Paths of Her* performed and filmed in Broadstairs (United Kingdom), and the city of Athens was the location for *Spirals: Flamingo* by Greek poet Eirini Margariti. In 2019, Barbara Bridger's poems for *Spirals: As If* were filmed and performed at the old Coventry Cathedral that was bombed by the Blitz in 1940 and in the same year Belgrade poet Ana Rodic produced the project *Spirals: Autoportret*.

Spirals is a multi-layered project that invites a range of interpretations, given its fluidity regarding collaborative methods, spaces employed and public engagement. However, the central role that each location plays forms an important parameter in the performance making. The creative

use of city-spaces through the symbol of a spiral emphasizes the idea that cities are an ever-changing and shared space. As the urban geographer Tim Hall asserts: “[T]he only consistent thing about cities is that they are always changing” (1). Besides, within the shifting urban environments, the project emphasizes women’s experiences of spaces and time and invites artists and audience to engage with female artistic work that goes beyond geographical borders. The feminist geographer Doreen Massey suggests that “[t]he identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” and she claims: “the particularity of any place is . . . constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that ‘beyond’” (5, italics in the original). In this way, place can be considered as “open and porous” (Massey 5). The *Spirals* project’s engagement with a variety of places showcases the plurality of city-spaces and voices as well as the links between them, and thus, emphasizes the power of “going beyond” (geographical, cultural, linguistic) boundaries and revealing the porosity of places—in Rosi Braidotti’s words: “[T]he frequency of the spatial reference expresses the simultaneity of nomadic status and the need to draw maps; each text is like a cap site” (47).

As Braidotti states, the nomadic subject can only be manifested through the connection with the other from different forms, therefore, this movement that breaks the linear form of subjectivity at the same time constructs another new form of interaction that can only be circular, particularly in the shape of a spiral. The female artists of PartSuspended move and create spirals as a form of expanding the boundaries of culture. The circular movement and shape of a spiral connects to the basic notion of the concept of becoming foregrounded in the process of becoming. Braidotti has stated in her book that the philosophical interest subjacent to such configuration results from the attempt to bridge the existent void between the personal experiences of the feminine subject and the way in which this subject is represented.

Taking biographical events of her own experience as a migrant and as a polyglot, Braidotti explores theoretically the discourses of sexual difference in relation to the formation of the subject and tries to provide the necessary points to destabilize the monolithic aspects of the subject, conceptualized by patriarchal tradition as masculine, from a European feminist perspective. Thus, Braidotti, who follows a creative approach to theoretical thought and writing, as we have seen above, refers to the concept of “nomadic subject” not as a fixed framework that determines space and time but as what she has conceived as a “navigational tool” (18) that allows the exploration from the multiplicity, interconnectedness

and circulation of the female subject. In this sense, the parameters of the “nomadic subject” sustain the theoretical and creative aims of the project *Spirals*, providing an alternative form of approaching “the other,” of collaborating and creating differently and this point became essential, as we shall see below, during the period of lockdown for the possibilities of productivity and creation.

Through the symbol of a spiral, the project underlines how opposite lands meet; how time is linked to the cyclical movement of exploration, migration, discovery, path and nature; and how we can open a common space for dialogue and sharing through multimedia, performance and poetry. The female creators make their presence visible either through their physical actions or voice, challenging the prevailing narratives of cityscapes. The project has been presented in a variety of forms and places. It fosters collaboration and creativity across art forms and reinforces the value of sharing, transforming and reconnecting. This has proven particularly important under the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic when physical contact and live interaction had to be halted. In the following section, we will discuss how care and hope were reframed and re-emerged as significant elements of our practical work during the pandemic.

SPIRALS: TURNING POINTS: HOPE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

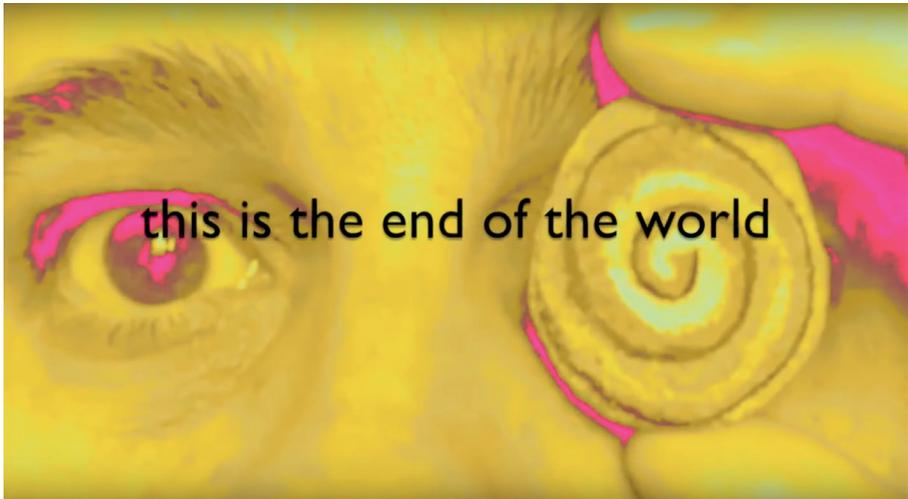


Fig. 3. PartSuspended, *SPIRALS: Turning Points* (London, Dorset, Athens, Agost), 2020, https://youtu.be/Vcp4Dt4_e_Y, © PartSuspended.

If we turn our gaze to the more distant future, the future which is unknown both to you and to us too, we can only tell you this: when all of this is over, the world won't be the same. (Melandri)

In her article “A Letter to the UK from Italy: This Is What We Know about Your Future,” published in March 2020, the Italian novelist Francesca Melandri warned the rest of the world about the consequences of living under the condition of COVID-19 lockdown that was spreading fast globally. Repetition, isolation, grief, rage, and despair would appear a few months later in the UK as well as in other countries in Europe and the rest of the world. The dystopian landscape, the fear, the uncertainty about the future and death had shaded our lives. In many instances, public health institutions were unable to handle the crisis caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Migrants, minorities, and low-paid workers who had been greatly affected by the crisis had often been left without support (Zarkov). Women and children were exposed to domestic violence. Surveillance and police violence increased in an effort to enforce measures that ensure safety in public space (Honey- Rosés et al.). We mourned the death of millions of people,¹ whilst it felt like that the world would not and possibly *should not* be the same.

Within this dystopic landscape, unable to meet in person or intervene in public spaces, PartSuspended had to rethink their way of working and to reassess the value of their artistic work. What could collaborative performance work offer and communicate about/in this critical period? What could artistic collaboration and expression tell us about the tension between hope and despair? How could female artists express their visions and help us imagine a brighter future? The core of PartSuspended artist collective—Bridger, Díaz Vicedo, Kalogeropoulou, Marini—held regular meetings every week to reflect on their work under these unprecedented circumstances and they were often accompanied by other artists such as Tuna Erdem and Seda Ergul,² Alessandra Cianetti,³ Nisha Ramayya.⁴ Holding this virtual space open and supportive was vital in order to create a sense of belonging. Artistic creation seemed to have been displaced by a more urgent form of survival: care. Caring for one another shifted from an intuitive response to the crisis to a source of artistic inspiration.

¹ According to the World Health Organization, there have been 3,530,582 confirmed deaths globally, as of 30 May 2021 (see “WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard”).

² Tuna Erdem and Seda Ergul are founders of Queer Art Projects.

³ Alessandra Cianetti is a curator, creative producer, researcher and writer, and founder of performingborders.

⁴ Nisha Ramayya is a poet and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Queen Mary University of London.

In times of crisis, the need to incorporate the notion of care into artistic work is imperative. Artist, activist, Professor of Contemporary Performance at Queen Mary University of London and co-founder of Split Britches⁵ theatre company Lois Weaver, has been making performance work and developing feminist performance methodologies by considering “care” as a fundamental gesture of her work. In the last two decades, projects such as *Long Table* (initiated in 2003), *Porch Sitting* (initiated in 2012), *Care Café* (initiated in 2016)⁶ have been added to the outstanding body of her performance work. In these projects, Weaver has devised participatory performance structures that encourage open-ended discussions and activity formats, underpinning “the interconnection of disparate peoples and places through the principle of care and gathering” (Weaver and Maxwell 88). Her work is formed by the need for care for both performers and participants, which also shapes the aesthetics of the performative actions and the structure of the written text. For Weaver caring is a radical act as she states:

Care has become a central component to my practice, performance and research in recent years, made necessary in part by age (as I approach my seventies), by the aftermath of stroke (in case of my performance partner, Peggy Shaw), and by the need to respond to hierarchies, systems and global events that render “caring” a radical act. (87)

The tension derived from the unparalleled situation of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was gradually considered as a call for artistic action by members of the collective. Not only were there moments of sadness, anger, frustration, but also ones of reflection, laughter and hope. An essential exercise on memory and embodied position certified the subject’s mortality, the importance of living together, the necessity of unity, the power of shared experience. Furthermore, despite awareness of the spatial reference, the meaning of borders—geographical, political, cultural—was contested in a tangible way as Rebecca Morelle stated: “[T]he virus doesn’t respect borders, or nationalities, or age, or sex or religion.” It was also a reminder of the looping forms of ecological systems and “how all organisms and substances are inextricably linked on our planet” (Spalink and Winn-Lenetsky 2).

Whilst the world population “entered a new age of contagion, social suspicion and anxiety” (Spalink and Winn-Lenetsky 1), the impact of less CO₂ emissions on the environment and the air pollution decline was evident

⁵ Split Britches was founded in 1980 by Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Deb Margolin.

⁶ PartSuspended presented their video-work *Spirals: Breath* (London, Dorset, Agost, Athens, 2021) and discussed their work practices in the online event *Rituals of Care*, which was facilitated by Lois Weaver and Aoife Scott as part of Peopling the Palace(s) Festival in June 2021.

in many parts of the world. The quietness of streets and city-spaces made cities less hostile places for birds and wild animals who made their appearance in urban landscapes as well as in waterways (“Coronavirus: Wild Animals”). In addition, green outdoors spaces in cities attracted people’s attention and appreciation, as they were often part of their daily walks. Parks, gardens, trees offered citizens a way to find comfort and inspiration. The possibility of shifting spaces from indoors to outdoors opened up a possibility for re-discovering natural landscapes and their potential creative inspiration, also unveiling the nomadic subject’s relationship with the earth as transitional and defined by passages “without predetermined destinations or lost homelands. The nomad’s relationship to earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation: the antithesis of the farmer, the nomad gathers, reaps, and exchanges, but does not exploit” (Braidotti 60).

With regard to climate change and ecological and political dilemmas, the COVID-19 outbreak also inspired discussions on the concept of “dark ecology” as another source of artistic possibility based on the emergence of hope. Angenette Spalink and Jonah Winn-Lenetsky point out that this term could address “the tension between desiring to feel hopeful about the future while simultaneously believing this hope to be naïve” (1). In this sense, the concept of hope and its possible implications on the situation and feeling of uncertainty became another fundamental point that not only emerged as a matter of discussions among the members of PartSuspended but also was placed at the heart of practical experimentations during the pandemic period.

The results of such artistic practice were displayed in the video-production *Spirals: Turning Points*.⁷ The raw material used for this work gathered images of domestic spaces, sky perspectives, images of nature, etc. filmed during the first quarantine. The fragmented shots included a flock flying and shaping patterns in the sky in Agost (Spain) filmed by Noèlia Díaz-Vicedo; Barbara Bridger filmed the yellow lilies growing in her garden in Devon (United Kingdom); Georgia Kalogeropoulou filmed the thin lines of a spider web being intertwined with the railing in her balcony in London (United Kingdom); and Hari Marini filmed the trees on a mountain close to Athens (Greece). The progression of such images of hope and serenity were intersected by the following phrases that were heard in different languages (English, Spanish, Turkish, Greek) and repeated throughout: “This is the end of the world, as you, we knew it. I cannot hug you. I will hug you.” Apocalyptic words that reflected a pessimistic, dystopian and gloomy landscape anticipated an end but the visual images of nature and the last phrase “I will hug you” implied the possibility of a new beginning and

⁷ See PartSuspended webpage: <https://www.partsuspended.com/productions/current/spirals/>

human contact; a chance to change. Although the fear of the unknown and uncertainty foregrounded the production and had an impact on emotional, professional and creative life, the need to remain active artistically, to keep observing the reality and to communicate through work persevered and guided PartSuspended thoughts, desires and practical explorations.

Uncertainty can lead to despair and hopelessness; it can provoke suffering. However, it also implies the possibility of change; a change that can bring alternative perspectives on both creation and thought. It can be considered as a fissure that allows things to be open, to be in process, to be unfinished and questionable. Uncertainty hides within itself the seed of hope. As Rebecca Solnit claims,

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Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. (14)

Members of PartSuspended embraced this moment of uncertainty without dismissing the destruction and suffering that this period provoked. As Solnit specifies, “[i]t’s important to say what hope is not: it is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction” (13). Experiencing and practising during such a dark period entailed suffering, but also demanded a greater effort in focusing on the function of artistic work as a celebration of human contact and empathy. Uncertainty and instability provoked periods of writing, dreaming, and laughing, as well as periods of silence and reflection. The sense of time and space felt at times compressed and at others expanded. Moments of praising life were followed by moments of frustration. In keeping active the artistic production and developing strategies for practical work not only envisioned an adaptation to the current reality but also fuelled hope for collective actions. Collective actions entail subversiveness, understanding, but also joy, in Braidotti’s words: “[I]here is a strong aesthetic dimension in the quest for alternative nomadic figurations, and feminist theory, as I practise it, is informed by this joyful nomadic force” (29). Uncertainty became a crack from which care and hope could spring through images and words spiralling in a continuous motion.

Georgia Kalogeropoulou wrote the following poem about the power of words that describes the transitory experience that the collective was experiencing and the potentiality they granted to these words and the images that they could create. This potential force, envisioned in the

spiralling motion of the rhythm of the poem, concedes to the poetic word the power of ritual, thus connecting one another in a vital and creative way:

The power of words
The power of community
The power of us getting together and connecting our voices
The power of ritual
Turning our rage into a powerful signal
Having trust and faith to each other
Keep going

Don't stop now
(Kalogeropoulou)

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Although confined and limited to exclusively inhabiting domestic space, the collective managed to create a virtual space by using technology, in which each one of the artists could co-exist not synchronically but diachronically through filming, editing and making video-works. For the video-work *Spirals: Turning Points* created during the first lockdown, PartSuspended compiled texts, images, videos, music taken from the “Diary of Quarantine Dreams” collectively generated through assembling night dreams during the quarantine. Following on from the work *Turning Points*, PartSuspended produced a second video entitled *Spirals: Breath*, which was created during the second lockdown. This second piece of work engages intrinsically again with the written word produced mainly during online interaction.

In the video-work *Spirals: Breath*, the following poem written by Barbara Bridger is entwined with the phrase “Breathe in. Breathe out. I cannot breathe. She cannot breathe. He cannot breathe. They cannot breathe. We cannot breathe. Last breath. First Breath.” Bridger’s poem was created after a Zoom meeting in which the collective reflected on the consequences of considering breath (as well as touch) as one of the main bodily functions that helped spread the COVID-19 virus. In this poem, Bridger relates to the act of laughing as a reactionary moment against uncertainty and the need to display that, despite the dystopic landscape that surrounded the times of lockdown, the quest for points of transfiguration could also be shared as moments of joy.

Written in memory of our laughter

LAUGHTER

we open our mouths wide
throw our heads back

bare our teeth
and bark out bursts of breath

we laugh
and share what's deep inside us
with another
face to face

but then comes a time
when we must stop
we step back
and lower our masked heads

we're waiting
waiting with baited breath
waiting
until we can laugh again
(Bridger, Poem)

SPIRALS IN MOTION: EMBODIMENT AND DESIRE



Fig. 4. PartSuspended, *SPIRALS: Breath* (London, Dorset, Athens, Agost), 2021, <https://youtu.be/YfvSeDIZkUE>, © PartSuspended.

This sense of uncertainty mentioned above, inevitably fragmented the basis of the existing structure of the PartSuspended collective and their particular experiences as female subjects. The discontinuity inherent in the female

subject between body, space and language is one of the key aspects of the project *Spirals*. As mentioned earlier, each one of the *Spirals* productions took place in a specific space and in a particular country. This cartographic precision anchors the position of the female subject within the public spaces of cities and within the multiple polyphony of European languages (Spanish, English, Greek, Catalan and Serbian). Therefore, language connects the images, the movement of the body, the music, the particular experience and the world, the synchrony of the female subject in relation to the body and the diachrony in relation to the cultural and social history of their subjectivity. In this sense, the construction of each one of the spirals is set up in an embodied motion that grounds the intersection between subjectivity and desire, intertwined in a constant process of becoming inwards and outwards, forward and backwards, along and through the shape of a spiral into a movement that Braidotti has suggested as nomadism: “[N]omadism is about critical relocation, it is about becoming situated, speaking from somewhere specific and hence well aware of and accountable for particular locations” (15). Thus, the limits of language and the specific experiences located in different geographical points provide an awareness of “difference,” which, along with this embodied motion, aims to discard any precepts of essentialism or homogeneity embedded in the female subject and considers the body as a repository of multiplicity within the dynamics of space, time and words. Braidotti has stated that the nomadic concept of the body has to be considered “as a threshold of transformations” and transcends any essentialist vision when she defines it as “multifunctional and complex, as a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings” (25).

Research on the proliferation of an embodied subjectivity is not exclusive to Braidotti’s thought. It is, in fact, one of the main concerns of the feminist thought of sexual difference, which she takes especially from Luce Irigaray’s particular understanding. The intersection between body and language conforms to the ideological dialectics that has shaped Western feminist thought throughout the twentieth-century. Among the most important theorists who have dealt with the interaction between body and language in writing are Monique Wittig (1992) and Judith Butler (1990). From a more symbolic perspective there are the theories of *écriture féminine* provided by Luce Irigaray (1977, 1984, 1989) and Hélène Cixous (1976), Julia Kristeva (1981) or de Lauretis (1990). Derived from such figurations, Italian feminism of sexual difference also dealt with sexual difference but prioritized practice over theory, as a collective form of thinking and acting, as seen in groups Diotima (1987, 1996) and Libreria delle done di Milano (1990) with philosophers Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, who later on would leave the group, as main figures. They foreground their understanding on Luce Irigaray’s thought and developed their theory about the reconfiguration of the female subjectivity

based on what they have called “The Theory of the Socio-Symbolic Practice” elaborated in the book *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* published in 1990, translated and edited by Teresa de Lauretis.

The consequences of isolation and the experience of lockdown had specific configurations for the female subject. As the graphics and surveys have already stated, women have seen their cultural, social and political activities diminished and unequally preserved in reference to their male counterparts. Thus, is it safe to state that to some extent women have been confronted with their own past, present and future from the very specific point of their embodied subjectivity? The synchrony of the living being that is not able to inhabit the public space resonates with the cultural, and even moral perceptions of women historically locked within the domestic sphere. The socio-historical present for women during the lockdown period acquired a specific form of oppression and trauma that directly confronted their subjectivity with the socio-historical past. The *Spirals* project interweaves and inhabits public spaces in the city in order to re-create gestures, movements that re-formulate female subjectivity. Thus, there was a need to rethink the project of *Spirals* while confined within the domestic space and to reassess the implications of a bodiless form of artistic relation.

Members of PartSuspended decided to take action and open up their fears and concerns towards the other. The unpredictability of the future, the fear of the unknown and the sense of feeling lost triggered this need to communicate to the other through the regular virtual encounters they held. Language was at the centre of such action and offered possibilities of an alternative narration of the self that soon was perceived as an act of creation. The complex diversity of nationalities in the group (Greek, English and Catalan-Spanish) reveals the capacity of language not as a mere tool of communication but as “a site of symbolic exchange that links us together in a tenuous and yet workable web of mediated misunderstandings, which we call civilization” (Braidotti 40). Language thus became the medium between female subjectivity and the world, even though this world seems to be at its very end as seen in the *Spirals: Turning Points* section.

At the very heart of this tension between the enforced isolation of the subject and the political and social context, a particular form of desire emerged. To avoid the fragmentation of a specific female desire that opens up towards the other as a member of a specific collective, the female artists of PartSuspended excavated within their dreams through language and collected a “Diary of Quarantine Dreams” where they formulated and elaborated an alternative narrative of themselves. The need to move beyond such fragmentation lies at the very heart of the concept of difference in the sense that it is precisely such difference that drives one member of the group to the other—never as an isolated subject but rather in connection

with the collective as a nomad that incarnates

the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing. As a figuration of contemporary subjectivity, therefore, the nomad is a postmetaphysical, intensive, multiple entity, functioning in a net of interconnections. She cannot be reduced to a linear, teleological form of subjectivity, but is rather the site of multiple connections. She is embodied and therefore cultural. (Braidotti 66)

The fissure and imbalance between symbolic forms of collective references and the individual embodied experience needs to be overcome by allowing desire to flow, to move around from one female subject to another, echoing Braidotti's understanding of desire as the centre of multiple identity. In this sense she has stated that "desire is productive, because it flows on, it keeps on moving, but its productivity also entails power relations, transitions between contradictory registers, shifts of emphasis" (41). This is particularly relevant to understand the kernel of PartSuspended's work, and particularly the substratum of *Spirals*. By considering PartSuspended's personal experiences, dreams and emotions as the basis of their creativity and their particular form of overcoming uncertainty, the collective provided the ground whereby they could stand and move forward with confidence despite the situation.

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CONCLUSION

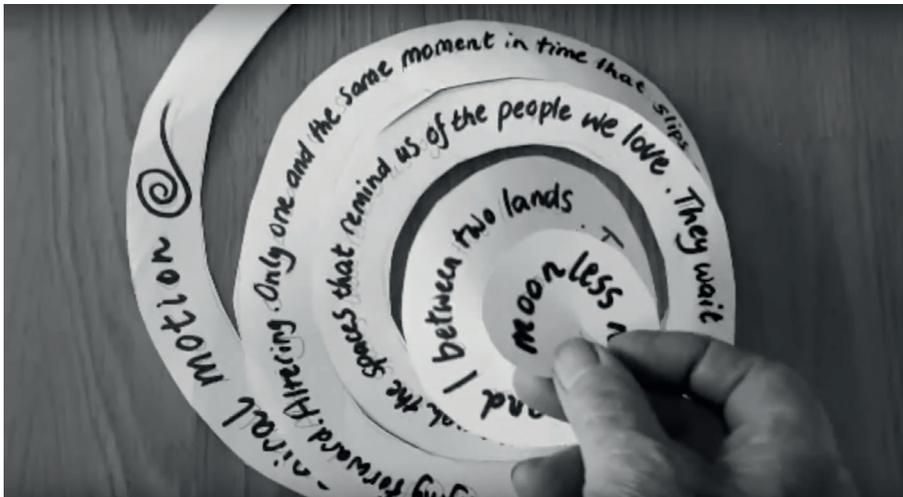


Fig. 5. PartSuspended, *SPIRALS: Turning Points* (London, Dorset, Athens, Agost), 2020, https://youtu.be/Vcp4Dt4_e_Y, © PartSuspended.

This article has examined artistic collaboration and unity in times of crisis through its exploration of the project *Spirals* developed by PartSuspended. Having determined their *modus operandi* through practice-as-research, the epistemological grounds of *Spirals* is situated in the continuum line of becoming through the symbol of a spiral. This line needs to be thought of and conceptualized as a continuous motion that encounters and approaches “the other.” Only by accepting the power of co-existing can the multiplicities and dynamism of the becoming of the female subject through *Spirals* be considered. As has been explored, the vicissitudes of an enforced isolation due to the pandemic situation emerged in the form of envisioning the configuration of the space in-between and of how to create together without the physical presence of the other. The continuity of the project *Spirals* was thwarted due to the impossibility of inhabiting and intervening in public spaces. However, this challenge ultimately inspired their work, resulting in new modes of working and outcomes, such as *Spirals: Turning Points* and *Spirals: Breath*.

We have seen how the artistic implications of this project had to be reformulated through alternative forms of virtual meetings through the lockdown period. As female artists and creators, the decision to engage more deeply with the purpose of searching for a multiform existence provided a diverse participation in the world. The action of opening each other up both creatively and personally through the concept of care bridged the feeling of uncertainty with the possibilities of restructuring the fragmented female subject. This has been possible by establishing the perspective of sexual difference as the point of departure for discussing the creative practice in *Spirals*. By mobilizing Braidotti’s concept of the “nomadic subject,” this article has explored this process of becoming based on the embodied motion of a spiral. The desire to create and communicate through images, sound and language has been essential for creating in collaboration. This has been the key to keeping the project running during times of crisis, and thanks to the mediation of technology, the female body and the interaction with language has shaped the motion through a spiral, allowing PartSuspended to reshape their map of action and move beyond the essentialism inherent in their historic and artistic condition.

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GRIEF/TRAUMA/ SOCIAL UNREST

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Grievable Lives during the COVID-19 Pandemic: US-American Television, Melodrama and the Work of Mourning

ABSTRACT

The present article applies Judith Butler’s notion of “grievable life” to reflect on the manner in which selected US-American television series engaged in the work of mourning and memorializing the loss of life in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of noting which lives were deemed “lose-able or injurable” (Butler, *Frames* 1), and how precarity of life was reflected by fictional narratives that were conceived and produced during the first waves of the pandemic. The article focuses in particular on the way in which network scripted programming operating within the melodramatic convention, namely *This Is Us*, *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Station 19*, incorporated pandemic storylines and which aspects of pandemic reality were highlighted or, conversely, avoided scrutiny.

Keywords: COVID-19 on television, Corona fictions, US-American television, grievable life, *This Is Us*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Station 19*.

INTRODUCTION

By late 2022, the number of estimated fatalities of COVID-19 in the United States of America exceeded one million, surpassing the approximate national death toll of the Spanish influenza and even of the forty years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.¹ Between February 2020, when the first cases of COVID-19 infections were confirmed in the US, and December 2020, when the first vaccines were authorized for Americans over 16, Americans went through a seismic shift that affected all areas of life: ways of working, socializing and spending leisure time either changed or, at the very least, were marked by new risk factors and requirements concerning, for example, distancing, testing and masking (cf. e.g., Johnson; Horton 14–18). The cultural, economic, educational and social impact of the pandemic is yet to be fully understood, even as backlash against mitigating measures has begun, and memory of the collective trauma it has occasioned² comes to be questioned and undermined.

The pandemic was a media(ted), televised event. From the very beginning, information about it circulated through news and social media, in the form of frequently animated “graphs and maps about infection rates” as well as “[i]nterviews with . . . health experts and programmed press conferences with politicians” (Melamed and Keidl 11). However, filmed materials have, in fact, long been an important way of informing the public about health policy, dating back to the beginning of the medium itself (Reagan, Tomes and Treichler 1). Film and television have drawn upon medicine as a source of “popular content and expertise” and the medical community has used audio-visual media for educational purposes (in particular in connection with infectious diseases such as tuberculosis or AIDS) (Reagan, Tomes and Treichler 2; 3–4; cf. Ostherr 2). This “symbiotic relationship” between medicine and film (Reagan, Tomes and Treichler 3) needs scrutiny to assess the ways in which mass media, and, for the purposes of this article, television in particular, functions at a time of health crisis, so as to determine the meanings and ideologies that it reinforces or even produces.

GRIEF AND THE WORK OF MOURNING

A valuable framework for such a consideration is offered by Judith Butler’s works. In *Frames of War*, Butler seeks to draw attention to the ways in which some lives and not others are “recognized as lives” (4). Butler describes

¹ See Lovelace Jr. and CDC data.

² For some scholars, particularly when understood in psychoanalytic terms, the essence of trauma is its irrepresentability arising from the ways in which trauma prevents memory from forming or being accessed (see e.g., Caruth 10–24; Kaplan 20, 30, 74 and *passim*).

“the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable)” as “politically saturated” (1), writing in the context of violence against Muslims after 9/11, but also acknowledging reproductive rights debates and denials of the value of queer lives. They stress that it is in fact the shared condition of “precarity of life” that “imposes an obligation upon us” (*Frames* 2), and highlight the significance of “sociality” with which precariousness is associated. Butler seems rather prescient as they write:

[O]ne’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. These are not necessarily relations of love or even of care, but constitute obligations toward others, most of whom we cannot name and do not know, and who may or may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who “we” are. (*Frames* 14)

These words apply to the pandemic particularly well. Mitigation measures (including masking, distancing, and vaccinations) rely on recognition of duty to our neighbours for effectiveness: in fact, “the very condition of our sociality becomes lethal under pandemic conditions” (Butler, *What World* 55) if such ethical obligations are disregarded. In addition, a refusal to not only regard other lives as valuable but also to believe in one’s own precariousness may lead to the choice to approach risk of infection with “market rationality” (97), or an “economic style of reasoning,” i.e. one that assigns supposedly objective values to contrary interests, and thus “deprioritizes concerns related to injustice or collective well-being” (Cartus and Feldman). In other words, this presents the personal inconvenience of the COVID-19-skeptical subject or the “‘health’ of the market” (Butler, *What World* 96) to be of equal or greater importance than others’ concern for their lives.

For Butler, the acknowledgment of our precarity, of depending on others for our survival, is taken as a necessary step towards a more democratic, egalitarian, nonviolent future. However, Butler notes that there are still certain groups who need to demand to be recognized as lives, or as equally valuable lives. In the pandemic present, those “whose lives are most imperiled by the pandemic” include “the poor, the Black community, the recent migrants, the incarcerated, the immunocompromised, and the elderly”: groups that have been discursively constructed as “dispensable”

(Butler, *What World* 49; see also 28) by eugenicist logics³ “revivif[ied]” within the current situation (103).

Butler devotes their latest book, *What World Is This?*, partly to applying the notion of “grievable” and “ungrievable” life to the circumstances of the pandemic. In this text, Butler draws attention to the paradox of COVID-19: although the pandemic could be used to address the universal condition of precariousness it highlights, as some have expressed the hope or expectation that it will (Horton 118–19), at the same time, those who “can afford [to]” may “recede behind boundaries . . . of selfhood and space, of shelter and household, of neighborhood paths, as the value of extra-domestic intimacy and sociality is lost” (Butler, *What World* 26). In other words, the pandemic creates and encourages separation. Moreover, the often-repeated notion that the pandemic unites us is itself a convenient illusion, because “a shared or common world” is not, in fact, shared “equitabl[y]” (3), “pandemic pain” being one example of suffering that is distributed unfairly, as “[i]n the United States, Black and brown people have been three times as likely to become infected with the virus as white people, and twice as likely to die” (Butler, *What World* 4; see also Horton 23; Berlant ix–x).

A connected subject central to Butler’s texts and to my reflections here is what they refer to as “the work of mourning” (e.g., *Gender Trouble* 79). In their earliest works, mourning was used to reflect on gender as inherently marked by loss and foreclosure of possible attachments and identities, as well as identification with the lost object. More relevantly to my discussion, in their recent texts, Butler explains, after Freud, that “mourning consists of acknowledgment of loss, of registering the reality of loss and undoing the ramparts of defense against knowing the event of loss itself” (*What World* 89). For mourning to be possible, loss must be understood as a loss (rather than declared insignificant because it concerns lives not recognized as lives), and for society to mourn, we must recognize ourselves to have been harmed “irreversibly,” which “may be difficult to fathom or accept” (90). That not every death occasions mourning is proof that not every life is considered grievable, or at least, equally worth of its share of grief.⁴

³ As evidenced by the tendency to count separately (and treat as more significant) the deaths of COVID-19 patients without other conditions (including diabetes, dementia, hypertension) and disregard the deaths of those with co-morbidities; as Richard Horton describes it, “science and politics of COVID-19 became exercises in radical dehumanisation” (viii).

⁴ Another potentially valuable perspective on mourning and COVID-19 trauma can be found in Dominick LaCapra, who writes about ways in which society engages with loss, and describes mourning as one way of “working through” a trauma (as opposed to reliving it or “acting out”) that can facilitate “survival or a reengagement in life” albeit it can also be seen as “betray[al]” through its connection to “a state of closure” (22). In particular, the notion of “empathic unsettlement” could be applied here to critique the ways in which contemporary narratives may attempt to conclude COVID-19 storylines with “uplifting

The goal of the present article consists in applying the notions of grievability and precarity to a close reading of selected US-American television series produced in the pandemic conditions and depicting these conditions, so as to note which lives are deemed “lose-able or injurable” (Butler, *Frames* 1), how precarity of life is reflected in these series, and which aspects of pandemic reality are highlighted or, conversely, avoid scrutiny.

PANDEMIC TV AND MELODRAMA

The pandemic has already left a mark on a variety of US media, in ways both apparent and indirect. From the mobilization of sentimentality in late night television (Poniewozik) to cancellations of series due to new budgetary constraints (Yang), and finally, to inspiring new programming, like *Love in the Time of Corona*, all aspects of television responses to COVID could not be addressed in a single article.⁵ My selection of texts is limited out of necessity, focusing on *This Is Us*, *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Station 19*, three primetime series that introduced COVID-19 into existing and established stories, whose convention, tone and characters are familiar to the viewers, given that the latter may already be imbued with affective investment, and assuming that witnessing such characters experience the pandemic should be particularly meaningful for viewers. I also chose to narrow the scope to the portions of those texts that aired specifically in the autumn-to-spring 2020/2021 season.

In addition, I focus on texts operating within the melodramatic mode, described by Linda Williams as “a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action” (42). This means that sitcoms like *Superstore* (which depicted the economic disparities in the context of the pandemic) or satirical legal drama *The Good Fight* (which delved into the horror and derealization of hospital settings from a patients’ perspective), are not included in the discussion, and could certainly occasion a separate study. The choice of melodrama is dictated by conceding that it has to some extent “dominated American television” (Reagan, Tones and Treichler 4). It is also driven by the fact that it readily concerns itself with trauma (Kaplan 66–86), operating through emotional excess. In addition, melodrama offers

messages” that would allow audiences to conveniently view the pandemic as the past and obviate need for critical reflection.

⁵ A valuable overview of aspects of the pandemic that call for further research is offered by Research Group *Pandemic Fictions* article “From Pandemic to Corona Fictions: Narratives in Times of Crises.”

space for pleasure in both identification and disengagement, critique of the status quo and acceptance of it (Fiske 194–96; Williams 42–51); therefore, it can domesticate trauma, serving to disarticulate its survivors, but also provide ways of coping and memorializing.

“HANKS GOT THE CORONA”: CONNECTION AND DISTANCE IN *THIS IS US*

Created by Dan Fogelman and broadcast on NBC, family drama series *This Is Us* aired for six seasons between 2016 and 2022.⁶ The series focuses on one family, the Pearsons; it commences in 1980, with a triplets birth that sees only two of the babies survive the delivery, and continues in the present of 2010s and 2020s, occasionally featuring flashforwards to the future. In the primary past storyline, the white parents, Jack and Rebecca Pearson, adopt a Black newborn, and raise the three children—Kevin, Kate and Randall (the adoptee)—together. In the contemporary storyline, the siblings are depicted from their mid-30s to early 40s. Kevin is a commercially successful actor whose storylines highlight addiction; Kate is an aspiring singer and later mother of two who struggles with disordered eating and prejudice due to her weight; finally, Randall, a businessman turned politician, is married to Beth and the two have three daughters—two biological and a third whom they adopt as a teenager. Randall’s storyline centres around his trauma due to separation from biological parents and resultant fear of abandonment, pain caused by being a trans-racial adoptee, and gradual learning about his family history after reconnecting with his biological father. The series operates within the generic conventions of melodrama—it has been described as “must-weep TV” (Garber)—marked by thematic and emotional excess, taking on contemporary problems, exploring individual and collective trauma (e.g., in a storyline about the Vietnam war), and focusing on characters from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds and with diverse ethnic identities, sexual orientations and disabilities, albeit often in a way that has been criticized as “too safe” (Chaney). It closely reflects melodrama’s overarching ideology, namely that of “priority and sacredness of the family” (Seiter et al. qtd. in Fiske 183), even if the definition of family is occasionally challenged, and no longer limited by biology and heterosexual marriage.

The series introduces COVID-19 into its storylines in the penultimate season’s premiere entitled “Forty.” The two-part episode centres around

⁶ The article focuses on episodes from 2020–21 seasons: season 5 of *This Is Us*, season 17 of *Grey’s Anatomy* and season 4 of *Station 19*.

the siblings' eponymous birthday. The opening montage serves to convey the new COVID reality to the viewers in a way that is partly comedic: Kevin claims that as a "movie star" he would be the first to know if the "new virus" was a serious problem, only to receive a message that disabuses him of the notion; Randall and Beth find out about Tom Hanks's infection and experience surprise and concern; finally, Kate receives a visit from a masked Kevin, who comes over to share news that is not "Zoom-appropriate." When this prompts Kate's husband Toby to joke about Kevin "knocking [someone] up," Kevin shares the news about expecting twins—with the pregnancy being accidental ("Forty" 1:40–5:20⁷). While the pandemic is central to this sequence, it is also somewhat minimized.

Later, the pandemic is also shown as an inconvenience (siblings cannot hug during an emotional moment, Randall's children are unhappy about remote learning and lockdown) or an adjustment (Kevin offers to quarantine with his child's mother so he can help her during pregnancy even though their relationship is casual). Although brief mentions suggest that the situation is more grave outside of the space seen on camera (Randall complains about not having enough masks to hand out to people in the area he represents), thus far, the only serious direct consequence for the Pearsons concerns their mother, Rebecca—who was meant to undergo an experimental clinical trial for early onset dementia, but instead isolates with her husband in a remote cabin ("Forty" 5:00–6:30). However, the episode avoids acknowledging the seriousness of the risk COVID could pose to either her (a senior with cognitive impairment), or Toby and Kate (given his cardiovascular problems and Kate's disordered eating and associated chronic illnesses). Arguably, the most significant effect of the pandemic on the characters is economic: Beth's dance studio struggles during the pandemic, and eventually closes in "The Music & the Mirror."

Another way in which the pandemic is present in *This Is Us* consists in normalizing mitigation measures. Across the first few episodes, the series shows in detail or even has characters describe in dialogue their new COVID protocols: socially-distanced conversations, quarantining, testing and hand sanitizing ("Forty" 1:00–5:30), as well as increased reliance on phone calls, video chats and texting for communication, or simply choosing occasion-appropriate facial masks ("Changes" 8:30). In fact, it can be argued that it is not danger to physical health that *This Is Us* becomes invested in, but rather the way in which the pandemic impedes

⁷ Where appropriate, I provide parenthetical timestamps based on Disney+ streaming version of episodes for all discussed series in question; where discussed scenes and plotlines extend beyond short fragments, I identify their place in episode or series in text proper.

closeness. This offers thematic correspondence for one of the major conflicts of this season of the series, namely the aftermath of Randall and Kevin's argument over responsibility for their mother's care and long-held fraternal grudges at the end of season four. Thus, it is not COVID-19 that causes the three siblings to celebrate their birthdays separately, but, rather, a personal conflict that causes Randall to withdraw from previously almost-constant contact with his adoptive family: a conflict that is closely related to his being a trans-racial adoptee, and which the COVID-related separation mirrors and reinforces. *This Is Us* explores racial tensions further by focusing on the murder of George Floyd, and the different ways in which the Pearsons react to it, while the pandemic is relegated to the background.⁸ It is only after Randall learns more about his birth mother and finds a Black therapist that this metaphorical wound can be bandaged.

Narrative attention is returned to the pandemic in the eighth episode, "In the Room," which is also when the Pearson siblings reconcile. The instalment follows three storylines: in the flashbacks throughout the episode, Jack and Rebecca reflect on the possibility of their family being separated, only to emerge certain that their children will remain connected; in the narrative present, both Kevin's partner, Madison, and the birthmother of Kate and Toby's second child go through labour; the third storyline constitutes a rare departure for the series, as it is focused on characters with no personal connection to the Pearsons: the scientist who designed a data compression method that makes video streaming possible, Nasir Ahmed, and his wife, Esther Pariente. This third story functions as a tribute to the inventor, his dedication and motivation for his work—when Esther criticizes him for missing a dinner with their son, Nasir explains that his work will one day make it possible for them, two immigrants from different parts of the world, to connect with their families instantaneously; for families like theirs to send photographs of their children to the grandparents, for far-flung relatives to be able to see each other ("In the Room" 37:00–38:00; 38:30–39:30). This evokes what Butler writes about "global interconnection and interdependency" (*What World* 8) and the commonality of the world (2–4): bringing the world closer, revealing an unrecognized connection (between the inventor, the characters and, perhaps, viewers themselves). In addition, this technology is shown to improve the life of immigrants in particular—but for the series, its primary significance lies in bridging the distance between family

⁸ It bears noting that all three series under discussion combine their portrayal of COVID-19 with storylines about characters reacting to George Floyd's murder (including in *Grey's Anatomy's* "Sign O' the Times" and *Station 19's* "Here It Comes Again" and "Get Up, Stand Up"), however, this theme cannot be fully explored in this article.

members separated because of COVID-19. Throughout the episode, Randall and Beth continue to talk to Madison on video, supporting her as she awaits Kevin's arrival in the hospital. The episode ends with a montage of video chats, as all the family members are shown calling each other to celebrate the arrival of three babies (the parallelism between their simultaneous birth and the three main characters being quasi-triplets⁹ is emphasized by Kate). Video streaming technology allows Rebecca to see her grandchildren soon after their birth, and makes it possible for Kate to speak with Toby, forbidden from hospital by pandemic protocols. Cousins, in-laws and siblings are virtually re-united, and Kevin reconciles with Randall (39:30–42:05). The danger of the pandemic, namely that it may lead to “personal isolation” (Butler, *What World* 64), is overcome, and instead, “persistent” connection (28) is reaffirmed.

Remarkably, it is only in a tangential manner that the episode makes a gesture towards recognizing the actually lethal aspect of the pandemic: that part is not “in the room,” to which the title directs viewers' focus. While Toby awaits the birth of his daughter in the hospital parking lot, he is joined by Arlo, an elderly man whose COVID-positive wife Rose is on a ventilator in the same facility. Arlo shares details about Rose with Toby, who chooses to name his daughter partly after the old woman (“In the Room” 15:10–18:00; 33:00). Although this commemoration might be taken to suggest that Rose is about to die, the episode has her survive being taken off the ventilator, and shows her speaking to her husband on video (41:20), thus refusing to depict the ultimate consequences of the pandemic: the loss of many lives and the grief of surviving family members.

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“I HATE THAT EVERYONE IS DYING, NO MATTER WHAT I DO”: MEMORIAL SPACES IN *GREY'S ANATOMY* AND *STATION 19*

The next two series thematizing COVID-19 in their 2020/2021 seasons offer a contrary point of view to the relatively sanitized outlook of *This Is Us*. The first of them, *Grey's Anatomy*, is a medical drama, and thus particularly well-suited to addressing the subject of illness and death. Created by Shonda Rhimes and currently helmed by Krista Vernoff, the series was in its seventeenth season in 2020/2021. Centred around a group of surgeons employed at a fictional Seattle hospital, *Grey's Anatomy* chronicles the professional development of its characters as well as their

⁹ The fifth season acknowledges that, having been abandoned after his birth, Randall is actually a day older than his siblings (“Forty”).

romantic and family lives, with a particular attention focused on Meredith Grey, the eponymous heroine, who, in a typically melodramatic fashion, overcomes a variety of traumatic experiences over the course of the series, including the death of her mother, a near-drowning, a plane crash, a shooting and a miscarriage as well as the loss of one of her best friends, her sister and her husband (in three separate accidents):¹⁰ as this list may suggest, this series is also marked by melodramatic excess. While early episodes of this series, known for its colour-blind casting (Miceli 106), were somewhat reluctant to engage with contemporary political or social problems, its approach gradually changed to become more didactic and explicit, with storylines dedicated to the #MeToo movement, the effects of the privatization of health care and, with particular frequency, racial inequality in the United States (Miceli 102; 107–10). In the seventeenth season, when the series takes on the pandemic, Meredith is a widow, mother of three and world-renowned surgeon, working as chief for a hospital she co-owns; however, in the new circumstances, her duties mostly comprise running codes, i.e. monitoring the vital signs of COVID patients in the intensive care ward and attempting to save them when they inevitably deteriorate (“All Tomorrow’s Parties”; “The Center Won’t Hold”).

Station 19 must be discussed in conjunction with *Grey’s Anatomy*, as it is not only a spin-off that shares the same showrunner but the two series also feature a number of crossovers in the 2020/2021 season. An action drama about firefighters with a prominent melodramatic tendency, *Station 19* occurs in the same timeframe as *Grey’s Anatomy* and complements the hospital stories of the latter with plotlines centred around rescue services; in addition, personal storylines about doctors’ and firefighters’ lives intersect on a regular basis. The series is likewise deeply invested in addressing contemporary social ills such as racism, and in 2020/2021, it concentrated on ways in which the pandemic affected marginalized communities, and the work of first responders, in addition to a storyline about anti-Black violence in the police force.

The two series commenced their 2020/2021 seasons with a three-part crossover, beginning with an episode of *Station 19*, “Nothing Seems the Same.” The episode is quick to announce its focus, as one of the first scenes is of the emergency workers and family members of doctors meeting in front of the hospital to clap and express gratitude as the medical staff enter the hospital. The camera lingers on signs with information about tests; the civilians are wearing simple medical masks, and responders and doctors—KN95s. The dialogue explains that, due to high risk of contracting the virus, the characters are separated from their families, and many of them

¹⁰ I explore this subject in an earlier article (Strehlau).

are staying in hotels, away from their children and romantic partners (1:45–3:20). This theme is expanded in *Grey's Anatomy's* two-part premiere, in which Meredith Grey mentions that she has not been home with her children in two weeks (“The Center Won’t Hold” 20:20–20:30), while her sister Maggie Pierce (also a surgeon) only speaks with them through a locked door and conducts her romantic relationship exclusively over the phone (“All Tomorrow’s Parties” 4:00–4:30).

The pandemic informs the majority of the *Station 19* episode, whose primary storyline is a cautionary tale of teenagers breaking COVID rules to party, only to get into an accident. The didactic function is also evident in dialogue about the pandemic, with one of the characters explaining the reasons for using face masks to an elderly woman, Marsha Smith, who refuses to comply. The firefighters are also shown receiving tribute for their efforts in helping people cope with the pandemic, such as distributing groceries, as well as discussing their living arrangements and quarantining plans (“Nothing Seems the Same” 3:50–4:10; 3:20–3:40 and *passim*).

The first episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*, in turn, immediately focus on the lethality of the pandemic. The premiere establishes the time of the action as April 2020, and commences with one of the older surgeons, Richard Webber, returning to work from medical leave and serving as a convenient entry point for viewers as he gradually learns about the new COVID protocols and problems at his workplace (“All Tomorrow’s Parties” 2:30–3:00 and *passim*). It has long been a staple of the series to begin a season with either a personalized catastrophe (a character or their loved one being the patient, risking death or permanent injury) or a mass casualty event that forces doctors to work in emergency conditions, heightening the dramatic potential: in this season, COVID-19 provides both, except that the mass casualty and personal peril become the new normal rather than a temporary situation.

This heightened status quo is introduced fairly quickly. Richard is told to learn the safety precautions by heart (10:40–10:50), but in addition, he traverses the hospital, encountering his former prodigies, masked or in respirators, relegated to repetitive monitoring of patient deterioration or to conducting tests (2:40–2:50; “The Center Won’t Hold” 0:10–0:40). As a COVID centre, the hospital turns away all but the most serious emergencies and postpones surgeries except in imminently life-threatening cases (“All Tomorrow’s Parties” 8:30). The series focuses a great deal of attention on the way in which this erodes morale: doctors exchange information about dying patients (many of whom only exist for the viewer as a name mentioned in passing) or simply list numbers of the new casualties. Their helplessness and desperation in the face of personal protective equipment (PPE) shortages and lack of knowledge about successful

treatment is only intensified by the fact that trying to facilitate deathbed visits is part of their new duties, and even so, many patients cannot be seen by their loved ones before dying. The two-part premiere is also explicitly didactic on several levels: it features discussion about the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and immigrant communities, criticism of misinformation about the pandemic, and a prominent storyline about the abovementioned shortages. While this subject came up in *This Is Us* in a humorous manner, with Kate refusing to “buy diapers in bulk” for fear of others going without (“Changes” 19:20–19:40), it is given more weight in the hospital setting, with bleach being used to sterilize masks (which degrades them), limited supplies of tests even for medical personnel (“All Tomorrow’s Parties” 8:30), and a disappointing delivery of PPE turning out to consist only of “booties” (“The Center Won’t Hold” 28:40). By the end of the first episode, Richard has found a make-shift solution for the shortage—using UV light to sterilize masks (“All Tomorrow’s Parties” 37:30–37:50)—but it is too late for some doctors, as the next episode ends with Meredith collapsing in the parking lot (“The Center Won’t Hold” 40:50–41:00), fully symptomatic, and the third episode has another doctor, Tom Koracick, likewise testing positive (“My Happy Ending” 34:20).

As signalled before, the entire season of *Grey’s* is bracketed by personal peril—namely, Meredith’s (the protagonist’s) illness, demonstrating the omnipresence of COVID-19. While Tom gets better relatively quickly (and some other characters are mentioned as suffering only minor symptoms), Meredith initially seems to be recovering, only to deteriorate, undergo experimental though seemingly futile procedures (“You’ll Never Walk Alone”), and later, go on a ventilator by episode six (“No Time for Despair”). She remains comatose and dependent on life support for another four episodes. In the course of her illness, she hallucinates about meeting many of her deceased loved ones, which both highlights the real life-or-death stakes of her illness and provides continuity between COVID-19 and other tragedies that already occurred in the series.¹¹ It is only after she awakens in episode 11 (“Sorry Doesn’t Always Make It Right”) that her survival seems assured, and only at the end of the season that she returns to her role as a doctor rather than patient (“I’m Still Standing”/“Someone Saved My Life Tonight”).

However, while Meredith ultimately makes a full if slow recovery, another character, her mentor Miranda Bailey, experiences a tragic loss in episode five, when her mother Elena, a Black woman with dementia living in a nursing home, is also diagnosed with COVID-19 and succumbs to it

¹¹ Naturally, this is an opportunity for ratings-grabbing cast returns, but also contributes to the mournful and reflective tone frequently present in the season.

almost instantaneously. The show explores a variety of issues by depicting this loss—Miranda feels guilty as she selected her mother’s facility, and in a dialogue with Maggie, the two discuss the impossibility of protecting loved ones from the pandemic; they also give voice to the significance of racial and economic privilege (as the infections are traced to a wealthy person admitted into the facility against the rules) as well as acknowledging the prevalence of COVID-19 deaths in elderly care (“Fight the Power” 25:00–32:30). Although her mother’s death is not unexpected—she is a terminal patient in the first place—Miranda explicitly demands for this death to be seen as tragic and grievable, as it robs her family of more time together, and occurs in austere conditions, with no one but Miranda being able to attend her deathbed. In a concluding voiceover, Miranda verbalizes the thesis of the episode—that patients like her mother “are more than statistics, more than ‘co-morbid conditions,’ or ‘nursing home patients’” (39:30–41:00)—before listing names of fictional patients named after real victims of the pandemic. The episode concludes with a twenty-second sequence of a rolling list of COVID-19 dead, a choice inspired by both pandemic memorials and the Black Lives Matter movement (Ramirez).

Station 19 similarly makes a case for the grievability of those seen as “disposable” by “market rationality” (Butler, *What World* 97), or at least, blamed for their condition, in the aforementioned storyline of Marsha Smith, an elderly alcoholic. Marsha recurs in the third season: she is a lonely woman, estranged from her son due to addiction, requiring firefighters’ help because of accidents likely caused by her drinking. Despite this seemingly negative introduction, viewers are encouraged to empathize with her loneliness, and see her attempts at redemption: before the pandemic, she offers shelter to a battered woman named Inara and her Deaf son Marcus, with whom she develops a close relationship (“Dream a Little Dream of Me”; “Louder than a Bomb”). Marsha is reluctant to follow safety precautions like masking; she is not constructed as a blameless victim about whom only positive information is revealed, like Rose in *This Is Us*, but rather as a fallible character who, arguably, shares responsibility for her illness. Nevertheless, when she is hospitalized and placed on a ventilator (“Make No Mistake, He’s Mine” 35:40), the possibility of her death is shown as a monumental loss to her new “communit[y] of care” (Butler, *What World* 27). While her biological son ultimately leaves the video call during what is expected to be her dying moment, the firefighters, Inara and Marcus continue to care for her as she recovers (“Save Yourself” 23:30–25:00; 40:30).

In addition to showcasing the illness, death and grief of survivors, *Grey’s Anatomy* dedicates significant attention to the psychological effects of the pandemic on medical staff. Their suffering is shown to result

from various factors: empathy for the dying and the grieving survivors, helplessness and lack of agency in the face of a disease they do not yet know how to treat effectively, and finally, the burden of making life-or-death decisions. This last aspect becomes particularly significant in an episode entitled “Breathe,” occurring during a ventilator shortage, where the series puts doctors in the position of having to choose whom to ventilate: to make this situation all the more poignant, the final two patients vying for a single machine are mother and daughter. Ultimately, the show avoids taking this storyline to a particularly cruel conclusion, instead opting for the last-minute fix of using a ventilator splitter¹² to save both patients, but the ethical issues raised (following protocol means ventilating the person more likely to survive) reflect real problems.

The pandemic is also used as an occasion to revisit past trauma that it evokes, not only for Meredith (visited by ghosts who attempt to convince her of life’s value) but for other characters as well. In Miranda’s case, this is her obsessive-compulsive disorder, connected to fear of contagion; another character, however, offers an intriguing connection to a different American trauma. Teddy Altman is a cardiothoracic surgeon and military veteran (having served in both Afghanistan and Iraq) whose storyline often revolves around her unstable relationship with another doctor/veteran character. In the pandemic season, the couple are estranged due to her infidelity, and the combination of COVID-19 burnout, death of another close friend, and her personal guilt leaves her in a catatonic state, returning to memories of 9/11, and in particular, ruminating about a woman with whom she had been having an affair—which ended when Allison died in the second tower (“In My Life”). This complex flashback serves to fill in gaps in the character’s backstory,¹³ but it also establishes a connection between the pandemic and 9/11, and tells a story about unacknowledged and consequently destructive grief—the dimensions of Teddy’s relationship to the dead woman were secret as an affair and as evidence of undisclosed, closeted queerness, thus foreclosing the possibility of public mourning, leading to internalization of loss (Butler, *What World* 89; *Gender Trouble* 108) and self-destructive behaviour.

Whereas *Grey’s Anatomy* draws a connection between COVID-19 and 9/11, the AIDS pandemic¹⁴ comes into focus in *Station 19* episode

¹² See “Using Ventilator Splitters During the COVID-19 Pandemic—Letter to Health Care Providers.”

¹³ Allison’s existence (and, consequently, Teddy’s queerness and life in the closet, particularly significant since she later served in the military under Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy) is established in the previous season (“Love of My Life”).

¹⁴ Television has long been at the forefront of informing Americans about AIDS (see Treichler 96).

“Learning to Fly,” in a storyline about an injured man who seeks help from firefighters rather than go to a hospital because he is HIV-positive and cannot risk being infected with the coronavirus (17:10–18:00). This provides an opportunity for the show to highlight parallels between the two pandemics, from the fear of an initially unknown disease to the pain connected to losing loved ones. Such a narrative choice offers context to the current pandemic, and may also at least partly counter the predominant approach that would see the pandemic as completely unprecedented (and thus, perhaps, singular, suggesting no need to learn from it) rather than unprecedented simply on the level of scale (Butler, *What World* 10; see also Horton 53).

CONCLUSION

The present article has considered the representations of the pandemic attempted by the seasons of three selected American series airing in 2020/2021, focusing on the aspects of the pandemic that were highlighted, and in particular, the notion of grievable life. As I have demonstrated, even when analyzing series operating within the melodramatic convention, certain differences persist—while all three remain somewhat didactic with respect to mitigation measures, *This Is Us* depicts the pandemic primarily as a threat to (or metaphor for a lack of) familial cohesion and connection, a problem that can be solved through technology, and only briefly acknowledges the possibility of grief, avoiding showing any pandemic loss or acknowledgements of precariousness of life. In contrast, *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Station 19*, as medical and emergency services drama respectively, focus on mourning and loss, accompany characters (and in the case of the former, the eponymous character herself) during the course of illness, and recognize the possibility or even probability of dying. Notably, these two series explicitly articulate the racial and economic aspects of the pandemic dividing rather than uniting the world—or, more accurately, perhaps, the United States, as the global aspect of the pandemic remains largely unexplored. Through the storylines of Marsha Smith on *Station 19* and Elena Bailey on *Grey’s Anatomy*, the series acknowledge and argue against attaching unequal value to victims based on their co-morbidities or identities. *Grey’s Anatomy* in particular offers space for memorializing and grieving those lost to the pandemic by combining the fictional narrative with references to the real victims. Moreover, both series draw parallels and connections between other communal traumas in US-American history, namely the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the events of 9/11 and the so-called war on terror that followed.

However, while the direct impact of the pandemic continues even today, despite mitigation measures and the relative availability of vaccines in large parts of the world, it could be argued that the media have since begun to shy away from its depictions. While COVID-19 safety coordinators operate behind the scenes of television and films, on the screen the pandemic seems to be all but over, with productions eager to return to earlier status quo or, else, address new themes and topics. Notably, none of the storylines discussed here result in visual reminders or any permanent or even long-term disability, perhaps because such reminders could be disturbing to viewers, as we “sink back into our culture of complacent exceptionalism and await the next plague” (Horton 57). Indeed, this raises the question of whether the choice to give space to the pandemic in the first place has mostly served to accelerate the process of mourning, and obtain convenient closure.

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“The particulars of loss”: Grief Memoirs and Their Pragmatic Applications

ABSTRACT

Death is commonly pushed to the periphery in contemporary society, leaving the grief-struck to endure the turbulent nature of their loss alone. Unsurprisingly, our mortality-denying times have witnessed the proliferation and popularity of grief memoirs. However, not every text will resonate with every reader, and the selection of appropriate, relatable texts is made more difficult with the overabundance of digital data in our lives. This essay explores select life-altering states of grief addressed in autobiographical accounts of loss and compares the details with the assessment of these states in bereavement literature. The correlations and disparities between the literary and the clinical reveal that the personal nature of grief memoirs makes them a suitable aid in the education of helping professionals and in therapy. Greater familiarity with grief memoirs among therapists may increase their visibility among the bereaved. To facilitate the selection and assessment of proper texts, a closer collaboration between literary scholars specializing in trauma narratives and helping professionals who use bibliotherapy is needed.

Keywords: bereavement, bibliotherapy, depersonalization, derealization, grief memoir, loss.

INTRODUCTION

“When my mother was dying, I found very few books that spoke of the particulars of loss. Much gets said about healing, but what of the violence of the actual event?” writes Robin Romm in *The Mercy Papers: A Memoir of Three Weeks* (Afterword, para. 1). Indeed, many contemporary publications stress the process of adaptation, meaning making, or healing after a significant loss (cf. Gillies et al. 207–15). However, much has also been written about the harrowing effects of loss on the self, perhaps more than about any other traumatic experience. Following the boom of autobiographical writing in the second half of the twentieth century, the past two decades or so have witnessed a significant rise in the publication and analysis of grief memoirs. Next to the elegy, the grief memoir has become a popular avenue for the bereaved to speak of “the particulars of loss” and commemorate the dead. Yet, Romm is not alone in expressing disappointment with the insufficiency of relatable sources. Joan Didion, Lindsay Nicholson, Lucie Brownlee, and many other memoirists bring up similar issues, either stating that hardly anything made sense to them or wishing they had a book like theirs while they were in the throes of grief. Amy-Katerini Prodromou speculates that this “gap” between the griever’s lived experience and bereavement literature may stem from “the feeling that nothing one reads in a bereaved state could help one deal with the loss” (2). The claim that an insufficient amount of relatable texts exists could also be ascribed to grief-denying modern societies (Prodromou 3). Certainly, in many cultures, mourning rituals and communal support for the bereaved are much less prominent than in the past. In this mortality-denying climate, it is possible that grief memoirs, many of which do capture “the violence of the actual event,” might be inadequately advertised or recommended to their target audience. In the age of the internet, however, where information travels fast and accessibility to books seems unlimited, the opposite is equally plausible: maybe the current abundance of information makes the identification of relatable sources more difficult, intimidating, and time-consuming. In *Life After You* (2014), Lucie Brownlee recalls how she “trawled the Internet for books on grief and underwent an ordering frenzy that resulted in a pile of bereavement literature” delivered to her doorstep (71). “Some books contained ‘road maps’ to recovery,” one implied that she “was currently in the middle of a boggy, hostile mire, surrounded by dead ends and evil-looking shrubbery,” and still others “were heavy with case studies and testimonials from people who had gone through it and survived” (72). “None of them made any sense to me,” Brownlee concludes (72).

In the light of claims such as Romm’s or Brownlee’s, it might be worth considering what could facilitate the search for relatable grief

accounts for those who might need them the most. While no solution is ideal, a closer collaboration across diverse fields researching bereavement may be a step in the right direction. For instance, with the help of literary scholars specializing in trauma narratives, helping professionals who use bibliotherapy in their practice could select proper texts and explore their supportive value in a more methodical and efficient manner. In this analysis, I first focus on select life-altering states of grief such as derealization and depersonalization, both of which are quite consistently addressed in autobiographical accounts of loss. Each grief is different and so is each grief memoir, but patterns emerge. Some of these patterns verify the “particulars of loss” reported in professional bereavement literature, providing an additional database of how grievers perceive the world changed by loss outside clinical studies. Such correlations and disparities between the literary and the clinical should be researched further to increase the knowledge of relevant grief narratives among those who profess to help the bereaved. Thus, in this analysis, I also indicate why grief memoirs can constitute a particularly suitable aid in bibliotherapy and in the education of future helping professionals. Ultimately, greater familiarity with grief memoirs among therapists will result in greater visibility of grief memoirs among the bereaved. Autobiographical expressions of loss use relatable diction and imagery and offer personal takes on grief that are devoid of didacticism yet may speak to the bereaved in a more pragmatic manner than professional bereavement literature.

LIKE DOROTHY IN *THE WIZARD OF OZ*

While it is a common belief that after the death of a beloved other we eventually move on with our lives, studies show that our experience of important loss can cause long-term changes in our memory, reasoning, behavior, sleep patterns, and bodily functions, affecting the self in ways that it may not be fully aware of and that it has never expected to experience (see, e.g., Parkes and Prigerson 15–47; Rando 46–61). Among the psychological changes that the grieving self experiences, shock, numbness, disbelief, and cognitive disorientation are said to be the most immediate and common (see, e.g., Worden 22–25). As a result, the bereaved often feel as if they have entered a kind of emotional, spatial, and temporal limbo, which, at times, leads them to the conclusion that there is something wrong with them or that they might be going mad.

Grief experts note that depersonalization (the self feels different or unreal) and derealization (the world seems different or unreal) often

follow bereavement (Parkes and Prigerson 77). In less clinical terms, both of these phenomena are consistently portrayed in the majority of grief memoirs. In the opening paragraph of his classic meditation on loss, *A Grief Observed* (1961), C. S. Lewis expresses his surprise that no one ever told him that “grief felt so like fear” (3). “I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning,” he states (3). For Lewis, the bouts of “fear” alternate with the feeling of “being mildly drunk, or concussed” (3). He feels as if he was divided from the world by “a sort of invisible blanket” which makes “it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting” (3). Lewis tries to seek refuge from his dazed state in thoughts such as “[l]ove is not the whole of a man’s life. I was happy before I ever met H. . . . People get over these things” (4). Yet, “a sudden jab of red-hot memory” makes such rational banalities vanish “like an ant in the mouth of a furnace” (4). In the first three paragraphs of his memoir, Lewis captures and reflects upon a gamut of somatic, psychological, and cognitive effects of grief. Incidentally, to come to similar conclusions, clinical studies employ large samples of subjects and can take months or even years. In his seminal paper “Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief,” Erich Lindemann reports his findings from the study of 101 bereaved patients. Lindemann defines “acute” or “normal” grief as “a definite syndrome with psychological and somatic symptomatology,” involving such sensations as “tightness in the throat, choking with shortness of breath, need for sighing, and an empty feeling in the abdomen, lack of muscular power, and an intensive subjective distress described as tension or mental pain” (141–42). Similarly, based on studies involving substantial samples of widows and widowers, Colin Murray Parkes and Holly G. Prigerson report that one griever felt “ill and shivery,” another felt as if their “inside had been torn out,” and many others felt as if they were “in a dream” (77). While Lewis’s reflections correspond in essence to what bereavement literature describes, they feel more immediate, even if filtered by his aesthetic choices. Phyllis R. Silverman points out that “many professionals adopt the language of medicine to describe the mourner’s experience” (31) or fit the data into an existing theory (11). Grief memoirs can help correct for such biases and complement clinical bereavement reports with less dispassionate diction.

Lewis’s mediations find individualized parallels in many other narratives of loss. In *When Things Get Back to Normal* (1989/2002), barely ten days after her husband’s sudden death, M. T. Dohaney goes back to work. In the meantime, she sorts out her husband’s belongings, gets the death certificate, cancels “memberships here and there,” closes bank

accounts, and performs dozens of other tasks (20–22). To an outsider, she may appear “normal,” as if she was coping with the loss (22). Yet, Dohaney also lingers in another reality: “[I]f I’m taking your death so well, why do I feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*? I feel as if I’ve been scooped up by a tornado and spiralled into another dimension, where nothing is as it was or as it should be” (22). The bereaved often have “the feeling that it is not the dead person but they themselves who have been ejected from the world hitherto familiar to them” (Parkes and Prigerson 112). Indeed, the loss spirals the bereaved out of their assumptive world and forces them to deal with new duties that may be daunting, adding to the feeling of unreality. For instance, while she is still struggling to accept the fact of her husband’s death, Dohaney is faced not only with closing bank accounts but also with such decisions as whether to sell the lawnmower, snowblower, or even the house. In this context, the image of being “spiralled into another dimension” suddenly takes on a literal meaning.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Joan Didion reflects upon another aspect of derealization that persists in spite of her systematic efforts to acknowledge her post-loss reality after the death of her husband. “To the average observer I would have appeared to fully understand that death was irreversible,” she writes (42). Didion authorizes the autopsy, arranges for cremation, and performs other funerary and daily duties. After the funeral, she states: “I had done it. I had acknowledged that he was dead. . . . Yet my thinking on this point remained suspiciously fluid” (43). It is only several months after the death that she is finally able to recognize the phenomenon of magical thinking she has been experiencing (44). The prolonged state of disbelief that the loved one is gone differs from the initial shock and disorientation. Yet, magical thinking is also a natural extension of those states as different grievers need different amounts of time to adjust to their reality without the loved one in it. Grief specialists underscore that there are three types of adjustments that the grieving self has to face: “the external adjustments, or how the death affects one’s everyday functioning in the world; internal adjustments, or how the death affects one’s sense of self; and spiritual adjustments, or how the death affects one’s beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world” (Worden 46). Dohaney, Didion, and other memoirists acknowledge these adjustments, but they also stress the disparity between what others see or recommend and what indeed gets adjusted and in what time span.

Reactions to loss such as shock, disbelief, and magical thinking fluctuate during bereavement, performing largely protective functions so that the bereaved can face loss at their own pace. At times, however, they

also entail fear (as Lewis specifies), helplessness, and despair that debilitate and disorient the griever. After the sudden death of her teenage daughter, Anne-Marie Cockburn regresses to a state that protects the self from the reality of the loss as well as impairs its will to perform basic tasks:

I was wrapped in a hazy cocoon; I became a newborn baby who was reliant on everyone for everything. I needed water to be poured into my mouth, I needed to be held, rocked and patted when I cried to make me feel better. I needed wrapping in a blanket, my bath to be run for me and my clothes laid out by my loving family. I needed help to walk again. (18)

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Losses of children result in the most long-lasting of all griefs and are “associated with an increased risk to physical and mental health” (Parkes and Prigerson 142–43). The helplessness Cockburn describes differs from Lewis’s, Dohaney’s, or Didion’s sensations of shock and disbelief, indicating that loss results in various degrees of depersonalization and derealization. Yet, her imagery of being “wrapped in a hazy cocoon” would be recognizable to each of those memoirists. In *Living on the Seabed: A Memoir of Love, Life and Survival* (2005), a narrative devoted to her grief after the death of her husband and daughter, Lindsay Nicholson confesses that she “spent several years on the seabed of despair” (8). “It is as if you are one of those dark creatures that lives on the ocean floor and has never felt the sun on its back,” she writes (8). Cases such as Cockburn’s or Nicholson’s draw attention to the particulars of grief that may require not only increased support from friends and family but also considerate professional help. Profound grief may trigger or contribute to serious health issues or even cause the death of the griever due to prolonged self-neglect, anxiety, lack of concentration, or difficulty in performing everyday tasks (Parkes and Prigerson 19, 128). Thus, if “living on the seabed” becomes unbearable, one should not shy away from clinical help, which many memoirists address in a thoughtful, non-didactic manner. The stigma of seeking psychological or psychiatric intervention persists in many societies, while platitudes such as “life must go on” or “she is in a better place now” continue to be tossed at the bereaved shamelessly. Nicholson criticizes those who “sneer about the need for counselling” (83). With two devastating losses in her life, she knows that the griever needs a variety of support to breathe in the midst of “unbearable, unending agonising pain” (2). Nicholson also wishes she had known “that someone else out there had gone through this experience and survived to see the light again” (8). “When I was down there, this is the book I would have liked to read,” she adds (8), asserting the idea that the bereaved could benefit from being directed to such texts more systematically.

THE OTHERWORLDLINESS OF GRIEF

The sensations of unreality (derealization) and otherness (depersonalization) are “transient” and should gradually subside (Parkes and Prigerson 77). Yet, they are memorable enough to find regular reflections in narratives of loss. For instance, many memoirists agree that the state of otherness persists in one way or another because they have involuntarily yet permanently joined “a club that no one wants to belong to”—one they “did not even know existed” (Sandberg and Grant, chapter 2, para. 18). This unwanted membership influences how the grief-struck are perceived by themselves and others. “People who have recently lost someone have a certain look, recognizable maybe only to those who have seen that look on their own faces,” writes Didion (74). “The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness,” she explains, comparable to “the look of someone who walks from the ophthalmologist’s office into the bright daylight with dilated eyes, or of someone who wears glasses and is suddenly made to take them off” (74–75). After her husband’s death, Didion began to notice this look on her face and, consequently, “on others” (74). “These people who have lost someone look naked because they think themselves invisible. I myself felt invisible for a period of time, incorporeal,” she specifies (75). In *Levels of Life* (2013), Julian Barnes makes a similar observation. He compares becoming a widower to changing one’s make of car. You “suddenly register” in a way you never did before how “many other cars of the same sort there are on the road” (Barnes 76). “When you are widowed, you suddenly notice all the widows and widowers coming towards you. Before, they had been more or less invisible, and they continue to remain so to other drivers, to the unwidowed,” Barnes completes his analogy (76).

The invisibility of the bereaved is connected not only with the grieving self’s changed perception of itself and of the world around it but also with how others approach mourners in everyday life. C. S. Lewis expresses the essence of this disparity between the two cohorts:

An odd byproduct of my loss is that I’m aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they’ll “say something about it” or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don’t. Some funk it altogether. R. has been avoiding me for a week. . . . Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers. To some I’m worse than an embarrassment. I am a death’s head. (10–11)

The bereft self becomes the reminder of mortality to others—a tangible, walking memento mori in the face of which everyday register fails. Platitudes such as “time heals” or “life must go on” are often of little

comfort to mourners, which partly explains Lewis's aversion to all social reactions to his loss. To many griever, the awkwardness of others is both alien and understandable. Some admit that they used to shy away from the grief-struck in the past—as if the bereaved were another species, tainted by death. “What could be more cruel than to walk away from a friend who is in pain?” Lindsay Nicholson asks (84), addressing as much those who avoided her as her own pre-loss persona. “After all I used to be that person—the one who didn't know what to say,” she admits (83–84). After two devastating losses, Nicholson realizes how oppressive the silence that often surrounds the bereaved can be: “I didn't know that to say nothing was far worse” (84). By discussing the subjective and social invisibility of the grieving self, narratives of loss create an alternative communal space in which the bereaved can recognize themselves, even if temporarily. They also remind us that grief can be extremely isolating and indicate what can help the griever regain a sense of belonging.

At times, however, even with ample support from family and friends, changed ontological states transport the bereaved into a place distant from the regions in which others tread. This “geographical” derealization constitutes another consistent trajec(s)tory in grief memoirs. In *Landscape without Gravity: A Memoir of Grief* (1993), Barbara Lazear Ascher mourns the death of her younger brother Bobby from AIDS. “Grieving takes heroic strength,” Ascher asserts (46). To illustrate her point, she reaches to the world of antiquity with which she senses she has more in common than with the reality around her: “You fight demons no more docile than Ulysses' Cyclops, and like Ulysses, you pine for home until you realize that what you long for is you as you once were, life as it once was” (47). Launched into another emotional plane of existence by the magnitude of her loss, Ascher finds it difficult to communicate with her family. “Grief is a landscape without gravity. My husband does not know I'm here, afloat. Nor does my daughter,” she confesses (44–45). Overwhelming loss creates a geographical gap between the linguistic registers of the grieving self and her family. The griever's register “is outside the scope of language,” while others “continue to communicate through normal channels” (Ascher 45). Similarly, Didion feels as if she had “crossed one of those legendary rivers that divide the living from the dead, entered a place in which [she] could be seen only by those who were themselves recently bereaved” (75). “I understood for the first time the power in the image of the rivers, the Styx, the Lethe, the cloaked ferryman with his pole,” she observes (75). To someone who has not suffered a life-altering loss, such mythological musings may appear dramatic. The bereaved, however, grasp as much at banal as at hyperbolic imagery, frequently doubting if either is adequate to express what they experience.

Barnes also notes this spatial reshaping of reality in the griever's life: "Grief reconfigures time, its length, its texture, its function: one day means no more than the next . . . It also reconfigures space. You have entered a new geography, mapped by a new cartography" (91–92). After the untimely loss of his wife, Barnes experienced suicidal thoughts. His despair was so profound that when he finally began to "brave public places and go out to a play, a concert, an opera," he found out that he "had developed a terror of the foyer," of "cheerful, expectant, normal people looking forward to enjoying themselves" (98). "I couldn't bear the noise and the look of placid normality: just more busloads of people indifferent to my wife's dying," he admits (98). To make the transition from the space of "placid normality" to the darkened world of an auditorium possible, friends had to meet Barnes outside the theater to "conduct" him to his seat (98–99). This behavior echoes the helplessness that Cockburn experienced after the death of her daughter. When we lose what was most dear to us, we lose our confidence in ourselves and the world around us (Parkes and Prigerson 103). "At such times the bereaved are disorganized and disabled by loss," observe Parkes and Prigerson (104). Like Cockburn and Barnes, many mourners "may need the protection and support of others, whose world has not been similarly shattered, to provide the security that will enable them, little by little, to take in the reality of what has happened and make it real" (Parkes and Prigerson 104). Grief memoirists address multiple ways in which assistance can be offered to the grief-stricken and how it can be modified with time to enable the bereaved "to brave" their new reality with increased confidence.

When what was familiar becomes unfamiliar, what was previously unfamiliar, or less accessible, often becomes close and familiar, providing an alternative source of identification and support. Like Ascher and Didion, Barnes finds a sudden affinity with the realm of ancient mythology and tragedy. One of the first plays he goes to see after his wife's death is *Oedipus*. The first opera he attends is Strauss's *Elektra*. "[A]s I sat through these harshest of tragedies," Barnes recollects, "I didn't feel myself transported to a distant, antique culture where terror and pity reigned. I felt instead that *Oedipus* and *Elektra* were coming to me, to my land, to the new geography I now inhabited" (99). In his grief memoir, *Kaddish* (1998), Leon Wieseltier notes: "The disconsolate are the masters of consolation. They offer sympathy without illusion" (581). When the world around them seems distant and does not provide enough "sympathy without illusion," many griever's instinctively turn to other realities that make them feel more understood and that they can understand. Free to defy the laws of conformity and logic, literature and art become natural allies in this journey. For most of his life, Barnes had considered opera

to be “one of the least comprehensible art forms” (99). “I couldn’t make the necessary imaginative leap. Operas felt like deeply implausible and badly constructed plays, with characters yelling in one another’s faces simultaneously,” he states (99). After the death of his wife, “in the darkness of an auditorium and the darkness of grief,” Barnes perceives people standing onstage and singing at one another as natural, with “song” being “a more primal means of communication than the spoken word—both higher and deeper” (99–100). Like many other grief memoirists, Barnes offers an apt, non-clinical commentary on how dramatically the perception of what is understandable, normal, and natural changes for the griever. Finding a new space in which the griever feels understood and, thus, safer is an important step in adapting to a post-loss reality. This space can be found in new hobbies, grief support groups, or relatable fictional worlds and characters. The newfound familiarity with other grief-stricken individuals gives the bereaved a clear signal that their loss is real and, indeed, can be as devastating as Oedipus’ or Elektra’s ordeals. It also shows that, undesirable as they are at first, gradual changes in the assumptive world view result in new connections and may eventually lead to a new, livable reality. This sense of possibility can make the bereaved feel more confident that their sense of identity can become “higher and deeper” over time as well (cf. Parkes and Prigerson 104–07).

The feelings of depersonalization and derealization are extensively covered in professional bereavement literature with clinicians providing examples from their case studies that, however, often contain their own biases. In grief memoirs, the portrayals of these and many other particulars of loss gain individual, vivid dimensions—dimensions that may only be captured by the self that has experienced “the violence of the actual event.” Undoubtedly ridden with their own biases, the autobiographical representations of grief reactions constitute what I call a collection of subjective correlatives: individual images of loss that correspond to and may inform many aspects of grief systematized by bereavement studies.

GRIEF MEMOIRS IN BIBLIOTHERAPY AND EDUCATION

The correlations and disparities between the assessment of grief reactions in professional literature and the particulars of loss portrayed in grief memoirs can be explored to advance the study and application of life writing in therapy. In essence, bibliotherapy is the use of literature for healing and developmental purposes. In clinical terms, it is a “process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature under the

guidance of a trained helper” (Shrodes 32). The bibliotherapeutic process relies on three basic stages: identification (the reader needs to identify with the storyline, ideas, or characters); catharsis (some emotional release should be present); and insight (the reader acquires some knowledge and understanding of a given problem) (Pehrsson and McMillen 1). Common steps in the application of bibliotherapeutic means include: preparation (assessment of the client’s interests and reading skills); selection (choosing reading materials and matching them with the client’s needs); methods of application which vary “from client-initiated to counselor-initiated, structured to unstructured, . . . and more-facilitated to less-facilitated”; and follow-up (assessing the client’s growth) (Pehrsson and McMillen 1). Helping professionals employ two main types of literature: affective (mainly fiction and poetry) and non-fiction (mainly self-help books).

The stages of identification, catharsis, and insight are all relevant to the particulars of loss presented in grief memoirs. In order for the bibliotherapeutic process to be effective, the reader needs to relate to the source and its storyline (Cohen 57), which makes autobiographical accounts of loss a viable option for the bereaved. The requirement of close identification with the book entails a careful selection of literature either by a skilled facilitator, a supportive person, or by the reader. A properly selected grief narrative could work for the bereaved in a similar manner to that in which opera works for Barnes and mythological characters and rivers work for Ascher and Didion. In fact, the bibliotherapeutic element of insight could be additionally enhanced through grief memoirs because many writers talk about how literary and artistic sources proved supportive in grief, and many, often inadvertently, demonstrate how self-bibliocounseling works. Undoubtedly, helping professionals and bereavement support groups across the globe recommend and use select grief memoirs as aids in therapy. Yet, considering the number of autobiographical narratives of loss on the market, an appropriate choice may not always be easy, even for the most experienced practitioners of bibliotherapy. In contrast to fiction, poetry, and self-help literature, the body of research documenting the use of grief memoirs in therapy is still insignificant. This scarcity of empirical studies may influence the familiarity of helping professionals with the possibilities such texts offer as well as make it more difficult to select proper texts and match them to the client (cf. Malecka and Bottomley 847–49). Generally, the application of life writing in clinical conditions is still scarcely documented (see Eisen et al. 243). This opens an opportunity for literary scholars and psychologists to collaborate and design studies testing the efficacy of life-writing genres in bibliotherapy. For instance, it will be easier for a scholar specializing in grief memoirs to locate sources that may appeal to pregnant widows (Nicholson could not

find any after her losses), and psychologists can verify if selected texts would not be too triggering for the bereaved. Such joint endeavors could lead to a systematized inventory of published grief memoirs that would make it easier for the bereaved to find those best suited to their needs.

To increase the social visibility of autobiographical grief narratives, scholarly publications devoted to their pragmatic applications should be written in an accessible manner so that the bereaved and their support groups can appreciate what such accounts have to offer. The bibliotherapeutic rule that the text should be relatable to the recipient in order to be effective is what academics should probably heed more often if they aspire to support the grief-struck in their choice of literature (cf. Prodromou 23). In a systematized review of the particulars of loss portrayed in grief memoirs, similar correlations between grief memoirs and professional literature to those presented in this analysis may be of use. Yet, even more straightforward strategies should be considered, executed, and reported in an explicit yet *unobtrusive* manner. I stress “unobtrusive” because, as some grief memoirists underscore, the bereaved often resent literature that is heralded as the panacea for what they are going through.

Memoirs of loss could also be used in the training of future helping professionals to help sensitize them to the needs of the bereaved. Courses such as Rita Charon’s program in narrative medicine at Columbia University prove that the application of “[n]ovels, memoirs, plays, [and] movies” in the education of future clinicians can be a worthy endeavor (42). In narrative medicine courses, students improve their skills in taking medical histories via close reading techniques. They also explore books to boost their levels of empathy and learn how to handle their own emotions now and in future practice (Charon vii–xiii). A special course focusing on the experiences of the bereaved with the use of grief memoirs would be a valuable addition in this type of developmental bibliotherapy. For instance, Sandra M. Gilbert’s *Wrongful Death: A Memoir* (1997) or Joyce Carol Oates’s *A Widow’s Story: A Memoir* (2011) could be particularly suited to help prospective as well as current clinicians understand the “violence” of loss from the perspective of the bereaved. Both Gilbert and Oates address the professional inadequacies of certain clinicians with whom they had to interact after their devastating losses.

Many memoirs of loss can be read as detailed case studies rich in sentiments and insights that academic textbooks may lack. In “The Healing Power of Culture Stories: What Writers Can Teach Psychotherapists,” American psychologist Ester R. Shapiro argues that her work “on cultural identity as a protective factor in development” would be deficient were it not for autobiographical accounts on the topic that she decided to include in her research and teaching (93). Shapiro assigned to her students several

memoirs written by African Americans that enabled her and them to explore “rich, multidimensional, and often surprising portraits of personal identities constructed out of complex lives between cultural worlds, a perspective too often missing in the psychological literature” (94). Grief memoirs offer equally “multidimensional” portraits of bereavement that, with careful selection and implementation, can enrich the knowledge and lives of current and future helping professionals and, as a result, can benefit the bereaved.

CONCLUSION

In spite of what some grief memoirists claim, we should not assume that griever in general will not be able to locate relevant bereavement literature. We can, however, assume that finding relatable texts in the throes of grief may be more challenging than academics versed in research acknowledge. The bereaved experience a host of psychosomatic and social changes. The new territory they navigate often requires unlimited depths of energy. To ease this journey, mourners reach for different sources, some more useful than others. In many contemporary cultures, where mourning rituals are often limited to funerary “tasks” without much follow-up down the road, autobiographical accounts of grief matter more than ever as they can assist griever in navigating their altered reality. In comprehensive and nuanced ways, they document the particulars of loss and the ways in which the griever handles “the violence of the actual event.” To help mitigate the sense of isolation and unreality that the grief-struck experience on many levels, more pragmatic assistance in the selection of relatable sources should also come from the combined efforts of professionals representing different fields and specializing in the analysis and application of bereavement literature in a variety of contexts.

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Dialogic, but Monologic: Toxic Masculinity Meets #MeToo in Teddy Wayne’s Campus Novel *Loner*

ABSTRACT

Teddy Wayne’s 2016 *Loner* tells the story of a Harvard freshman’s sexual obsession with a fellow student, leading to stalking and attempted rape. On a deeper level, the campus novel can be interpreted as a critique of wider processes taking place in American academia and generally in the US: the mainstreaming of the so-called “woke” movement and the growing impact of “political correctness.” The novel also reflects on class inequality, privilege, gender politics, the ongoing crisis of white (heterosexual) masculinity, toxic masculinity, and online “incel culture.” The present paper will analyze the problematic “dialogic, but monologic” nature of the book’s unreliable narrative addressing the above problems. The paper’s goal will be to read *Loner* in light of the #MeToo movement as an illustration of the current stage of the now decades-long reckoning with rape culture, and with patriarchy.

Keywords: academic fiction, the #MeToo movement, sexual assault, rape culture, toxic masculinity, crisis of masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

Teddy Wayne's 2016 campus novel *Loner* recounts an obsessive reliving of a Harvard freshman's first semester, and his sexual fixation on a female fellow-student. Wayne's chronicling of stalking culminating in attempted rape offers a useful educational tool and a warning in its own right. However, this paper will discuss *Loner* as a wider critique of contemporary academia and what it represents. Wayne's novel captures some of the most crucial recent developments in American academia and campus culture: the mainstreaming of the so-called "woke" movement and the growing impact of "political correctness." Transcending academia and responding to even broader processes unfolding in the US, the novel also reflects on class inequality, gender politics, the ongoing crisis of white (heterosexual) masculinity, toxic masculinity, as well as the so-called "incel culture." It will be the goal of the present paper to analyze the problematic "dialogic, but monologic" nature of the book's unreliable narrative, as it voices an academic understanding of gender inequality and patriarchal objectification of women, while simultaneously exemplifying American white male "aggrieved entitlement" leading to violence. I will read *Loner* in light of the #MeToo movement as an illustration of the current stage of the now decades-long reckoning with rape culture, and more broadly speaking patriarchy. I will argue that central to this stage is the white masculinity crisis—on the one hand, as male self-victimization weaponized by extreme political movements, and on the other, as a recognition of men's victimhood within patriarchy, "the male malaise" (Reeves 1), both of which need urgent intervention.

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LONER: RECEPTION, ZEITGEIST, AND INSPIRATION

Published in 2016, *Loner* is the third novel by Teddy Wayne. The American writer, a Harvard graduate himself (Wayne, Interview by Ryan Chapman), has written four other novels: *Kapitoil* (2010), *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* (2013), *Apartment* (2020), and *The Great Man Theory* (2022). Like all of Wayne's works, *Loner* received many highly positive reviews (see *Teddy Wayne*). According to *The New York Post*, "Wayne is one of the most insightful, talented, criminally unknown writers of his generation" (Post Staff Report). Kirkus Reviews called *Loner* "[a] startlingly sharp study of not just collegiate culture, but of social forces at large." For another reviewer, it was "not a stretch to say the Whiting Award winner's third novel might become the most incendiary book since Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*" (Wayne, Interview by Ryan Chapman). *The New York Times* also saw a parallel with the same, by now, classic novel: "As Bret

Easton Ellis did with Patrick Bateman in ‘American Psycho’ (1991), Wayne seems to imply that [*Loner’s* protagonist] is somehow emblematic of this particular moment, with its apparently insurmountable class divisions paired with a voyeuristic internet culture” (Rosenfeld). Finally, a reviewer of Wayne’s fourth novel, *Apartment*, where the author again exercises his skill in creating an unsympathetic loner, has observed that “[t]here’s perhaps no living writer better at chronicling the most crucial emotional flash points of the young modern male than ‘Teddy Wayne’”¹ (Colburn).

Currently, HBO is developing an adaptation of *Loner* into a TV series, with the author as a co-executive producer (Wayne, Interview by Maris Kreizman). This investment by a major media corporation proves that *Loner* meets a present demand for shows such as Netflix’s *You* (2018–) (about a stalker) and BBC Three and Hulu’s *Normal People* (2020), an adaptation of Sally Rooney’s 2018 bestseller. Like these two stories, Wayne’s also tackles contemporary sexual and gender politics, specifically among young people, university students, as well as class inequality, privilege, and above all toxic masculinity and sexual abuse, with social media in the background. In addition, set at Harvard, Wayne’s novel addresses on-campus rape culture and “political correctness.” In short, it can be said that Wayne’s “disturbingly prophetic” (Wayne, Interview by Maris Kreizman) novel taps into the current Zeitgeist. Its publication coincided with the beginning of the “Trump era,” characterized by manifest misogyny and an anti-feminist backlash, additionally fuelled by a movement which started as Me Too, founded by the African American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, and then gained global recognition as #MeToo in October 2017, after accusations made by a group of Hollywood actresses against Harvey Weinstein became public (Kantor and Twohey 2, 185), following earlier similar public charges against Bill Cosby (in 2014; NBC10 Staff) and Roger Ailes (in 2016; Disis and Pallotta).

Most importantly, *Loner* captures the basic sentiment of the “incel movement” (the involuntary celibates’ online subculture), which was not well-known in 2016, but has become notorious since (Hern; Williams; Broyd et al.), owing to a number of “lone shooters” whose online activity, combined with commercialized media coverage, helped spread the “contagion effect in mass shootings” (Israni 68). As Wayne has observed, stating a fact all too obvious to any American: “Every few weeks it seems there’s another atrocity in the news perpetrated by invariably a man, often a young man, whether on a mass or individual scale. And very often when the news researches this individual’s life, they call him a loner”

¹ When it comes to the older modern male there is James Lasdun, author of *The Horned Man, Give Me Everything You Have: On Being Stalked, The Fall Guy* and *Afternoon of a Faun*.

(Wayne, Interview by Scott Simon). Consequently, the author said: "I was compelled to write from the perspective of one of these young men and try to understand what's going on in their head and what cultural forces influence them to act this way" (ibid.).

In an interview for *Kirkus Reviews*, Wayne revealed his immediate source of inspiration: an online video showing a teenage psychopathic murderer from Ohio, who in 2012 shot three classmates in a high school cafeteria. Even though Wayne does not directly mention incels in *Loner*, he recognizes that his own protagonist "shares some characteristics" with incels, but he does not belong to any community (Interview by Maris Kreizman). Still, reviewers have interpreted the novel as a story of "a burgeoning incel's embrace of the dark side" (Colburn).

Thus, Wayne's own eponymous "loner" is not as shockingly horrifying (yet) as his real-life inspiration, but he is horrifying enough. Even though he does not kill anyone, he becomes obsessed with Veronica Morgan Wells, whom he stalks and finally attempts to rape. In the meantime, in order to get close to her, he also exploits, including sexually, another young woman, Sara Cohen, who is Veronica's roommate. Consequently, *Loner* could be subtitled "A Portrait of a Socio- and Psychopath as a Young Man," even if the portrait is in fact a self-portrait painted in words by the novel's unreliable first-person narrator.

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LONER'S LONER

The narrator and protagonist of *Loner* is David Alan Federman, a white, Jewish eighteen-year-old, who is a freshman at Harvard. Wayne's portrayal of his protagonist's Jewishness has been criticized "at this point in American history [as] not only a cliché but an anachronism" (Rosenfeld). However, while Wayne (who is Jewish himself) does rely on some Jewish male stereotypes, they are clearly intended to alienate his "loner" even further among the successful Harvard WASPs.

Coming from suburban middle-class background, David suffers from an inferiority complex, made only more acute by meeting the object of his desire. This is because Veronica Morgan Wells, originally from Manhattan, "came from money," and "[i]t wasn't just [her] financial capital that set [her] apart; it was [her] worldliness, [her] taste, [her] social capital" (Wayne, *Loner* 18)—in short, all the things denied David by his upbringing in a town in New Jersey.

Yet, despite his feeling of class inferiority, David has a very high sense of his intellectual superiority. Indeed, he was accepted to Harvard as a highly intelligent student. Such duality to his character, a simultaneously low and high self-esteem, is typical for incel or incel-like young men

(Broyd et al. 257), some of whom become domestic terrorists, and authors of long hateful online manifestos (Israni 67; Broyd et al. 255). What David also shares with incels is not living up to stereotypical ideas of masculinity (Broyd et al. 255): he is not muscular or macho; he describes himself as a “fragile” (Wayne, *Loner* 33), “effete, thin-wristed” (39), “vacuum of charisma” (21). This was one of the main reasons why he was—again typically for future incels—bullied at school (Israni 67; Broyd et al. 260).

As we learn from his memories, he was a quiet, studious, and lonely child (even his younger sister disowned him in public). His high school English teacher described him in her letter of recommendation as “most gifted” (Wayne, *Loner* 6), but also as “somewhat of a loner” (7) and mentioned “the immense strain human interactions put on him” (6). David matches the stereotype of an extreme introvert, perhaps from the autistic spectrum, although these terms are not used in his narrative.² To complete this picture, Wayne equips his protagonist with a rare OCD quirk. As David puts it: “At twelve, without many interlocutors to speak of (or to), I began a dialogue with language itself; mentally reversing nearly every word I encountered in speech, signs, objects I saw” (8). He described this skill in his Harvard application:

“To continuously reflect the world in a linguistic mirror,” I postulated in the essay, “is to question the ontological arbitrariness of everything and everyone. Why is an *apple* not an *elppa*, nor, for that matter, an *orange*? Why am I *me* and not *you*?” I titled it “Backwords” and typed the whole thing in a reverse font and word order (by line), preparing to mail in a hard copy so that the reader needed to hold it up in front of a mirror. My parents, however, feared the admission committee would think it was gibberish. Bowing to prudence, I compromised by writing the body of the essay normally and changing just the title to `2CROWD8`. My “unique” essay had “rather intrigued” the Harvard admissions committee, my guidance counselor later informed me. (9)

² Broyd et al. stress that research on the mental health of incels “is in its infancy” (262); however, their review of current literature on the subject leads to the following conclusion: “Inceldom is a poorly understood but significant online movement that shows potential for extremism and violence, particularly among those with mental health difficulties. Although depression, autism and personality disorder are not associated with violence themselves, they may accelerate or produce a vulnerability to extreme overvalued beliefs” (ibid.). Furthermore, “the literature suggests that there may be a specific relationship between autism and incel-related activity” (257), and “the co-occurrence of autism and narcissism may be a particularly explosive combination, increasing the risk of someone with autism engaging in violent behaviour” (257–58). However, alongside activists for autistic people (Gilman), the authors of the study stress the need for caution and warn against overgeneralization in inferring a correlation between autism and violence, as violence stems from a co-occurrence of multiple risk factors (Broyd et al. 257–60).

This fragment offers a good illustration of David's style and character. It is not only the Harvard essay that sounds pretentious; the whole narrative and the narrator are entirely self-absorbed. However, the resultant self-reflexivity lacks any self-criticism, and any other perspective; this would require empathy, which David lacks entirely, while showing a great deal of megalomania. David recognizes himself as different—but meaning only unique. Ironically, the self-reflection—highlighted by the figure of the mirror above—points to a self-perception that mirrors other people's perception of David only in the sense that it is its reversal. What David sees in himself is often the opposite of what people see in him. As David put it in Chapter 7, thinking of Veronica: “you, too, felt like you had always seen the world differently from everyone else” (74). He keeps seeing what he wants to see—in this instance: that he and the object of his desire are the same. At the same time, he knows that they come from very different worlds, but imagines himself belonging to Veronica's affluent, privileged milieu. She represents both his sexual and class aspirations: the desire for who he feels he ought to become.

THE NOVEL'S NARRATIVE MONOLOGUE AND INCELDOM

The passage quoted above showed the narrator engaged in “a dialogue with language itself”³ (8). In fact, David's entire narrative can be defined this way. While it is supposedly written to and for someone, it turns out to be entirely one-sided: fittingly for a loner, it is a monologue, but we can only fully appreciate this by reading the novel backwards from its ending.

David chooses to begin his story on his first day at Harvard: when he first saw Veronica. From this moment, located towards the end of Chapter 1, the first-person narrative, unchanged for approximately ten pages, begins to regularly address a second-person “you”: Veronica. As we learn from the penultimate section of the final Chapter 16, David is reconstructing the story of his fascination with her—in retrospect, more than five years after the described events. Writing from a temporal distance is occasionally signalled in the narrative, as in this early example of foreshadowing at the end of Chapter 3: “It's convenient, in hindsight, to blame Harvard. But it wasn't the guilty party” (29). However, predominantly, the narrative is organized chronologically, reflecting the narrator's state of mind and knowledge at the given moment being narrated, deliberately withholding and delaying already possessed information. This technique

³ The novel is engaged also in an intertextual dialogue with many other literary works.

creates an effect of immediacy, as if the narrator was intentionally—still obsessively—re-living the described events. Importantly, as signalled, the second-person address remains monologic, because Veronica never reads the story and never replies. As David says towards the end, “I didn’t write it for you . . . I wrote it *about* you” (202).

Another reason why David’s story has to be a monologue is that, effectively, it is a confession to stalking, a fetishistic obsession, and attempted rape, which he fully intended to carry out and would have completed if no one had stopped him. David takes comfort in the fact that “there aren’t judicial consequences” (202), due to a “plea bargain” arranged between the district attorney, Veronica’s wealthy and “publicity-weary” parents (201), on the one hand, and David’s lawyer parents and his lawyer, on the other. As David put it in his smug words to Veronica: “The burden of proof was on you” (200), which is not far from victim blaming, while on the other hand, Veronica had very little say in how the matter of attempted rape of her was handled. Consequently, to quote from David: “To put it in layman’s terms, I [got] off scot-free” (201).

The only real punishment for the attempted rape was David’s expulsion from Harvard, although this had less to do with Harvard’s sense of justice than with the institution’s fear of negative publicity (also about drugs and Veronica’s consensual relationship with a married teaching assistant). Without addressing the problem, the university got rid of one instance of it and protected its reputation. Presumably for the same reason, to protect his and his family’s reputation, David keeps his account to himself, at least for now.

Initially we may read the text as personal self-therapy suggested by David’s mother, meant to give him “closure.” His mother did give him this idea for writing a letter but never sending it, after he vaguely confided in her about his rejection by Veronica (189). Yet, it can be inferred that David is using the idea for the opposite effect: not for closure, but for keeping the source of pleasure—and pain—open. This corresponds with David’s sexual and pornographic preferences, where pleasure, loneliness, women’s suffering, and his own humiliation are mixed. It also proves that the writing is a prolonged exercise in nostalgia, itself a mixture of pleasure and pain.

Thus, *Loner’s* ending is an open one for David, who, now, at twenty-four, is even more of a loner than before his single semester at Harvard. Having effortlessly attended a community college, David lives with his parents: “I don’t leave the house much these days. Usually I’m in my bedroom, on the Internet. You can burn a great deal of hours like that” (202). This detail in particular brings to mind the incel subculture, especially since the very last words of the novel are about no one knowing David’s name: he remembers being arrested (on campus, soon after the attempted rape), while no one among the onlookers, his fellow students,

even recognized him. Since this is the last thing that David writes, non-chronologically, such departure from his rigid narrative pattern suggests that his anonymity bothers him.

Incels, some of whom become violent, sometimes as “lone shooters,” typically seek fame (Israni 60; Broyd et al. 260). They see themselves in the same warped mirror in which David sees his own paradoxical, self-serving image: both victim and hero—a heroic victim, a victimized hero. Parts of David’s writing already sound like an incel manifesto:

I collected my thoughts, reminded myself of the original plan. Fleeing was for the cowardly and deceitful. For the weak. You were the one who’d fled. The heroic manifested their own destinies and accepted their undeserved punishments without complaint. . . . [I] returned to your room. . . . I waited for the authorities. (Wayne, *Loner* 199)

About Veronica he writes: “There’s just one Everest, and only the most heroic can reach the summit” (24). To himself (or some virtual reader) he says: “For years everyone could believe you were a faceless foot soldier. . . . Then, in a single stroke, you could prove them all wrong” (36). The military reference, the veiled threat of violence and a hint of a desire for revenge reinforce the association between *Loner*’s protagonist and inceldom.

Although we are not given information about David’s online activity allowing us to gauge his potential incel indoctrination, his text’s features correspond with the key “risk factors associated with inceldom,” namely “the ‘triad of risk’ consisting of (a) fixation on a lack of sexual experience, (b) cognitive distortions and (c) blaming women for [one’s] frustrations” (Broyd et al. 259–60), as well as lack of important “stabilising/protective influences” such as support from friends, employment and empathy (*ibid.*).

The young man tried to rape someone at eighteen; the question of what he may still do looms unanswered as the novel ends. He should be in therapy; his mental health should be treated by a specialist; instead, he is online, stuck in an interior monologue. Through this problem, *Loner* demonstrates its engagement in another dialogue: with toxic masculinity.

TOXIC MASCULINITY IN *LONER*

While the novel’s ending leaves us with a vague premonition about David’s future, his already available self-portrait offers a valuable insight into toxic masculinity. The novel’s protagonist, tragically a victim of toxic masculinity inflicted upon him by other boys, his bullies, himself grows to inflict toxic masculinity—not upon other boys or men, but upon young women.

According to the standards of hegemonic masculinity,⁴ David's masculinity is deficient, and this is the reason why he was oppressed at school by stronger boys, and why, as he believes, he remains a virgin at the age of eighteen, which is a source of intense stigma to him. It is this shame that drives him to emotionally manipulate and sexually exploit Sara, also a virgin, who does not feel ready for intercourse (Wayne, *Loner* 125), and who is pressurized by David when she is drunk, and thus incapable of giving true consent. David pressurized her into having sex one more time, and the next day broke up with her, loudly enough for Veronica to hear his voice and Sara's crying in the adjacent room, hoping to impress the object of his real desire as "someone who had the power to wound another person" (136).

Such behaviour is David's attempt to make himself belong to the dominant group, despite his deficiencies. The novel captures well the common phenomenon of heterosexual male-bonding where women's bodies and sexuality are exchanged through words and images between male group members for each individual member's status within that group. David's entire Thanksgiving high school reunion with a few male former schoolmates is spent on interrogations about conquests of "sluts" and bragging about invented "blow jobs," and "tapped asses"; any claimed "hookup tally" (163) supported with pictures on Facebook passed around with "greasy fingers" (164).

Such treatment of women is very old and so commonplace that when Donald Trump was recorded engaging in it in 2016 ("Transcript"), he could dismiss it as mere "locker room talk" and go on to become the president of the US with the support of America's most conservative religious organizations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls such (and similar, as they are wide-ranging) practices "traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (25–26), which ultimately serve as "structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25). The book defining these mechanisms, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, was published in the 1980s and examines 19th century literature. But as Gerda Lerner explains in her *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) patriarchal power began with the *literal* use of women as exchangeable property. In fact, "[f]or much of recorded history women were the property of men, with their value as property measured largely by their sexual 'purity'" (see "1. Common Themes and the Liberal-to-Radical Continuum" in Whisnant).

⁴ The term, meaning the most dominant type of masculinity in a given time and culture (and pointing to a plurality of masculinities), was introduced by R. W. Connell in 1979 (Beasley 31).

Wayne breaks with the tradition of women's objectification in *Loner*. Rather than normalized and dismissed as "locker room talk," the behaviour representing toxic masculinity in the novel is shown as actively dangerous, also for men, but especially for women. Most importantly, the novel shows that David is a product of a whole culture that simultaneously punishes him, too, while (at least for the time being) offering him shelter.

RAPE CULTURE VS. "WOKE" ACADEMIA

The culture that has shaped David is not only patriarchy, but also, more specifically, rape culture. It is "a culture in which rape is normalized and rarely punished" (Jensen, *Getting* 175); it "doesn't command men to rape but does blur the line between consensual sex and non-consensual rape, and also reduces the likelihood that rapists will be identified, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and punished" (Jensen, *The End* 84). Furthermore, this culture "endorse[s] a vision of masculinity that makes rape inviting" (Jensen, *Getting* 48) through (increasingly violent and degrading) mainstream pornography (ibid. 103), as well as the peer-pressure and competitive male homosocial trading in objectified women as trophies and means for gaining status within hegemonic masculinity.

In *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*, Mithu Sanyal points out that "American universities"—to their credit (or others' discredit)—"have gone further in their efforts to eradicate rape culture than institutions anywhere else" (102), and "have become a microcosm of the way our understanding of rape culture can inform our actions" (ibid.). However, in her *Citadels of Pride: Sexual Assault, Accountability, and Reconciliation*, Martha C. Nussbaum writes about the titular "zones of unusually well-insulated male privilege" (84), among them college campuses. Discussing student-on-student assault and harassment, Nussbaum stresses that "our [American legal] system is protective of defendants in multiple ways" (116).

Feminisms' (plural) reckoning with rape culture and rape has gone on for decades. It was only in the 1970s that the most prominent second-wave activists and writers in this area, Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin, intensified public debate on rape, framing it as an active war on women (Dworkin; Sanyal 23, 25, 116), which is considered too radical even by otherwise appreciative feminists today (Sanyal 46). Legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon continues this approach addressing the rape crisis, and has succeeded in changing federal law (Abrams 1539, 1549). In the early 1990s, after the "sex wars" of the 1980s (ibid. 1533), the most outspoken opponents of this strand of anti-pornography rape-crisis feminism were the postfeminist Camille Paglia (ibid. 1534) and Katie Roiphe, who in her

The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism, shared Paglia's concern about stressing women's victimhood, weakness and passivity, as well as Paglia's lack of concern for class, race and power structures e.g., in the workplace. Roiphe criticized rape-crisis feminists as conformity-imposing thought police and saw on-campus safe-sex workshops as policing sexuality and an infringement of sexual freedom. Both Roiphe and Paglia could be seen as early critics of "political correctness" (Abrams 1534) already then gaining dominance in American academia, leading to today's "woke" movement at universities and beyond, especially in social media.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "politically correct" means "conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated," and "woke" means "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)." The word "woke" originated in African American English, and since 2014, in connection with the Black Lives Matter movement, has been gaining more widespread use ("Stay Woke") "[l]ike many other terms from black culture that have been taken into the mainstream" (ibid.). By the end of the 2010s "it was also being applied by some as a general *pejorative* for anyone who is or appears to be politically left-leaning" (ibid.; emphasis mine). However, by the present moment, even those who are not against left-leaning politics may use both terms negatively, if what "offends" becomes extremely broad, leading to what would be more accurately defined as "political hypercorrectness" (as distinct from actually socially useful "political correctness"—a distinction needed not to throw the baby of pro-equality movements' progress out with the herd mentality bathwater). A good illustration of the "woke" movement going too far even for the otherwise "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues" ("Woke") is the 2019 case of a Harvard law professor, Ron Sullivan, who was dismissed as (incidentally, the first Black) faculty dean after law students protested (some waving #MeToo signs) against his joining Harvey Weinstein's defense team (Russo). This—i.e. legal representation of the innocent until proven guilty, ensuring that the due process rights are maintained for everyone—made the law students feel "unsafe" (Parloff); therefore Sullivan was "cancelled."

Such is *Loner's* context of contemporary academia, where progressive ideology or "wokeness" clashes with conservative ideology and the status quo, such as the legal system often shielding actual harassers, as indicated by Nussbaum. Three years after the novel's publication, Wayne observed: "Colleges have become even more of America's ground zero for the culture wars the last few years, after both #MeToo and Trump's ascendancy" (Interview by Maris Kreizman).

Wayne's tool for a mild parody of campus "political correctness" is Sara. A reader of *Anti-Imperialist Marxism in Latin America*, she observes about missing a salsa event: "Maybe it's a good thing for us to experience being unseen at a Latino event," she whispered. "You know—when Latinos have to deal with being unseen more systematically every day in the US" (Wayne, *Loner* 47). Later, recognizing her act of virtue signaling as potentially hubristic, she adds: "I realize that comment about Latinos' being unseen sounded pretty sanctimonious. I didn't mean to imply that you're someone who doesn't recognize his privilege" (49). Sara's "wokeness" sounds rote, is only performative and ultimately self-serving; but she may yet put her reading of *101 Idealistic Jobs that Actually Exist* to good use.

However, the main example of Wayne's critique of the current campus "culture wars" can be found in *Loner* in the scene where David attempts to join one of Veronica's classes: "Gender and the Consumerist Impulse," taught by a tattooed and otherwise hip feminist professor. The "woke" group, surely opposed to inequality and minorities' discrimination, fail to embrace inclusivity and diversity when given an opportunity: "There was only one (clearly gay) male at the oval table. Everyone looked at me as if my presence were unwelcome, a grotesque insect crawling over their lovely picnic spread" (43). David believed he experienced hostility due to being a white straight male, which he makes clear in a conversation with Sara:

"I almost wish I belonged to a marginalized community so I'd have a safe space for all occasions," I said.

"The whole world is your safe space," [Sara] snapped.

"Not true. I shopped a feminism class and didn't feel particularly welcome there." (121)

Later still he observes about the same class: "It was dicey to loiter outside any classroom for you [Veronica], especially for a feminism course, where my being caught might itself be fodder for an entire conversation about the male gaze" (141). Ironically, such a conversation would be entirely applicable to David stalking Veronica (during a feminist class, too). This serves as a perfect illustration of David's "bilingualism": being fluent in "woke" and "toxic" at the same time. What finally proves it is the scene where David actually "mansplains" to Veronica "the male gaze" from Laura Mulvey's essay, while constantly subjecting Veronica to his own "male gaze"—in fact, his whole narrative is an example of it.

Thus, "bilingual" David is partly "blind": he can instantly define the problem, but he does not seem to realize that he is part of it. Theory and

practice remain separate; there is no true self-reflection and no dialogue, only David's self-victimization on the one hand—and the “feminist class” group's oblivious self-righteousness on the other. Academia's charged political climate is something that “David, as an insecure and entitled young white male, chafes against” (Wayne, Interview by Ryan Chapman)—even though, in the end, his ultimate rape attempt does not help his case: “He is threatened by what he sees as the silencing of his own voice, feels he is being persecuted for the sins of his ilk elsewhere, and most of all frustrated that he is not reaping the sexual and social benefits of his privileged status” (ibid.).

This sentiment, characteristic for the crisis of white masculinity, is not new, similarly to the debates on rape culture, and even “political correctness,” briefly summarized earlier. In *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi identified the problems experienced by white male Americans in the 1990s. In his *Angry White Men*, first published in 2013, Michael Kimmel diagnosed the titular hitherto most privileged group's sense of victimization due to their increasing loss of privilege and defined “aggrieved entitlement”: “[I]hat sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you” (18). Kimmel pointed to a direct link with violence as a consequence: “Again and again, what the research on rape and on domestic violence finds is that men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they feel entitled” (186). The violence can have many forms and targets, as, due to the widespread conviction among many American white men of being unjustly scapegoated, they in turn scapegoat “Jews, minorities, immigrants, women, whomever” (24). The fact that David is Jewish himself is only one reason why his privileged status and entitlement are problematic.

David's privilege is not equally and always obvious to everyone—including himself. On the one hand, to simplify matters, at a time of intense tribalism, from the “woke” perspective he is presumed to be part of the broadly speaking unenlightened privileged white heterosexual male “tribe.” Yet from this “tribe's” perspective he is a loser undeserving of privilege (a scarce resource and a reward for the most powerful). Even though he is a near-rapist oppressor, he is defeated in his design by Sara who helps Veronica escape, and by Veronica, who, in a surprising twist, turns out to have had her own design manipulating, using and objectifying David as a “Beta” in her, admittedly, pseudo-scientific paper.

It transpires that for “Gender and the Consumerist Impulse,” where she was assigned “a lengthy ‘anthropological study requiring local fieldwork’” (Wayne, *Loner* 45) she devised an experimental project: “A QUID PRO QUO: A Market-Based Study of Fe(male) Sexual Transactions” (182), involving an Alpha male with “high market value in the heteronormative undergraduate social economy,” and a Beta male—David. One of her

research questions was: “To what lengths would Beta extend himself for the presumptive possibility of sex?” (184). It emerges that David, seemingly playfully (?), considered murdering Sara for Veronica, who, when rereading the text, can be seen clearly carefully selecting her sparse words, testing, probing and maneuvering David, as in the scene where she pretends to be stupid, or just lazy and spoilt, and asks David to engage in plagiarism and write essays for her, although as we now see she is perfectly adept at academic writing (if not academic ethics).

Thus, Veronica turns out to be not “just” a victim—contrary to Roiphe’s fears, even after attending a safe-sex talk she is not weak and desexualized; in fact, she is very sexually “liberated” and unsterotypically empowered to the point of being fully in control. This is true until the last night before her moving out from the campus (due to David’s increasing obnoxiousness), that is—the night she is drunk and takes a sleeping pill and is cowardly attacked by David now feeling double desire: for Veronica and for revenge. The Beta male wants to prove he is Alpha; but all he proves is that he is toxic.

Wayne’s *Loner* makes us ponder not just where the toxicity leads, but also where it comes from. Ultimately, the novel’s analysis of toxic masculinity points to “the ways that the patriarchy can be damaging to men, not just women” (Wayne, Interview by Scott Simon). This leads to my conclusions about the novel’s focus on a toxic masculine perspective, and the victimhood of men undergoing a crisis of traditional patriarchal masculinity.

CONCLUSIONS: MALE VICTIMHOOD—HELP US OR ELSE

It has been the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how *Loner* can be read as a literary commentary on the recent developments within American academia—synecdochically standing for the “culture wars” in the US immediately before and during the “#MeToo era.” The novel, in dialogue with American culture and academic discourse, is a monologic narrative with no true dialogue within its plot. The novel’s academia is already—theoretically—“politically correct.” However, the novel’s Harvard is shown as a bastion of elitism, classism, and rape culture, wrapped in the “politically hypercorrect” jargon of the insular, unwelcoming “woke.” It proves to be a setting where discourses are embodied, words become flesh, and ideologies clash in practice—either confirming or belying theory, which those studying theory fail to see. This is how the two sides—feminist “wokeness” and male “toxicity”—meet in the text. On the one

hand, through its narrator, the novel voices an academic proficiency in the discourse of feminist theory, women's studies, gender studies and masculinities studies, an academic understanding of gender politics, and the feminist take on sexual abuse and the patriarchal objectification of women (David is intelligent, knows the language, and learns a great deal by mimicry). On the other hand, the novel's narrator embodies many of the very problems that these studies and their practitioners identify and struggle against—at times equating problems with types of people, in effect alienating them. This is how the already alienated David feels discriminated against as an American straight white male in “woke” academia.

The novel privileges his voice and perspective. This may seem emblematic of the dominant patriarchal norm, which—until very recently—has enforced the routine silencing of women's voices, especially in the context of rape, which in her *Women & Power* Mary Beard dates back to ancient Greece, whose myths and archetypes are proved to still hold a grip on the Western collective imagination.⁵ However, what is this privileged voice saying? That he is the victim.

What is this, the opposite of the millennia-old assertion of masculine power, telling us in the historical context of the novel's publication, on the eve of the Me Too movement becoming viral #MeToo, and several years later, upon reading it in light of the movement's impact? As Kantor and Twohey reflect in their 2019 *She Said*, an account of their work on the Weinstein case, some argued that not enough had changed: “Social attitudes were shifting, and there were dramatic accusatory headlines almost daily, but the fundamentals were still largely the same. Sexual harassment laws were largely outdated and spottily enforced” (186–87). On the other hand, “[m]ore and more critics were complaining that men were becoming the victims”; there was a “rising sense of grievance”; and Weinstein's attorney “argued that the charges against Weinstein were just another way in which the #MeToo movement was becoming a witch hunt, a moral panic” (186).

In 2018 Kimmel wrote: “[I]he biggest shift in American masculinity has [already] taken place quietly, with little fanfare and even less media coverage. As women have become increasingly equal, most men have simply accepted these changes” (*Manhood* 317). Yet many (men and women) have not accepted them. A lot has *not* changed in the decades-long reckoning with rape culture, and in the patriarchal gender dynamics. One prominent development is noticeable, however: in the last decade there has been increasing focus on the white man as a victim (Coston and Kimmel)—in a double sense, and *Loner's* protagonist embodies them both.

⁵ For more on this topic across ages, geographic locations and cultures, see also Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger.

The first sense has been recently defined by Richard V. Reeves in his *Of Boys and Men* (2022). The book diagnoses the masculinity crisis as the result of “deep structural challenges” (xi) following “[t]he transformation of the economic relationship between men and women [which] has been so rapid that our culture has not yet caught up” (36). Although Faludi’s argument in *Stiffed* about the transformation of the economic system into globalized neoliberal capitalism as the cause of the crisis is far more accurate, Reeves points to indisputable “deaths of despair”—i.e. “mortality from drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related illnesses,” which are “almost three times higher among men than women” (60). The latter observation corresponds with general data on a growing mental health crisis in America (Darcy and Mariano). According to Reeves, the solution is “a positive vision of masculinity that is compatible with gender equality” (xii). This view is a feminist one, acknowledging that (with all due proportions) both women and men have been victims of patriarchy, and recognizing that feminist anti-patriarchal struggle has brought more progress for women than for men; therefore, an analogous, effective movement for men’s liberation from patriarchy is needed.

The second sense in which the current widely conceived discourse on gender sees the man as a victim is due to male self-victimization weaponized by extremists. Already in the 1990s, Faludi wondered: “Why don’t contemporary men rise up in protest against their betrayal? . . . why don’t they challenge the culture as women did?” (603). So far, instead of challenging the culture as women did, the most aggrieved contemporary men, like the earlier generations from the beginning of women’s fight for equality, have repeatedly challenged women, especially the women who have challenged the culture. Several reasons for this can be listed. Firstly, Reeves points to “the potential for politicians to activate and exploit male anxiety about the loss of status” (126) and quotes former Trump adviser Stephen Bannon: “These guys, these rootless, white males, have monster power” (120)—energy that can be harnessed for political gain. Secondly, the “rootless white males” grievances can be capitalized on for financial gain in online “manosphere”—“a world of pickup artists, incels, and even some male separatists—MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way)” (121). Unlike any large men-focused anti-patriarchal movements, such pro-patriarchal movements have been more numerous and lasting—the 1970s pro-feminist Men’s Liberation was replaced in the 1980s by the not-feminist mythopoetic men’s movement and anti-feminist Men’s Rights (Coston and Kimmel). On the far-right, a movement known as Proud Boys has joined them more recently. The general anti-feminist backlash is profitable, and its world-famous influencers (Today in Focus) spread online misogyny having visible impact on young people (Science Weekly). Thirdly, amid the abovementioned mental health crisis, US mental health (and other

public) services are famously underfunded, and moreover, those prone to radical indoctrination mistrust the mental health system, which renders therapeutic interventions very challenging (Broyd et al. 258). Real therapy is replaced by toxic “support” groups online. Finally, before the “shootings contagion” (Israni) there may be a “woke”-related victimhood contagion, as many successful social media cancellations have demonstrated that there is power in claiming victim status and righteous retribution-seeking (in the US greatly assisted by uniquely easy access to firearms).

This brings us back to *Loner*’s David—alone at home, online, like many others, harbouring his grievance for at least five years, perhaps longer. The questions about David with which Teddy Wayne leaves us—“What will he do now? What happens next?”— are also questions about America’s nearest future.

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Erasing “Knowable Communities”: From *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* to *Brassed Off*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses cinematic representations of working class communities in British cinema from the pre-war documentary movement to (post-)Thatcher feature films chronicling the decline of traditional industries. A particular focus is given to contrasting Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and Mark Herman’s *Brassed Off*. The former title serves as a model example of British New Wave cinema, marking the “discovery” of the working class with its “knowable communities” that revealed them to the general public. The latter film provides an apt illustration of the impact and consequences of Thatcherism on the very same communities. The paper elaborates on selected narrative and visual motifs, investigating the ways in which British filmmakers have striven to depict social changes in British society over the consecutive decades.

Keywords: realism, British cinema, knowable community, documentary movement, Thatcherism, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Brassed Off*.

Social realism in British cinema has a long tradition beginning with the documentary movement in the 1920s, through the “kitchen sink dramas” of the late 1950s to more contemporary “Brit-Grit” productions (Thorpe). The founding fathers of social realism are commonly associated with the documentary tradition of the late 1920s and early 1930s and with such filmmakers as Paul Rotha, Humphrey Jennings and John Grierson. It was the latter who embarked on a mission to educate and inform the public through the medium of film arguing that “British cinema should carve out a distinctive space for itself, not by competing with Hollywood but by specialising in films of fact and public information” (Leach 33). His feature-length documentary *Drifters* (1929) emphasizes the value of hard work and those who perform it, elevating the images of individuals to “representatives of a nation rather than of a specific class or other restricted social group” (Higson, *Waving* 199). Grierson’s approach was further enhanced by the filmmakers of the Second World War era. The armed conflict significantly influenced the character and message of the films at that time promoting the need for “social integration and harmony” (Forrest, *Social Realism* 19).

NEW TIMES, NEW IDEAS

The late 1950s brought about a new documentary formula with the Free Cinema movement, whose members intentionally rejected the propaganda and commercial dimensions of mainstream cinema in their films. Instead, they expressed a desire “to make independent films, free from profit considerations, free from studio tampering, and with the freedom to choose their own subject matter” (Lay 11). The filmmakers, by directing their cameras at the ordinary person and at the rituals of life, became successful in conjuring up an aura of the extraordinary out of mundane, everyday activities. In a series of programmes presented between February 1956 and March 1959 at the National Film Theatre in London audiences were exposed to a handful of productions of the movement that now comprise the Free Cinema cannon, such as Lindsay Anderson’s *O Dreamland* (1953) and *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957), Lorenza Mazzetti’s *Together* (1956), Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson’s *Momma Don’t Allow* (1956) as well as Reisz’s *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959) to name but a few.

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s Anderson *et al.* were ready to switch from the documentary format of Free Cinema to the feature dimension of the British New Wave and bring the working class out of cinematic obscurity to the big screen. Striving for authenticity, the filmmakers went for local, often unknown actors and placed them in locations in northern

towns and cities. The characters spoke colloquial language with regional accents and their acting was partly improvised. The visuals (black and white photography, handheld camera) hinted at a documentary form distinguishing the New Wave films from the “phoney” mainstream British productions. Within a relatively short period of time New Wave filmmakers managed to establish a canon of works firmly anchored in the realist tradition of the period. Lindsay Anderson’s *This Sporting Life* (1963), Tony Richardson’s *Look Back in Anger* (1959) and Jack Clayton’s *Room at the Top* (1959) offered a type of realism combined with an authenticity of setting in the industrial cities and towns of the English north. Yet it is Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) that remains emblematic for the whole movement by capturing the spirit of the times and reflecting the realities of working class lifestyles.

At the time of its release, *Saturday Night* looked almost revolutionary for its representation of sexuality and working-class youth although, later on into the decade, it somewhat lost its edge with the arrival of the “swinging sixties.” Arthur, the central protagonist, expresses his harsh masculinity with scathing comments on co-workers, women, television, social relations and life in general. His attitude towards women obsessed with consumer goods and middle-class aspirations is tinted by a New Wave stereotyping since

demonising the women prevents further uncomfortable debate over class identity. *Saturday Night* shares this misogynistic tendency, but whereas in other New Wave films, the male view is privileged, this one is more ambivalent in its audience positioning. Effective examples include the sequence where Arthur deliberately tips a pint of beer over the woman in the club, the sequence where he puts a dead rat on the bench of a female worker and the sequence where he shoots Mrs. Bull. (Welsh 101)

All incidents lack clear motivation, suggesting Arthur Seaton’s desire to just “have a good time,” as he (in)famously proclaims in his opening monologue.

GETTING IT REAL

New Wave films evoke the notion of “realism” that may refer to specific elements of a given work: content, message or visual style. Realist texts are usually “described as ‘gritty’ and ‘raw,’ offering a ‘slice of life’ or a view of ‘life as it *really* is’” (Lay 5). They may also be defined by contrasting with other cinematic practices since they have come to “represent numerous examples of films that reflect a range of social environments and issues, in

a manner that rejects the artifice and escapism of more classically oriented narrative models” (Forrest, *Social Realism* 1). Perhaps for this reason, recounts Philip Gillett, realism still remains “in the eye of the beholder. It signifies something beyond camera technique, affecting the representation of working-class people on screen. . . . Somehow the term realism was never bandied about when upper-class characters were portrayed” (183). Forrest, in turn, charts the tradition of social realism in British cinema from a specific angle, seeking “to highlight hitherto unrealised depths within the textual parameters of British social realism in order to propose its deserved status as a genuine and progressive national art cinema” (*Social Realism* 1). Therefore, it would be perhaps more appropriate to talk about different types of “adjectival” realisms: moral, nostalgic, social, working class, etc.

Discussing the work of Grierson, Jennings, Reisz, Anderson, Loach, Leigh, Herman, Clarke or Meadows would always imply a specifically calibrated critical approach, since Grierson’s version of realism differs from that of Richardson or Meadows. As Hill aptly observes, realism, “no less than any other type of art, depends on conventions” (57). Therefore, films “which were accepted as ‘realistic’ by one generation often appear ‘false’ or ‘dated’ to the next” (59). Forrest evaluates the latest incarnation of realism in British cinema by stating that

new realism has elevated its everyday subjects through lyrical emphasis on ubiquitous landscapes, domestic interiors, familiar buildings, routines and habits. . . . They make clear the political, emotional and cultural forces that shape and determine our lives, and stir the experiences and memories that we deploy to negotiate, interpret and consume them. Realism is no longer instrumental, it is no longer fixed to a specific effect or defined by a particular appearance, rather it provides a site for multiple reflections, inhabitations and contestations. (*New Realism* 196)

Having this in mind, it is worth remembering that what follows neither claims, nor attempts to (re)evaluate the nuances of various strands of realism, but serves as a mere reminder of how complex this term is and how prone it is to (re)interpretations.

A social realist convention seems to be a style of choice for filmmakers engaged in telling stories about common people and their everyday experience. These stories would frequently focus on a group of characters carefully placed in social, historical and geographical contexts. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, characterizes the settlements that developed in England prior to the Industrial Revolution as “knowable communities,” a type of community that developed certain values that drew on “many deep and persistent feelings: an identification with the people among whom we grew up; an attachment to the place, the landscape, in which

we first lived and learned to see” (106). The migration from the rural areas to the cities stimulated by the enclosures and Industrial Revolution rearranged existing social structures, destabilizing sedentary lifestyles and disrupting the functioning of the “knowable community.” The long-term nature of this process generated a progressive crisis of values in which local communities as the preferred form of social organization were idealized. Attachment to a specific place and a deep sense of continuity resulted in a particular hierarchy of values based on profound and permanent identification with people from the community. Williams’s “knowable community,” even if located in the pre-industrial period, may well be extended to include working class people in the north of Britain after the industrial revolution as well. The titular process of “erasing,” although beginning much earlier, greatly accelerated as a result of Margaret Thatcher’s economic policies.

LOOK AT BRITAIN

The Free Cinema/New Wave period was a time of profound social and economic change. Post-war austerity was becoming a thing of the past while the society was embracing the era of relative affluence. It was Harold Macmillan who famously proclaimed in 1957 that “most of our people have never had it so good” (Hill 5). Very soon the “era of affluence” turned out to be a mirage as the country entered the 1960s with signs of economic crisis looming on the horizon. Though the working class was (still) doing relatively well, with each passing year Britain was experiencing a gradual decline in her imperial status.

Even if New Wave productions were followed by formally imaginative, socially illuminating and psychologically penetrating films by directors like Nicolas Roeg, Ken Loach, Tony Garnett and Joseph Losey, . . . the vast body of British cinema remained mired in uninspired mediocrity and predictability. It was not until the Thatcher era, 1979–90, that genuine signs of a British film resurgence could again be seen. Margaret Thatcher took power during a time of profound economic trouble, government impotence and declining national prestige. (Quart 16)

If the New Wave films had striven to record the world of the working classes “as it is,” (post-)Thatcher cinema was busy with registering the image of that world doomed to extinction. The social realism of the 1960s was political; (post-)Thatcher social realism was not only political, but also much more confrontational (Kosińska 193). And it could hardly be otherwise. The social reality of the late 1950s and early 1960s had little in common with that of three decades later.

Margaret Thatcher rather mechanically transferred her free-market approach to the economy into other spheres of social life. Although her ideological turn also included cultural transformation, she demonstrated little interest in the arts. Her dismissive attitude towards cinema manifested itself, at best, in ignorance and, at worst, in actions negatively affecting film production. Unsurprisingly, then, many films made around that period directly “attacked the Thatcher government, seeing her free-market philosophy as a callous disregard for everyone but the entrepreneurial buccaneers who plundered the economy” (Friedman xiv). As such, her contribution to British filmmaking “was not the business climate she created, but the subject matter her policies and the culture she helped create provided British directors” (Quart 21).

Stylistically, the films of the (post-)Thatcher era followed the tradition of British social realism, though their approach slightly differed when compared to the New Wave productions. Here, Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* will be juxtaposed with Mark Herman’s *Brassed Off* (1996) to illustrate this “before and after” dichotomy. (Post-)Thatcher cinema denotes two aspects: the films’ subject matter (the impact of Thatcherism on individuals and on British society in general) and their release date(s). In fact, the films addressing Thatcherism began to be made in the late 1980s, but it was only in the 1990s that the bulk of such productions appeared on screens.

BITTER COMEDY-DRAMAS

The films of the 1980s generally avoided engaging openly in the critique of Thatcherism. But as the decade was nearing its end and the social, economic and cultural effects of Thatcherism were appearing in plain view, the filmmakers, as it were, “took to their cameras.” They began telling stories about the devastating consequences of Thatcherite policy for individuals, social groups, businesses and whole regions of the country. The artistic temperament of British directors was reflected in a variety of narratives and visual formats as depicted in Chris Bernard’s *Letter to Brezhnev* (1985), Mike Leigh’s *High Hopes* (1988), or Alan Clarke’s *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1987) to name but a few. Their films were permeated by an ironic, if not a downright virulent humour underpinned by a sheer sense of desperation resulting from helplessness. While the poetic realism of New Wave was a record of the existing state of affairs (the here and now), the realism of the (post-)Thatcher era is acutely aware of recording the image of a world (literally) doomed to extinction.

All of this became fairly evident throughout the 1990s with a string of titles that did not shy away from spells of bittersweet humour, alleviating an otherwise bleak reality. Still, films such as *Riff-Raff* (1991), *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* (1997), *Career Girls* (1997), *The Dockers* (1999), or *Billy Elliot* (2000), though stylistically quite varied, resort to situational or verbal humour. At times they turn this into a driving force of the narrative (*The Full Monty*), or use it more sparingly, striking a sentimental note instead (*Billy Elliot*). Yet the comedic conventions only partially mitigate the confrontational stance and political message of those films which makes Herman's *Brassed Off*, in particular, stand out.

Not many viewers saw the director's first feature *Blame It on the Bellboy* (1992) and it was only his second film, *Brassed Off*, that engaged audiences and critics alike. Here, the director demonstrated his skill at creating a story that would combine a feel-good touch with truthful, if uncomfortable, insights into the plight of a collapsing industry. This formula was to colour his later films as well and Herman would prove his talent by crafting "two further provincially-set successes: *Little Voice* (1998), with its rich evocation of seaside culture, and *Purely Belter* (2000), the comedy-drama based around Newcastle United football team" (McFarlane 322). Herman's last work to date is a historical drama, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008), based on John Boyne's book of the same title.

"THE MINERS UNITED, WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED"

Brassed Off remains a politically charged film, identifying Margaret Thatcher as the person chiefly responsible for the collapse of a whole industry, resulting in dire consequences for the miners involved. Released in the mid-1990s, the film's narrative makes references to the miner's strike of a decade earlier. Thematically and stylistically, it meets the criteria of a kitchen sink drama whose narrative offers a diagnosis of the state of a multidimensional crisis: existential (a social group affected by economic and political changes), family (masculinity under pressure, redefinition of the role of women), intergenerational (upsetting the sense of continuity) and class (the management versus the miners).

Brassed Off is set in the fictional Yorkshire town of Grimley. Here, a local pit that has survived the turbulent 1980s is on the verge of closure, forcing the miners to go on strike. When Gloria Mullins, a young Coal Board surveyor, arrives, she becomes torn between two incompatible realities: the world of management attempting to persuade the miners that the pit "has to go," and the world of the "knowable community" of working men and women. Gloria was born in Grimley where, as a teenager,

she was in a romantic relationship with Andy. The two meet at the rehearsal of a local brass band and rekindle their teenage love. Gloria keeps her work for the management a secret while she tours with the band, winning local competitions. This eventually earns them a performance at the Royal Albert Hall. Unfortunately, her secret is revealed to the miners while she also learns that the viability report she has been preparing turns out to be a publicity stunt. Therefore, the majority of miners vote for the closure of the pit in exchange for compensation. Gloria, disillusioned, turns to the miners and helps them finance the trip to London. As they win the competition, Danny, the band leader, delivers a passionate anti-Thatcher speech.

The film received generally positive reviews, becoming the second most successful British production in the UK in 1996. In the course of time *Brassed Off* has generated more in-depth analyses, especially when compared to other films of the period dealing with similar issues. Moya Luckett pointed out that

many 90s films stabilise their representations of regional difference within the UK by articulating the north/south divide in terms borrowed from 1960s cinema. While the 1960s also witnessed changing and uncertain national identity, the passage of three decades has reshaped its images to connote a distinct, recognisable, image of nation. Films like . . . *Brassed Off* borrow the shots of “our town from that hill” from the realist/New Wave films with equal awareness. This return to earlier traditions of local representation invites a critical examination of the dialectic between past and present, memory and current experience, economic power and disadvantage. (94)

Claire Monk drew attention to the way these films exploit the “transformation of underclass material into an appealing, profitable and exportable commodity” (276). Her critique focused especially on the fact that generally tragic subject matter (unemployment, family issues, redundancy and poverty) was turned into feel-good stories for mass audiences (*ibid.*).

The impact of Thatcherism, understandably, was referred to in all critical evaluations of the film. Paul Dave labels *Brassed Off* a “deindustrialising elegy” in which “unemployment still appears to indicate a break in the lives of traditional industries and communities—it marks the shifting of the macro-economic gears which threatens to leave entire workforces on the ‘scrap heap.’ Here ‘unemployment’ is a sign of political crisis—as it was under the consensus conditions of post-war social democracy” (Dave 72). A denunciation of the economic crisis highlights the problem of male disempowerment. Both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* “pointedly equate the loss of working-class male labour power with the loss of male

gender power—in the case of *Brassed Off*, with obtrusive misogyny” (Monk 279). Therefore, according to Luckett, “*Brassed Off* ultimately exposes the Marxist truism that culture has no value without an economic infrastructure, it leaves its protagonists in abeyance and in transit in the carnivalesque world of London’s nightlife” (96). Yet the film offers little hope as it ends “with a show-stopping tirade against the government from bandleader Danny, a bitter rendition of *Land of Hope and Glory*, and details of continuing pit closures” (Glasby 56).

PAST AND PRESENT . . .

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As an example of “northern realism,” *Brassed Off* shares a number of features with the New Wave productions. Though it is impossible to judge whether these references to the canonical films are intentional, it is worth drawing attention to some of them as opening up new interpretative possibilities. In this respect, Herman’s film seems to best fit this purpose since, despite its humour, it remains uncompromising in the critique of Thatcherism and its “erasing” impact on “knowable communities.” The starting point is to draw attention to a visual motif that, apart from its symbolic and narrative meaning, evokes associations with a similar one characteristic for New Wave social realist films with Reisz’s *Saturday Night* providing a good example. This is, of course, “that long shot of our town from that hill”—“a shot which lures the eye across the vast empty space of a townscape” (Higson, “Space” 138). In essence, it is a panorama of the industrial areas of the north of England; an urban landscape filled with terraced houses stretching along both sides of the streets of the town with a patch of front garden separated by a fence from a similar patch of garden next to the identical house. Over the rooftops are visible tower mine shafts and factory chimneys with plumes of smoke.

Intentionally or not, *Brassed Off* makes a few nods towards *Saturday Night*. One of the initial sequences in Reisz’s film shows Arthur Seaton riding a bike along a street lined with terraced houses. Similarly, in Herman’s film *Danny*, the band conductor, is filmed cycling against a cityscape down below. This may be a sheer coincidence but the similarity is striking: another day in the north captured here in “that long shot of our town from that hill.” Even if (post-)Thatcher cinema does not necessarily offer a similarly universal cinematic equivalent present across a number of films, it is actually *Brassed Off* which comes the closest. It utilizes “that long shot of the winding wheel on the shaft tower” operating as a visual riff fulfilling a twofold function: it punctuates the story development and serves as a kind of commentary on the unfolding events.

For the first time, a shot of the shaft tower appearing against the blue sky with its rotating winding wheel provides the backdrop for a briskly marching group of miners. The shaft tower can be seen as a symbolic totem pole, a signpost serving as a focal point for the inhabitants of the mining town. Grimley very much feels like a “knowable community” with its inhabitants following the social rules established and developed over successive generations, including the tradition of working in the mine that passes from father (Danny) to son (Phil); the “men only” brass band; and a visit to the pub where one can chat over a beer and play billiards. The times of the day are marked by the sound of the mine hooter announcing the beginning and end of the shift. The shaft tower dominates the townscape. Its rotating wheel, akin to a clock on a medieval church bell tower, sets the rhythm of the day. The town is reminiscent of post-industrial traditions as described in Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*. The fact that it survived until the first half of the last century indicates its durability and adaptability to changing conditions. Just as the Industrial Revolution remodelled the social relations which had prevailed before it, so the working-class customs developed as a result of it found their end.

... BUT NO FUTURE

However, there is not much time left for Grimley. Like many other communities in the industrial north, it too will become a “lost world” caught in the grip of the economic upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. And, to quote one of the characters, Grimley’s inhabitants, like “dinosaurs, dodos and miners,” will share the fate of other extinct species. Yet for a short while, despite the ongoing protest against the planned closure of the mine, the winding wheel on the shaft tower is still turning to signal that life goes on as usual. If Hoggart in his book was already lamenting the weakening of working-class culture in the 1950s, Margaret Thatcher’s policy dealt this tradition a final blow.

Another shot of the shaft tower comes again on the television screen in the news bulletin. The set is in Gloria’s hotel room and, while unpacking her suitcases, she watches a report on the ongoing negotiations between the management and the miners. The distancing effect of the media coverage provides a glimpse of Grimley’s community from the point of view of a stranger for whom the situation in the town turns into yet another television news item. Gloria’s position is ambiguous. She is a local and an outsider at the same time, and soon she will be confronted with the conflict resulting from the clash between the cold outlook of the economists and the sentiment of the locals.

In his “Lecture on Realism,” Raymond Williams makes a reference to *The Big Flame*, a 1969 BBC television play about the occupation of the Liverpool docks by about ten thousand dockers. The film, based on a script written by Jim Allen, was directed by Ken Loach and produced by Tony Garnett. Since all of them have always voiced their left wing inclinations, it was not surprising that *The Big Flame* turned out to be a realistic drama presented in a gritty documentary style. In his text, Williams discusses the clash of conventions between the reality and the requirements of the news report:

There is a quite effective short scene of a television interviewer who has come to discover what the occupation is about, but to discover this within the terms of his function as a reporter for a particular kind of television service. In fact, we are shown him falsifying in his summing-up what has been said to him, and this is an effective satiric presentation of what many working class people feel about the function of television interviewers when they come to report events of this kind . . . This use of yet another convention dependent on our awareness of the modes of television interviewing and its insertion into the dominant convention of the rest of the film creates a certain unresolved tension, even a contradiction. (Williams, “A Lecture” 112)

In *Brassed Off* it is this contradiction arising from the clash of the cold, matter-of-fact news report that is contrasted with the actual reality of the plight of the miners in Grimley.

Gloria makes an attempt at reconciling the local with the outsider when she decides to take part in a brass band rehearsal. Danny, the band conductor, is initially reluctant to accept not only an outsider but also a woman. But the fact that Gloria was born in Grimley makes her eligible to join the strictly male group of musicians. It is her “locality” that makes her a trustworthy member of Grimley’s community. Yet very soon she finds herself in a difficult position when her work for the mine’s management comes to light. She immediately becomes persona non grata among the miners. Here, the sequence of a band rehearsal is combined with shots of negotiations between the miners and the management. Inserted in the dramatic montage of scenes from the rehearsal and negotiation rooms there comes another image of the shaft tower. Shown from a worm’s-eye view it majestically overlooks the mine like the guardian of a long-standing tradition.

Gloria’s return to Grimley is not just a sentimental journey into the past, but also a kind of “tourist” trip through the social classes as, having a working class background, she nevertheless managed to gain a college degree. Her status is akin to that of the “scholarship boy” Hoggart writes

about in *The Uses of Literacy*: "Almost every working-class boy who goes through the process of further education by scholarship finds himself chaffing against his environment during adolescence. He is at the friction-point of two cultures" (292). Gloria, a scholarship girl, willingly, or not, finds herself on the other side of the barricade, "stained" by her university education in the south of England. Paradoxically, it is the miners who position Gloria as an ideological opponent, contrary to herself declaring her loyalty to Grimley's community. Gloria's alienation is, therefore, threefold. Not only is she a woman in a "man's world," but her education also makes her suspect among commonsensical, plain-thinking locals. In addition, her locality is somewhat doubtful. Yes, she was born in Grimley, but she also committed the act of betrayal of "going down south" to get her college degree and work for the management. She may be, as Danny discovers, "old Arthur's Gloria," but eventually she ended up being a "scholarship girl," a tourist in a working class community.

Karolina Kosińska draws attention to the fact that the issue of class tourism may be applied to the directors who "overwhelmingly represented a well-educated middle class . . . usually coming from southern or central England . . . They probably had little in common with the working class experience and the life of the decayed industrial cities of the north of England" (193). In a way, Anderson, Richardson and Reisz were performing a kind of class tourism within working-class culture, providing the viewer with an insight into the social realities of the class but locating themselves outside its boundaries. Their middle-class sensibilities filtered the on-screen realism, imbuing it with a poetic touch for the sake of a subjective vision of working-class life. This subjective vision, although legitimate, begs to evaluate the New Wave films in a broader perspective. Their version of social realism has a poetic dimension because it is a distanced gaze, it is a creative projection tinged with ideological wishful thinking. It is also an unconscious manifestation of an inability to transcend the class barrier and "feel" for the plight of the Yorkshire worker, which is not an accusation but merely a statement of fact. Although (post-)Thatcher films more frequently resort to humour, they offer a decidedly harsher vision of reality. It is obvious that these films cannot "poeticize" reality since the irreversible damage to the "knowable communities" has already been done, or is about to be done.

Despite the threat of closure hanging over Grimley, the winding wheel on the shaft tower is still turning. The next two shots of it, accompanied by the sound of a hooter, indicate the passing of another day while Gloria works to produce a viability report, and the negotiations with the management continue. Yet, in fact, the fate of the mine and the miners has already been decided. "Coal is history, Miss Mullins," quips Gloria's

boss, and the majority of the miners decide to give up further work in exchange for a severance package. Even those who were in favour of the closure are aware that in essence it is their defeat. As life slows down the winding wheel on the shaft tower also stops and this is where a very telling image comes into view: as the miners, with their heads down, are leaving their former workplace, the shaft tower is reflected in a puddle, in which the stationary winding wheel can be seen. The significance of this shot is fairly obvious: the tower no longer overlooks the mine and the town. Its symbolic collapse entails the real decline of the mine as a place of work and a source of livelihood. The future fate of Grimley's "knowable community" comes into question.

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THIS IS THE END . . .

The collapse of the mining community coincides with Danny's real-life collapse. Upon their return from a performance, the band walk down the empty street of a deserted town when Danny suddenly falls down. Sickness, fatigue and stress have taken their toll. Danny's lying on the ground is linked with another shot of the shaft tower. A collapsed miner and a stationary winding wheel make for a powerful statement: this is what happens to the industrial communities of Britain. Economic decisions taken in a faraway place (London) result in tragic consequences somewhere else (Grimley). Later, as the bedridden Danny is recovering in hospital, the miners stand in line patiently waiting to hand over their mining equipment and thus finally close this chapter in their lives.

There is a direct connection between the operational winding wheel and the plight of the community. As Danny's collapse coincides with the collapse of the mine, so his son Phil not only wants to close this chapter in his life: he wants to give up on his whole life. His attempt to hang himself on the shaft tower is both grotesque and tragic. Phil, struggling on a rope, is saved at the very last moment by his colleagues. Dressed in a circus clown costume, the miner had just delivered a poignant monologue to a group of puzzled kindergarten children. Instead of regaling them with funny stories, he shouted out a desperate accusation against Margaret Thatcher and her government. Phil's suicidal gesture turns into a symbolic expression of the humiliation of an entire social group subjected to economic pressure. A stationary winding wheel marks the end of life for the community and for the individual.

Gloria's mission also seems to come to an end when she realizes that her work has been in vain and her youthful idealism has been cynically exploited. Just as Danny riding his bike is reminiscent of Arthur's cycling

in *Saturday Night*, so Gloria’s conversation with Andy evokes associations with the final sequence featuring Arthur and Doreen in *Saturday Night*. They both look down from the hill at the town in the distance. There are rows of houses being built nearby. “Maybe one of these houses will be ours one day?”, wonders Doreen aloud. For these two “that long shot of our town from that hill” holds a promise of a better future as they walk away holding their hands. Doubtless they will indeed live in one of these houses, fitting in with the customs of their local “knowable community.” Their gaze from the hill over the city is at once a gaze encompassing past, present and future. Towards the end of *Brassed Off*, Gloria meets Andy, also on a hill overlooking the city. However, the backdrop of their conversation is less “that long shot of our town from that hill” than “that long shot of the winding wheel on the shaft tower” in the rays of the setting sun. This is a farewell conversation with a mood of fatalism and resignation pervading the entire sequence. The couple do not look to the future like the couple in Reisz’s film. Here, everything seems to freeze in stillness. This is the end of the relationship, this is the end of the local history, this is the end of the local “knowable community” and its way of life. For the miners, Gloria’s work for the management is the ultimate confirmation of her “betrayal.” Never mind that she was born in Grimley. Now she stands on the other side of the economic and class divide.

US AND THEM

To Andy it is also obvious that Gloria does not see her future in Grimley, hence his question as to whether she plans to “go back south.” Gloria, as a “scholarship girl,” has a way out. “Going back south” is going back to the place where evil comes from, where the decisions are made, where “scholarship girls” like Gloria decide about the well-being of communities up north. Andy’s words make a direct reference to the phenomenon of the north-south divide: the (in)existence of the economic demarcation line between the prosperous south and the less prosperous north of Britain. Whether, and to what extent, the division truly reflects the well-being of British citizens remains a point of contention. But it returned to the public debate at full power as a result of Margaret Thatcher’s policies when “numerous academic studies pointed to the emergence of a significant difference between southern and northern England in terms of employment opportunities, unemployment rates, average income, welfare dependency and other indicators of socio-economic well-being” (Martin 17). Such a division, even if challenged as perpetuating a simplistic image of Britain, functions in the popular consciousness, reflecting mental

and moral, and above all economic, differences. The end of the twentieth century, on the other hand, made it clear “that the idea of a united England is a kind of myth” (Martin 15).

Brassed Off indirectly subscribes to this statement. There seems to be no way around this division and it always appears to be “us” or “them.” The film remains one of many referring to the destructive aftermath of Margaret Thatcher’s economic and social policies. In the process it tries to strike a balance between comedy and drama, and whether it succeeds remains debatable. Nearly three decades after its premiere one can be tempted to refer to some of the jokes as being crude or plain sexist. Those made at Gloria’s expense usually seem fairly one-dimensional: always referencing her sex appeal and physicality as the (in)famous “Gloria Stits” remark uttered by one of the miners at the band rehearsal. Similarly, the film does not make excuses when, for a change, it addresses the issue of male fallibility and inadequacy, although it tries to alleviate the gravity of the situation with humour or occasional tenderness and sentimentality as in the hospital conversation between Danny and his son. If this “kind of tonal tightrope walk is not always successful . . . it is always watchable, and suggests a confidence to match the political commitment of the script” (Glasby 59).

Striking the right balance between humour and seriousness was certainly a decisive factor contributing to the film’s success as stressed by its producer Olivia Steward: “I think the reason why *Brassed Off* was so popular . . . was that it combined anger with the spirit of laughter in the face of adversity” (Glasby 60). This laughter meant that the realism that the film makes claims to has to be taken in context. It is certainly there and it can be uncompromising. Yet since the battles depicted in the story have been lost, they may now seem somewhat antiquated and therefore comic. But the comic factor, as Simon Beaufoy put it, was a “way of sugaring the pill” (Mather 6). Even with its shortcomings, *Brassed Off* remains a kind of tribute to the long tradition of cinematic kitchen sink dramas. The filmic town of Grimley may be elevated to the status of a universal mining town in the North that experienced the “erasing” effect of the social and political changes of the 1980s and 1990s. Grimley, as a “knowable community,” may soon qualify as another manifestation of “Broken Britain” with “that long shot of the winding wheel on the shaft tower” standing as its symbol.

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Envisioning the Ecological Future: Three Perspectives off the Beaten Track

ABSTRACT

With few truly hopeful visions currently emerging from mainstream academia or from established science concerning humanity's collective environmental outlook, it might be necessary to go off the beaten track in order to see how we can maintain a sense of hope while realistically preparing for the gradual erosion of the world as we know it, therefore also leaving some psychological and emotional room for a sense of the tragic. This essay considers three lesser-known but, in our eyes, important contemporary perspectives on the ecological future: Ernest Callenbach's "ecotopia," John Michael Greer's "catabolic descent" and William deBuys's "hospice for Earth"—all three of which aim to challenge the currently still dominant focus on the binary of "progress or apocalypse" that flows from modern thought. We critically examine these visions and argue that, when combined, they offer an approach to the ecological future that is both more realistic and more inspiring. In essence, Callenbach's ecotopian vision still has significant traction—and an almost "erotic" appeal—today, but needs to be adapted to contemporary ecological realities through Greer's and deBuys's insights into decline, grief and the tragic.

Keywords: ecological future, critique of modernity, critique of progress, apocalypse, ecotopia, catabolic decline, hospicing Earth, eco-grief, Ernest Callenbach, John Michael Greer, William deBuys.

THE FUTURE IS NO LONGER WHAT IT USED TO BE

An alternative title for our essay could have been: “The Future Is No Longer What It Used to Be.” In fact, this was almost to the word the title of a book by Jörg Friedrichs, published a decade ago, in which he set out in great scientific detail how climate change and resource scarcity combine to make the outlook rather unsavory (see Friedrichs). As we write these lines, the IPCC’s latest *Assessment Report* (see Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) sounds one more round of alarm about our planet’s climate system and how humanity’s ecological future is in jeopardy unless drastic mitigation measures are taken. It is by now a common occurrence, almost a ritual that takes place in salvos every few years: environmental scientists the whole world over warn of “dire predictions” for the future (Mann and Rump), and although that future is unlike anything any human alive on Earth today has ever had to envision, we somehow cling—certainly in the wealthy, industrialized Western parts of the planet—to the future as it once was: not comfortable, certainly, but not *like that*.

Many who were born in the twentieth century grew up with the assumption that the future would resemble some sort of techno-modernist fantasy with flying cars and robot servants quietly whooshing around our fully automated houses (see e.g., Lem). Some of us may have also grown up with a fear of some sort of Cold War armageddon, but overall, the outlook was one of constant improvement: the world was generally “getting better” over time thanks to ingenuity and innovation—epitomized by slogans such as Dupont’s famous advertisement for “Better Things for Better Living . . . Through Chemistry,” which was used from the 1930s to the 1980s, and by the so-called “green revolution” of mechanization and chemical fertilization that led to modern, fossil-fuel-driven agriculture (or rather agribusiness). Nowadays, however, when either one of us asks our university students how they see the future, we get pinched looks of anxiety and uncertainty. This is possibly the first modern generation to be facing a future that either looks depressingly bleak to those who are realistic and informed or, to the more avoidant, feels like an uncanny hologram of the present projected indefinitely forward (but with the emotional price tag of nagging anxiety that accompanies any willful act of denial or repression). Despite the narratives of progress that continue to shape our society (Norberg; Pinker; Wright), cognitive dissonance is creeping up on many of us, and the recent literature has been following suit (Allen; Maxton; Norberg-Hodge; Ryan).

Moreover, many scholars of literature and popular culture are also very aware of the predominance of narratives of dystopia and apocalypse in the culture at large. Some of us may have been intrigued or fascinated

by *The Road*, whether as a book (McCarthy) or on film (Hillcoat), have read the dystopian *MaddAddam* series (Atwood), or have seen the climate-catastrophe film *The Day after Tomorrow* or the more recent *Don't Look Up* (which was not directly about climate change but was clearly aiming to serve as a satire on climate denial and its catastrophic consequences). Stories of environmental apocalypse permeate our cultural landscape, but to no avail. Some sense of impending doom may initially have been effective in sparking awareness and action on climate change (as Lawrence Buell observed in 1995, calling the apocalyptic narrative “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” [285])—one may think of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and its galvanizing effect on the Earth movement in the late 60s and early 70s (see Carson), and even more so of the alarming scenarios of collapse set out in the *Limits to Growth* report of 1972 (Meadows et al.). However, the impact of apocalypse stories has long since passed the point of diminishing returns and entered the realm of counter-productivity, as dire visions of cataclysm compound with unwelcome news stories and drive many people into denial, dismissal and avoidance (Washington and Cook).

In fact, cognitive studies have shown that we have a wide range of psychological mechanisms that work against taking climate change seriously. In his book *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, George Marshall reviews and examines the various cognitive reasons for why we do not believe and/or do not act—including the “optimism bias,” the tendency to minimize risks to ourselves, the “temporal bias,” the tendency to avoid making short-term sacrifices to mitigate potential long-term consequences, and many others (see Marshall). In addition, recent studies have shown that ideology and worldview have a far greater impact on our predisposition to take climate change seriously than does the fact of being informed or not—and, unfortunately, ideology, worldview and belief systems do not usually change because of facts; they reject or ignore facts that do not fit their paradigm (Czarnek, Kossowska and Szwed).

Just as alarmingly, going back to the plethora of dystopian scenarios present in popular culture, we notice that many of them also smuggle in a very specific myth about human nature—what we can call the Hobbesian myth of war of all against all in a context of scarcity, of which *The Road* is the epitome (but very recent TV series such as *The Last of Us* are partly following suit). Although the protagonists are mostly good and sympathetic, the general post-apocalyptic order has devolved to a chaotic state where the more violent and unscrupulous prey on the weak. This Hobbesian myth is, so to speak, the de-civilized flip side of neoliberal capitalism and its ideology of the “free” market. The myth of predatory

human nature has also been projected into narrative scenarios known as “survivalist” stories. In all these different versions, humans—especially male ones—are like proverbial “wolves” to one another (either in the forest or on Wall Street) and social “progress” can only be salvaged through a mixture of self-centered accumulation, NRA-driven gun culture and international militarized power-mongering. The myth is not borne out by cognitive, psychological, historical, evolutionary or archeological data (Chapelle and Servigne), but in its survivalist form it remains very present in American society and keeps spreading via Hollywood’s culture-industry productions: in the last twenty years there has been an explosion of this type of story in popular culture, including two separate films explicitly titled *The Survivalist* (Fingleton; Keeeyes). The Hobbesian narrative and its inherent pessimism about human nature potentially represents another significant obstacle to a more widespread willingness to take action in order to forestall ecological degradation. After all, if people are naturally selfish and predatory, why bother trying to create a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world? It is no accident that the Hobbesian myth is the favorite political fairy tale of the right wing and is often invoked as a counterargument to progressive politics more generally (Graeber and Wengrow 17).

In short, there is a wide range of reasons one can identify and examine for why alarms about global warming and the destruction of ecosystems, forests, oceans and habitats have been rung for decades now, but denial, dismissal and inaction nevertheless remain the predominant attitudes, especially in the most “developed” and therefore most extractive, destructive and polluting nations. It is not surprising that eco-anxiety and eco-despair are on the rise among activists, scholars and people at large (Rieken, Popp and Reile; Vakoch and Mickey), as one window of opportunity after another closes and we realize that the best we may be able to do is brace for impact. And the fact that the image of alarm we just spontaneously reached for because it is so pervasive in our vernacular language—“bracing for impact”—is a metaphor linked to vehicular transportation is perhaps just one more sign of how deeply rooted our dependence on oil, motor vehicles and, more broadly, industrial modernity is in our consciousness (B. Johnson; Miller; O’Reilly). We know that we cannot or at least should not live with modernity’s rapidly failing notions of progress much longer, and we also feel that we cannot or do not know quite how to live without these outdated notions. The future, indeed, is no longer what it used to be . . . and yet, our (still) modern societies seem to be trapped in the sterile dualism of either infinite progress and growth or the apocalyptic end of the world.

Against this backdrop, how can one lead one’s daily life with a balance of lucidity about vanishing opportunities, a clear sense of the tragic, as well as a modicum of optimism, or at least hope, about the future? Over the past

years, combining our expertise in economic anthropology, sustainability science and cultural studies, we (the two authors) have encountered three US-American thinkers we have found useful as intellectual partners with whom to think differently about the ecological future: the ecologist and novelist Ernest Callenbach, author of the 1975 novel *Ecotopia*; the independent scholar of post-peak oil civilization, John Michael Greer; and the nature writer and philosopher William deBuys.¹ Their perspectives and ideas differ from each other in significant ways, leaning towards optimism, realism and grief, respectively, but we believe that a creative combination of them may offer a promising way of envisioning our ecological future—what most likely lies ahead, what the future could be, and what we can do to make it better. While we are cognizant of the fact that these are not the usual go-to thinkers of the environmental humanities today—a select group which includes scholars such as Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway and Ursula Heise—we nevertheless believe that these lesser-known (and less “academic”) figures provide an interesting path forward. We will argue and try to show that they offer an approach to the ecological future that is both more realistic and more inspiring than the standard “progress-or-apocalypse” scenarios of popular culture and much eco-literature. In essence, Callenbach’s ecotopian vision still has significant traction—and an almost “erotic” appeal—today, but it needs to be adapted to contemporary ecological realities through Greer’s and deBuys’s insights into decline, grief and the tragic.

ERNEST CALLENBACH AND ECOTOPIA

We begin with Callenbach, partly because he comes first chronologically, but also because his is the most optimistic vision—an optimism which was warranted in the 1970s, but which now needs some serious updating and qualification. Ernest Callenbach was a film scholar and one of the founders of *Film Quarterly*, published by the University of California Press, as well as the series editor for their nature and science books. In this dual role he came to be aware of the urgent nature of ecological issues and was able to propose a very detailed and concrete vision of what a more rational and ecological society would look like. Although set twenty years in the future from his time, and based on the plot premise that the northwestern states of the USA have been able to secede and

¹ Each of these figures occupies a place of honor in issue 12 of *Text Matters*, which we co-edited in 2022 (see Soltysik Monnet and Arnsperger). The present article is an extended, and extensively re-worked, version of the address we gave at the University of Lodz in March 2023 on the occasion of the issue’s official launch.

form their own sustainable republic, his 1975 novel *Ecotopia* was far from being science fiction. In fact, over several years he meticulously researched the science and the policy issues that he used in order to imagine this sustainable society, and nothing in the novel was physically or technologically impossible (Callenbach, *Ecotopia*).

Indeed, many of the ideas proposed by Callenbach, some of which seemed farfetched in 1975, have become completely normalized—like large-scale recycling, free public bikes, local organic farming and increasingly, in our post-Covid and climate-aware world, teleconferencing as an alternative to travel. Other ideas, like the abolition of inherited wealth, the reduction of the work week to twenty hours and universal basic income, are not likely to be implemented anytime soon in our modern capitalist culture, but are regularly up for debate. The cornerstone of Callenbach’s ecological vision—and the chapter he wrote first—is a circular food and waste system, in which waste is treated and used as fertilizer for food production, and of course chemical pesticides are removed from the cycle. This system is integrated into the larger context of what he called a “stable-state equilibrium,” instead of constant growth and expansion. (In this regard, he was completely in tune with the approach of “ecological economics” that was developing at the time, most notably under the aegis of heterodox economists who felt that the *Limits to Growth* report had ushered in an epoch of post-growth, “steady state” thinking; see Daly.)

Not only was Callenbach’s vision of an ecological future eminently feasible, but in writing this vision into the world of his novel, he was able to describe this alternative culture in great visual and sensual detail. The city scene depicted in the novel is a green urban space where people and nature co-exist, as music, birdsong and water from open creeks and fountains can be heard instead of cars; electric taxis and driverless minibuses purr quietly through streets full of bicycles and pedestrians; people are dressed in colorful and highly individualized clothing (which the narrator describes as “Dickensian”), and they stroll unhurriedly among kiosks, food stands and street performers. The scene is both bucolic and full of life, and Callenbach goes to great trouble to visualize it for readers. (It is certainly no happenstance that only a decade later the innovative and ecologically-minded architect and urbanist Richard Register envisioned ecotopian “ecocities,” among them a model for an ecologically redesigned city of Berkeley, which is where Callenbach also lived until his death in 2012; see Register.)

Callenbach also thought hard about how the new economic and political conditions would impact people psychologically and emotionally. Based on his experience of the Bay Area hippie movement, he imagined that people living in a more sustainable society would also be more

emotionally expressive and uninhibited, more grounded in their bodies and animal selves, and that relations between men and women would be egalitarian, but that the two sexes would remain distinctly different and complementary, as was the ethos of the 1960s counterculture (Lemke-Santangelo). While some of his ideas about psychology, identity and gender definitely could use some updating and greater inclusivity, Callenbach tried to respond sensitively to the main cultural currents of his time, which included Black nationalism, cultural and countercultural feminism, and a neo-Freudian understanding of mainstream society as sexually and emotionally repressive. What is interesting, however, is his desire to think about society and culture as *an integrated whole*. This holistic integration process is unique to what literature is able to do—namely, in this case, to explore the inner life of people in an alternative world and stimulate readers to think about all the different possible aspects of an ecological transition, including the existential and affective dimensions.

The first-person narrator of the novel, William Weston, is a journalist from the United States who initially is very skeptical, ironic, suspicious and even mocking of Ecotopian ways. He finds their unpainted houses made of natural materials such as wood and cob ugly and unfinished, he deems their clothing eccentric and comical, and their unhurried and friendly ways are irritating to him when he is in a hurry (which, initially, is pretty much always). Yet as time goes by and he becomes accustomed and acculturated to Ecotopian places and mores, he not only changes his mind and his ideas, but also his eye and his sense of aesthetics. At the end of the novel, when he puts his old polyester suit back on to go home, he feels disgusted at the way it looks and feels on his skin. A classical conversion narrative, *Ecotopia* ends with the narrator choosing to stay in the Ecotopian Republic, and Callenbach hoped that readers would be similarly swayed by their experience of being inside the narrator's point of view for the duration of the novel, so that the initially utopian aspects of this fictional but technically feasible world could begin to feel not only desirable but "normal."

Although dated in some ways, *Ecotopia* remains in our opinion one of the most compelling examples of eco-fiction to offer a view of the future that is attractive and thought-provoking. An outlier in the mid-seventies, it has since spawned or inspired an entire genre of literature and art: the recent solarpunk movement, dating back to the early 2010s, credits the novel as one of its direct forerunners (Gossett; I. Johnson; Ulibarri). Solarpunk is a genre of eco-fiction that tries to think creatively about how people, nature and technology could co-exist in ways that serve human needs and regenerate nature (Freinacht; Hunting). It is explicitly a gesture *against* the nihilism of cyberpunk and the reactionary dimensions of

steampunk. Known mainly through anthologies of short stories (see e.g., Lodi-Ribeiro, Rupprecht et al.; Wagner and Wieland) but also, by now, a handful of novels (Corby; Gee; Tortorich), solarpunk defiantly performs and models an optimism that aims to fall squarely between the extremes of utopia and dystopia, and, instead, to suggest that perhaps we could be innovative and compassionate in our hopes and dreams for the future while acknowledging the destructiveness of our industrial past and the need to simplify our ways—whether through technological prowess, through material downscaling, or both. Solarpunk is a rather loose assemblage of very different kinds of stories, many of which are quite fantastic and speculative—far more so than Callenbach’s—but it is driven by the same desire to imagine a future that has adapted creatively and cunningly to the imperatives of the biosphere while treating all people as equally worthy of care and support.

Yet, one of the paradoxes of Callenbach’s influence on solarpunk fiction is that anyone envisioning the ecological future *today* needs to take stock of five additional decades of fierce destructiveness and global failure to address, much less resolve, environmental degradation and human denial. At the time, Callenbach skillfully wove the idea of cultural, social but also technological “progress” into a narrative that could rest on the hopeful and sometimes radical assumptions of the 1960s counterculture—ideas such as voluntary simplicity, going back to the land, appropriate technology, indigenous knowledge and bioregionalism, collaborative economies, etc. Many of these ideas were thwarted and all but annihilated by the fierce neoliberal backlash of the 1980s and 1990s. Industrial extractivism and “growthmanship” have reigned supreme since then, emerging economies have added massively to the burdens created by Euro-American capitalism, and the biosphere has been brought close to collapse in many dimensions (Rockström and Gaffney). In short, any thinker writing about the ecological future *now* must be much more explicit about the risk of global decline and scarcity, of resource-driven contraction (such as “peak oil”), and of the piecemeal breaking-down and frittering-away of the cherished “advances” of modernity.

JOHN MICHAEL GREER, CATABOLIC DECLINE, AND THE DE-INDUSTRIAL FUTURE

For such a dose of economic and ecological realism, we turn to John Michael Greer, both a novelist and a thinker of peak oil and contemporary society whose many non-fiction books interrogate our Western cultural shibboleths such as the myth of progress and what he calls the “apocalypse

meme” (Greer, *Apocalypse* xvii–xix; *After Progress*). He has argued—convincingly, in our view—that the window of possible transition to a sustainable future has closed and that we are probably facing a prospect of catabolic decline, a long descent or slow collapse characterized by periods of decay and decline followed by periods of provisional stabilization, until the next wave of decay, and so on. As the tongue-in-cheek title of one of his books—*Collapse Now and Avoid the Rush*—suggests, Greer argues that we can perhaps still act to make the inevitable landing from our carbon-fueled Icarian flight a soft one rather than a hard one. One of his key ideas is that collapsing deliberately and early is much better than waiting until the very last minute by hanging on—through power plays, resource wars and institutionalized denial—to zombified ways of producing, consuming and living. Himself a certified Master Gardener, a proponent of low-tech living and of what he calls—in another title of one of his books—“green wizardry,” he forcefully argues that reviving the technological and spiritual heritage of the counterculture is essential and that we should all possess a library of works from the 1970s about self-sufficient living and do-it-yourself technologies, in the tradition of the *Whole Earth Catalog* (Maniaque-Benton).

“Peak oil” is the hypothetical moment in historical time when the maximum amount of oil production is reached and begins not only to decline, but also starts to require more and more energy to extract and refine fossil fuel (Bentley). This is actually already the case: the “energy return on energy invested” ratio (EROI) is steadily declining across all currently available energy sources, which is why Greer—along with many other scholars—dates peak oil to a moment in the early twenty-first century. One of the consequences of peak oil is that, technologically speaking, our ecological future is likely to have to be a less power-hungry one (Greer, *Not the Future We Ordered*). These last years have revealed, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, how precarious our energy supplies (in Europe) are, and although we have avoided major power outages, we are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that we may have to reduce our energy use. This has up to now been the great taboo of the ecological debate—even many ecologists shrink from having to speak of *reduction*—and politicians are positively allergic to this word. It simply sounds too negative to our modern ears: to use less, to have less, to consume less, is to *be* less—and this is truly the end of the world for some people. Indeed, it is the end of *a world*—one made of infinite growth, of constant material progress, of ever-increasing power over, and separation from, nature (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro). It is nothing less than the end of modernity as we have known it—so that, again, the future is no longer quite what is used to be.

Greer appears less sanguine than Callenbach about how relatively smoothly the end of modernity will arrive—and about how much of modernity can be salvaged along the way. (In Callenbach’s case, the answer seems to be: quite a bit, technologically speaking—an optimism implicitly echoed by the solarpunk movement.) The “long descent,” as he calls it, is bound to be messy and filled with anguish just as much as (and, in the early stages, more than) by rationality, optimism and hope (Greer, *The Long Descent*). He calls this process “catabolic decline.” This means that key metabolisms and processes in nature, society and culture deteriorate and diminish, but then they can stay put for a while and may even bounce back a bit—so that, to take just the “peak oil” example, as the demand for petroleum decreases after a phase of economic contraction, oil prices drop and the demand for oil can *increase* again. This leads to the “zombified” survival of technologies that momentarily seemed on the verge of being superseded, thus thwarting the hopes for a smooth and rational transition to post-oil technologies.

Still, Greer argues, while contraction and decline generate catabolic turbulence and instability, they do not need to spell the end of any meaningful and livable human world—especially for those who deliberately let go of familiar industrial moorings and “avoid the rush” by heading consciously into a de-industrial future. Reaching back to the Appropriate Technology movement of the 1970s and adding a novel idea of his own, which he calls “technological choice,” Greer suggests that we can choose older and less energy-intensive ways of life right now (by disconnecting as much as possible from mainstream networks and cultivating a low-tech, DIY attitude to everything from clothing to the internet) and live satisfying, comfortable and meaningful lives with older, more efficient and resilient technologies (Greer, *The Retro Future*). Progress is no longer what it used to be, either, and one place where Greer *shows* this and makes it *palpable* is in his fiction work. His emblematic short story “Winter’s Tales,” for instance, takes place over the course of an entire century and shows the changing nature of Christmas in a context of decline, which no longer looks like decline after a generation or two, but simply like change and a new normal for those who never knew anything else (Greer, “Winter’s Tales”).

An even more compelling fictional foray into catabolic decline, and into how it could be possible to adapt creatively to a context of reduced fossil fuel supplies and a damaged natural environment which needs regeneration, is his novel *Retrotopia*—which, as can be gathered already from its title, is partly inspired by Callenbach’s novel. Also featuring a skeptical visitor coming from a dystopian and fragmented post-civil-war United States in 2065, traveling to an independent republic located along the Great Lakes and called Lakeland, which has managed to become fully self-sufficient,

Retrotopia depicts a society that allows people to choose from a “menu” of five different regimes of technological sophistication. There are five counties of Lakeland which offer infrastructures and technologies ranging from roughly the 1830s to the 1950s. People in the more advanced counties pay higher taxes to support this greater luxury, while people in the more low-tech areas pay less for their more rugged amenities. The narrator in *Retrotopia*, initially just as dismissive as the journalist in *Ecotopia*, starts out unable to imagine getting along without his electronic devices, but gradually comes to see the intelligence and pleasures of analog and low-tech life.

By vividly portraying this future world which has scrutinized its technological past to find creative solutions to contemporary problems, Greer is able to illustrate a number of points that are central to his whole *œuvre*.² First of all, he is able to challenge the myth of progress by depicting a functional future society that adopts technologically and socially feasible solutions (just like in *Ecotopia*) from the past century and a half, and is neither utopian nor dystopian, but something in between—a stance we might call *eco-realism* (or *ambitopian*, to use a word that is gaining traction in contemporary fiction). Secondly, the novel allows Greer to illustrate his contention that collective change to mentalities and ideologies usually follows changing circumstances, rather than the other way around:

The belief that economic growth is as inevitable as it is beneficent, the central ideology of twentieth-century industrialism, was not the cause of the great petroleum-fueled economic boom of that century—it was one of the effects of that boom . . . Human beings figured out how to extract fantastic volumes of cheap energy from the planet’s store of fossil carbon, *and therefore* ideologies that celebrated the consequences came into fashion. (Greer qtd. in Arnsperger and Soltysik Monnet 87, italics in the original)

Retrotopia engages with this critical insight by depicting the inner life of a post-peak society where infinite growth is simply no longer an option, as fossil fuel supplies dwindle and the natural environment has been seriously damaged, and so the ideology of infinite expansion has quietly disappeared. Greer is as interested in processes and trajectories as in end-points, and catabolic decline with its stages and thresholds, its starts and stops, is indeed a useful way of envisioning our ecological future: it allows us to accept the possibility of a de-industrial future and to brace ourselves for the turbulences and hardships of the decline, while gradually coming to terms (as does the narrator in *Retrotopia*) with the fact that

² These are points he also makes in our interview with him in issue 12 of *Text Matters* (see Arnsperger and Soltysik Monnet).

irreversibility has its virtues. Once we have left industrialism for simpler and less luxurious times, what our descendants have never known cannot be an object of regret or resentment for them—and new beginnings are made easier by this existential realism.³

In this sense, Greer appears as far less utopian than Callenbach, in that he believes in the meanderings of ecological “succession.” According to this view, history is, as the expression goes, “one damn thing after another,” which also means that time is not so much linear as it is *successive*. Put another way, from a Greerian perspective the ecological future will be the result of multiple forces of experimentation, constraint, destruction and adaptation, and Greer presumes that we can find solace in this fatalism while retaining the desire to make our lives good, i.e. to make them as good as they can be within constantly changing circumstances (Greer, *The Ecotechnic Future*). There is no such thing as “progress”; there is only “progression” from one “successive” metabolic and ecosystemic configuration to another. Everything passes eventually, and in the very long scheme of deep time, he seems to suggest, this is no big deal (see also Arnsperger).

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GRIEF AND THE ECOLOGICAL FUTURE

One of the issues that Greer (like Callenbach) minimizes is grief and, more generally, existential anguish in the face of ecological degradation. He shares with Callenbach (by whom he was inspired but whom he never met, as he mentions in an interview with us; see Arnsperger and Soltysik Monnet 92) the characteristic of being both ecologically-minded and optimistic to the point of bypassing the sense of the tragic that pervades *human* dealings with decline and decay.

However, their optimism is of a rather different nature. Greer’s relationship to the 1970s counterculture is profoundly more pessimistic: he is dealing with many decades of additional neglect of countercultural

³ Interestingly, another book titled *Retrotopia* was published in 2017 (just one year after Greer’s novel) by the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. Despite the similarity in titles, the two works could not be more different. Bauman argues that, because of decades of onslaughts on existential meaning by capitalism and by military conflicts—and, more generally, because of the complexification, acceleration and “liquification” of postmodern life—many people nowadays are yearning in nostalgic ways for older forms of community and belonging, which they tend to idealize. This makes them blind to the dangers of inequality, discrimination and particularism, and makes them susceptible to the lures of communitarianism, nationalism and traditionalism. “Retrotopia,” then, is for Bauman a cause for concern and alarm. He does not view “looking to the past to reinvent the future” (to quote Greer’s words) as positive or at least potentially fruitful.

issues, and he also seems to be more cynical about large-scale changes being possible in a fully positive, coordinated and forward-looking way. His optimism is, if anything, *more ecological* in the sense of adhering to scientific ecology. He sees human endeavors as fully engulfed by ecological succession, so that decline is just as likely as progress, and at the same time there is a sort of tautological optimality to any change that does occur: it could not have occurred any differently given the ecosystemic parameters. Callenbach, too, was deeply cognizant of ecological thinking. In fact, he authored a book on scientific ecology in 1998, in which he displays the same hard-nosed environmental thinking as Greer, seeing humans as but one species within the web of life and making no difference between a virus and the entire populations (including humans) that it can wipe out (Callenbach, *Ecology* 150).

Yet, in his novel Callenbach does not carry the succession reasoning—if it is present at all—nearly as far as Greer later will. While Callenbach was never an idealist or a wide-eyed New-Ager, he seems to have believed in the possibility of a more conciliatory approach to human inhabitation of natural ecosystems. While he joins Greer in recognizing that “[w]e will achieve a stable, secure world of sustainability only if we give up our unquestioning faith in material growth” (*Ecology* 78), in the 1970s he seemed to be a bit more optimistic about the possibility of this renunciation. The protagonist of *Ecotopia* ends up staying in the breakaway republic because it is so deeply successful in offering a sustainable and fulfilling way of life; in contrast, the protagonist of *Retrotopia* does not stay, even though he no longer cares much for his own country of origin. The Lakeland Republic, while certainly incorporating some interesting technical and institutional ways of arranging de-industrial parameters, does not quite have the powerful erotic force of attraction of the sensuous, gregarious, countercultural Ecotopian Republic. At five decades’ distance in terms of writing, the perception that a genuinely exhilarating new alternative is there, compelling the reader and making them want to immerse themselves in it, seems to have waned.

Strikingly, as mentioned above, neither Callenbach’s nor Greer’s protagonist is inhabited by any grief at all: they simply exist in a future world—one which is (although differently in both cases) necessarily the result of the succession of past transformations that took place many decades earlier. They inhabit, for better or for worse, re-stabilized universes in which adaptations to ecological demise have occurred and in which past hardships, as bad as they were, have given way to a new steady state and, therefore, to a new *modus vivendi*. There may still be conflicts and tensions, but they are now part of a current situation to be dealt with. The Ecotopian protagonist stays behind and secedes from his old home;

the Retrotopian protagonist leaves again, hoping to import the Lakeland model at home. In Lakeland as in Ecotopia, ruined landscapes have already been regenerated, or there is hope that they can be rebuilt.

Not so, for instance, for the characters of Starhawk's ecofeminist novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993)—written a whole generation after Callenbach (and a generation before Greer), and also credited with co-inspiring the solarpunk movement—who are still in the midst of dealing with the immediate aftermath of a deadly catabolic collapse. In Starhawk's story, which is clearly inspired by Callenbach's novel and also takes place in a future San Francisco, Northern California has broken off from an oppressive Los Angeles-based police state. Her ecotopian Bay Area is going a low-tech, shamanic and bottom-up tribal way while Southern California hangs on to militarism and dictatorship. Pandemics rage, people die by the thousands, and northern inhabitants' relatives are imprisoned in the south and thought to have disappeared forever. From the beginning of Starhawk's novel, even as a beautiful nature-based culture has emerged in the rebellious North, the protagonists' feelings of grief and loss are overwhelming and the lapses into hopelessness are frequent as we follow the lives of mostly female healers in a community which, by choice, has eschewed modern technology and medicine, and suffers bacteriological warfare at the hands of its dystopian southern neighbor. The newly born world is still profoundly destabilized and fragile, haunted by memories of war, torture and repression, and anxious about the future. We are shown what it is like to live in the vicinity of a catabolic collapse that has just occurred, and we are made to feel the all-encompassing grief that comes from that proximity.

It seems that the closer one is to a phase of catabolic collapse, the more intense the component of grief. All the more so if, as many indicators suggest, one is *as in our current period* at the threshold of such a catabolic collapse—living one's life not some time afterwards, but right before it. In such moments as we are witnessing nowadays, denial and grief coexist, manic optimism and sorrow clash, ecomodernists and terraformers quarrel with eco-anxious downshifters—making for a highly polarized culture with wildly disparate visions of the ecological future. As ecopsychology has abundantly demonstrated (Canty; Macy and Brown; Omaha), failure to work through ecological grief is one of the main factors explaining the lack of collective will to embrace coordinated descent solutions and scenarios.

What exactly is the object of this grief? In the present time of peak oil, imminent climate collapse, rising consumption aspirations and the emergence of new economic powers, what people are grieving is a complex mixture. To simplify, for some there is grief for the modern way of life of luxury and privilege made possible by ecological depredation—a grief that often goes unformulated and appears as denial or the aggressive doubling-

down on worn-out habits. For others, the grief is for the biosphere we are collectively destroying, for the beauty irretrievably lost and the species forever gone—a grief that often gets covered up by paralyzing anxiety or by unproductive anger (Weber Nichol森). And for many moderns, one must admit it is both—and this makes it all the more complicated, because grieving a way of life that is made possible by the disappearance of a biosphere that one is also grieving is bound to make one feel rather unhappy and very hypocritical. This, too, tends to breed denial or avoidance. At the heart of the problem of our difficulty to lucidly envision our ecological future, then, is *unacknowledged and unaddressed grief*.

WILLIAM DEBUYS, COMPLEX GRIEF AND HOSPICING EARTH

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This is where our third intellectual partner, William deBuys, offers a very helpful metaphor, as he wonders

if the time ha[s] come to apply the ethics of hospice to the care of Earth. The idea of *hospice for Earth* is easily misunderstood. Of course, Earth is not dying. It has supported life for billions of years, and no matter what we do, our planet will generate life in myriad forms for billions more. But aspects of Earth are passing away . . . there will be a lot of death, a lot of “patients” breathing their last. And the emotional and spiritual toll on the caregivers who attempt to mitigate those losses and on others who consider themselves family to the ailing world will tap our deepest levels of fortitude. (xiii)

For someone like him, deBuys says—born in 1949 in the United States at the heart of industrial privilege and Cold-War destructiveness—grief for the world encompasses the natural world as well as *his own human world*: “Hospice is a compassionate triage. So is Earthcare. You balance a dedication never to quit with the discipline to recognize endings. You pause to honor the passing of whatever is lost: mobility, autonomy, life itself; wildness, species, ecosystems” (202). The key term here is *compassion*, for it undergirds the basic notion that understanding where today’s situation comes from is essential: *understanding* what has made modern humans, the wealthy minority in the West, so utterly and mindlessly destructive. Indeed, according to deBuys, one of the (often forgotten) virtues of Western rationality is that understanding ought to breed compassion. And this combination of compassion and understanding is precisely what leads him to adopt what we could call a kind of “epistemic Stoicism” concerning our ecological future, an attitude that almost dovetails with Greer’s fatalism:

Perhaps the long genesis of human nature could have led nowhere else except to the clamoring, possibly incurable, melee of unrestraint now tipping the world into environmental freefall. But where might such an understanding take us, to despair, to forgiveness, to some state where heartbreak and wisdom dwell together? The answer lies beyond my grasp. (deBuys 202)

If one judges from deBuys's writings overall, he is clearly partial to the third of the above choices: "some state where heartbreak and wisdom dwell together." Such a state, however, is not easily accessible; it can only be hard-won. It requires that we face squarely one of the most difficult emotions that can exist for humans: the feeling that one is forever unable to resolve a terrible situation that one has (or believes one has) caused and that one feels deep sorrow for. When explaining why he is going on a Himalayan trek with a team of doctors to bring help to poor, isolated mountain populations, he writes:

My . . . purpose is to make peace with the sorrow that dogs me. I know it will never leave me alone, for it arises from a circumstance of the world that is as durable as any other. My delight in the beauty of the natural environment must coexist with grief at its destruction. These emotions are like cellmates who cannot get along. They dwell in my head and my heart, and their constant argument creates a moral ache, piercing at times, that frequently sours the taste of life. (8)

DeBuys's great courage consists in not covering up this difficult, painful emotion with aloofness, intellectualism, denial or a righteous doubling-down on consumerist excesses. Avoiding all of these maneuvers is, indeed, our only chance to become "good ancestors" (to borrow Roman Krznaric's book title) and to be *participants in our descendants' ecological futures*, rather than mere purveyors of that future in the worst possible form. To be able to carry both heartache and wisdom, as deBuys says—or, perhaps even more accurately, to be able to transmute heartache *into* wisdom—we need to painstakingly learn, as Vanessa Machado de Oliveira has recently written, "how to gradually part with habits of living that are harmful to [ourselves], to other human and nonhuman beings, and to the metabolic movements of the planet at large" (xxiii).

Machado de Oliveira's book is entitled *Hospicing Modernity*. She published it in 2021, the same year that deBuys's book *The Trail to Kanjiroba: Rediscovering Earth in an Age of Loss* came out, apparently without knowing of the "hospicing Earth" metaphor he sets out in that text. Despite this mutual ignorance, however, their ideas converge. Time is not oriented towards some providential omega-point; it is merely the

support that makes visible the changes that occur, and so it merely—but always generously, supportively—ambles along to wherever these changes move next. Modernity may have been an inevitable stage in the continued and open-ended self-shaping of human nature, but it is now no longer the fountainhead of “progress.” Succession requires what Machado de Oliveira calls the hospicing of modernity itself, because it is now holding us back “in an immature state” (xxi). Hospicing modernity means “acting with compassion to assist [it] to die with grace, and to support people in the process of letting go—even when they are holding on for dear life to what is already gone” (Machado de Oliveira xxii). The amount of contradictory grief involved in “letting go” *both* of the parts of the Earth that are dying *and* of the modernity that has made them die is bound to be enormous and immensely confusing for many of us. This is of course why Machado de Oliveira, like deBuys, insists on compassion and mutual support.

An important aspect holding people back from acting is the familiar collective-action problem—the feeling of “having to go it alone” while others are continuing the binge (Hourdequin). Intense and multifarious community support is essential if we are going to be “good ancestors” who are capable of letting go of the mortiferous structures that have caused the damage we are bequeathing to our descendants—and while community lies at the heart of Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, of Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, and of more recent post-apocalyptic fictions such as Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, it is precisely absent from more familiar narratives such as *The Road* or *The Day After Tomorrow*, which are in that sense still deeply “modern” because of the Hobbesian and/or atomistic and neoliberal manner in which they portray people’s desperate attempts to navigate catastrophic (rather than catabolic) collapse. As a result, in such narratives, an ecotopian ecological future will most likely never be reached—or if it is, the amount of needless hardship involved in an uncompassionate, callous succession will be unspeakable.

FROM GRIEF AND RUGGED REALISM TO AN EROTIC DESIRE FOR THE FUTURE

What is needed to make our ecological future one of *catabolic* rather than *catastrophic* collapse in Greer’s sense is partly, or even largely, the presence of deBuys’s compassionate wisdom born of heartbreak. Ironically, Greer himself, with his own brand of rugged individualism and what he calls “Burkean conservatism,” is decidedly unsympathetic to what appears to him to be useless complaints about loss:

As the Long Descent unfolds, some people will adapt to it, changing their thinking to fit the new reality of contracting energy and resource supplies, and some will not. On average—there will doubtless be exceptions—those who make that adaptation will be more likely to thrive than those who refuse it. Now that belief in limitlessness is no longer adaptive, it will begin to lose its grip on our collective imagination and be replaced by other ideas better suited to new conditions. That’s the way human culture adapts to changing times. Shrieking “Humans are the masters of this rock!” was an exercise in absurdity even at the peak of the industrial age . . . Now that we no longer have the resource base to keep prancing around pretending to own the planet, such attitudes will be even less helpful than they were. (Greer qtd. in Arnsperger and Soltysik Monnet 90–91)

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When envisioning the ecological future, as we saw, both Callenbach and Greer are basing their stance on an ecological worldview, and this should normally involve a good dose of the uncaring, callous brutality with which natural ecosystems and the biosphere generally regulate life within themselves. (For a disturbing but insightful discussion of Earth as Medea rather than Gaia, see Ward.)

However, a too single-minded focus on deBuys’s and Machado de Oliveira’s hospice metaphors risks leading us into an exceedingly one-sided sense of the tragic. It is a fact that all the compassion and community support championed by these authors is not supposed to merely accompany a never-ending sense of heartache and . . . endings. And this is where the critique of the notion of progress finds its existential limit: as humans we *need* a sense that something new *and good* will eventually emerge from the endings our ignorance has forced us through. This is not at all the same notion of progress that modernity has been distilling and that Greer and many others have rightly dismissed. It is also not merely the unemotional, drab “succession” of states of being that Greer’s scientific-ecological outlook puts forward. There is going to be disappearance, succession and emergence, but for human cultural and affective purposes it needs to be imbued with the emotions associated with the *emergence of something wondrously new*—as Machado de Oliveira writes, what we need is an approach “related to modernity dying, and what would be necessary to hospice it and assist with the birth of something new” (xxiii). In Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, the female healers we follow are literally midwives, and that’s what makes their struggle with the hardships of catabolic collapse all the more emotionally touching. In the HBO Max series version of St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, one of the main protagonists, who briefly trained to be a doctor before the modern world ended, ends up stranded in a makeshift women’s clinic set up in a defunct department store (the

epitome of the consumerism that ate up the Earth) and assists multiple women in giving birth—again, a powerful if old-fashioned symbol of the renewal the character is on the way to experiencing in the ruins of a “Before” that will never again be.

At least as important as the literal emergence of new life in these novels and television series that try to imagine hope in a context of a post-collapse world is the emergence of new *forms* of social life. In sharp contrast to the tired patriarchal tropes that run at the heels of the Hobbesian myth of predatory human nature, these recent solarpunk narratives reflect the social and scientific reality of the true diversity of human beings, and they model a radical acceptance and even affectionate nonchalance about non-heteronormative genders, sexualities and social relationships that emerge from the ruins of the collapsed capitalist order. In Starhawk’s novel, love between men, between women, and between members of what would be called, in some circles, “polyamorous families” flourishes freely in ecotopian Northern California—a society which allows people to follow their natures in matters of love, and moreover allows nature a voice within the body politic, with each of the elements—fire, water, earth and air—having a human representative on the governing council to speak for it.

Similarly, in *Station Eleven* (both in the novel and in its television adaptation), the progressive post-apocalyptic communities of the Great Lakes region are characterized by a general acceptance of the many modalities of people’s love lives and families. The only character who tries to resurrect exploitative patriarchal practices is the mad fanatic known as The Prophet, who “marries” young girls who are merely children, and models his family on the harem and the Old Testament. This type of predatory white male character is a staple of survivalist narratives, where he often appears in the context of the “default” type of human social and sexual practices—in sharp contradiction to what we know nowadays from evolutionary psychology, archeology, indigenous societies and many other non-patriarchal cultures (see Matthews; Picq and Tikuna). In short, popular culture is finally catching up—thanks to the emergence of solarpunk and other thoughtful forms of storytelling—with the contemporary realities of gender, sexuality and love.

While he minimizes the deep sense of grief and loss that accompanies ecological degradation in modernity, Callenbach is nevertheless the only one in our original trio of future-oriented thinkers to offer an integrally sensuous, erotic, emotional, nature-bound and “carnal” picture of human life in the ecological future—while avoiding any and all flights of techno-fantasy and remaining completely grounded and realistic. In the prequel, *Ecotopia Emerging*, the looming ecological crisis is averted by motivated eco-activists engaging in political struggle to overthrow power structures

and to create a new nation. In other words, Callenbach's Ecotopian Republic does not emerge from catabolic collapse, but from standard—albeit violent and occasionally deadly—political struggles against corporate control, while what is left of the United States lurches towards ever greater pollution, inequality and crime. Thus, in the first novel, *Ecotopia*, when Weston visits the new republic, twenty years after independence, it has re-stabilized into what the eco-activists of the time sought: an ecological counterculture irrigated by what Chaia Heller calls “the Desire for Nature” in the broadest sense (see Heller), with the pervasive presence of desire—including erotic desire—in everyday political and relational life. Heller bases her ideas on a notion of erotic “mutual recognition,” which “implies a differentiation within association, a desire to maintain individual identity while recognizing a connection to others,” where “together, differentiative and associative desire can form an erotic dance between autonomy, community, individuality, and collectivity” (101).

In contrast, while Greer's Lakeland Republic is interesting and even fascinating for its institutions and the way it organizes economic and political life (like the anarchist, Kropotkinian planet Anarres in Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, published just one year before *Ecotopia*), it is only Callenbach's counterculture-infused Ecotopian Republic that makes its character want to remain there, clearly because the human beings in that place relate to one another socially, physically and emotionally in a way that is tantalizing and consciousness-broadening. And if it makes its protagonists *want to remain there* in the present tense of their story, it has a good chance of making us here and now—despite the sorrow, grief and economic hardships of our catabolic present tense—*want to go there* in the future tense of our and our descendants' story.

Because the future is no longer what it used to be, we have no more use for worldviews and ideologies that haunt our present from a now dangerously outdated past. What we need instead is an attitude of tragic wisdom, creative sufficiency and radical inclusion of love and compassion in all their varied forms. This is why Callenbach's, Greer's and deBuys's ideas, together, form a worthwhile and important corpus to envision our ecological future outside the strictures of conventional “progress or apocalypse” modes of thought. It is crucial that we break the spell of “business as usual” on the one hand, and “the world is going to end,” on the other—both of which serve to excuse and release us from the responsibility of thinking critically and acting decisively to change course from destroying the planet and our own habitats. What is urgently needed now is a willingness to face loss and grief while recognizing the possibilities of ecological regeneration in the context of human creativity, compassion, inclusivity and collective action.

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Harry Styles as a Cecaelia: Sexuality, Representation and Media-lore in “Music for a Sushi Restaurant”

ABSTRACT

The music video for Harry Styles’s 2022 track “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” (directed by Aube Perrie) provides a surprising representation of the pop star (arguably at the peak of his career) appearing as a cecaelia (a monstrous figure with a human head, arms and torso giving way to tentacles around its midriff). The video is notable in two distinct contexts. First, in terms of Styles’s trajectory as a popular music performer who has received intense media attention because of his fan base, artistic persona and ambiguous sexual identity; and second, in terms of the articulation of a relatively minor media-loric (i.e. modern folkloric) entity in a high profile popular cultural context. The article discusses these aspects before moving to an analysis of the music video showing how Styles’s role as a cecaelia serves as a representation of his career position, public profile and desire to assert his creative-industrial agency in the early 2020s. The music video thereby illustrates the potential of media-loric figures to represent complex themes in contemporary cultural discourse.

Keywords: Harry Styles, performer identity, sexuality, cecaelia, mermaids, media-lore.

INTRODUCTION: STYLES’S MUSICAL CAREER AND STAR PERSONA

Harry Styles has been the subject of intense media scrutiny since he first appeared as a teenager on the British version of television talent quest *The X Factor*. From there he shot to international popular music stardom as part of boy band One Direction (1D), which released five studio albums in 2010–16 and was deemed so significant that it featured in the London 2012 Olympics’ Closing Ceremony alongside George Michael, The Spice Girls and Queen. As part of 1D, Styles won American Music Awards, MTV Awards and Brit Awards. As a solo artist, he has won multiple international awards including both the Grammy and BRIT for Album of the Year for *Harry’s House*. Despite these industry accolades, he has been consistently stereotyped as a superficial cultural “lightweight” in a manner that has led him to respond in both public relations discourse and—as this article will go on to elaborate—in the music video for his 2022 song “Music for a Sushi Restaurant.”

Fans of Styles have featured in contemporary considerations of female fandom such as Ewens (147–72) and Tiffany (261–70). In Australia, Styles was also the inspiration for the male lead (called Harry) in Yve Blake’s musical *Fangirls*.¹ Styles’s music has been accepted by what might be called the traditional “white male mainstream,” but this has still been through the lens of his boy band/female fan legacy. For example, his second album *Fine Line* was listed as #491 in *Rolling Stone* magazine’s “500 Greatest Albums of All Time,” yet is still discussed in terms of female fandom rather than as a recognition of Styles and his own artistry. The opening sentence introducing *Fine Line* to the Greatest Albums list refers to it as a “divisive entry,” and describes Styles as “One Direction’s Harry Styles” rather than simply on his own terms (Schewitz). Schewitz continued: “I’m not a fan of One Direction’s music at all, but then I’m not their target demographic” (ibid.), a strange comment given that *Fine Line* is the second *solo* release for Styles rather than a 1D product. The rest of Schewitz’s profile focused on Styles’s live performances—“I didn’t hear him because his fans screamed through every song.” Such a comment is curious given the task at hand to review the Styles *recording*. Rather than writing about the album itself and its music, Schewitz spent column space on Styles as spectacle, rather than Styles as a musician. Sadly, this is not an unusual treatment for pop artists in the music press.

¹ Blake has discussed the genesis of this work and its relationship to Harry Styles and fandom in depth in the 2019 TED talk “Why Are Fangirls Scary?”

Styles is well aware that many of his fans are women and girls. When prompted to dismiss them as somehow unimportant, he replied: “How can you say young girls don’t get it? . . . They’re our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of keep the world going” (Crowe). The solidarity with women in the music industry has continued with his musical choices as well, with his touring band featuring prominent female players such as band-leader and drummer Sarah Jones, and his tours have featured female driven support acts such as Wet Leg, Mitski, Wolf Alice and Arlo Parks. Styles has also made prominent appearances onstage with Lizzo and Shania Twain (both guests at his headline show at Coachella 2022) and Stevie Nicks, notably as he inducted her into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2019.² These choices should not be remarkable for a solo male artist in the mainstream pop community, but unfortunately, this show of solidarity is still unusual. It offers leadership towards gender equality and diversity in the music industry that is still rare, and its consequence has positioned Styles as a relative outsider, albeit in the best way.

In addition to media portrayals of Styles as a stereotypical romantic target for young heterosexual cis girls and women, he also has a strong queer and gender diverse following. This includes fans who speculate that he and 1D band member Louis Tomlinson are actually in a romantic relationship. These fans, called “Larries” (a portmanteau of “Louis” and “Harry”), assert their position beyond traditional media expectations of binary heterosexual identity and attraction in pop music.³ The interest of LGBTIQ+ communities has also been apparent with, for example, the Drag King 1D tribute group Every Direction.⁴ Styles has openly welcomed LGBTIQ+ members of his audience, regularly appearing with pride flags onstage. During his “Love On Tour” concerts in 2022–23 he also conducted impromptu “outing” ceremonies for fans in the crowd who asked him to help them. *Variety* reported one of these interactions at a Styles concert at Wembley in June 2022, detailing how, at the fan’s request, Styles asked the crowd to chant the young man’s name, then with a rainbow flag declared him as “a free man” (Garcia).⁵

These shows of inclusion onstage and in fan communities have sparked speculation about Styles’s own sexuality. Partly driving this are Styles’s fashion choices on and off stage, which have become more extravagant

² For more on this see Giuffre.

³ For a good overview see McCann and Southerton.

⁴ See the in-depth exploration of this group and their fan relationships in the study by Pruett.

⁵ There have been several similar events reported in the press and on social media during 2022; however, this one is the most detailed and is on one of the biggest media outlets.

as his career has progressed. Notably, he appeared on the cover of *Vogue* in an Alexander McQueen gown in 2020, and in 2022 released a fashion collection in partnership with Gucci. Styles’s stage costumes, which include glittered jumpsuits, dresses and colourful suits which he wears bare chested, are also very different to the relatively low-key, tight black jeans and shirts he wore as part of 1D. As a solo artist exploring fashion and identity, suggestions that his flamboyance or experimentation should align with a particular sexuality position is certainly not aligned with much of the history of popular music where many male, female and gender fluid artists have regularly explored their creativity through fashion. Indeed *NPR* writer Ann Powers said that Styles’s wardrobe was drawn from “the finery of rock’s legacies,” noting not just straight male influences, but including pop referents such as the Spice Girls.

Styles has aligned himself with creativity (rather than scandal) as often as possible, carefully navigating the media’s interest in his sexuality. However, the interest has persisted, and began, shamefully for the press, while he was still underage.⁶ Styles has dealt with this in different ways, often reminding interviewers: “I have a private life. You just don’t know about it” (Lamont). Despite this, attention has remained on his sexuality and relationship status, brought to the fore again in 2022 as he promoted two films that he plays lead in, *Don’t Worry Darling* (Olivia Wilde, 2022) and *My Policeman* (Michael Grandage, 2022). The first, directed by Olivia Wilde, has been overshadowed by the off-screen drama around Wilde and Styles’s rumoured romantic involvement with her. In the second film, Styles was cast as a closeted man in a homosexual relationship with another man while being married to a woman, and again media interest was drawn by the possible correlations between Styles’s on-screen and off-screen experiences. In response to these questions, Styles has repeatedly challenged the media to reconsider its own practice rather than answering the question with a confirmation or denial, calling such questions “outdated” (Stoppard). Similarly, in a global cover story for *Rolling Stone* magazine, he stated: “I think everyone, including myself, has your own journey with figuring out sexuality and getting more comfortable with it,” adding when asked about his relationship with Wilde: “Sometimes people say, ‘You’ve only publicly been with women,’ and I don’t think I’ve publicly been with anyone. If someone takes a picture of you with someone, it doesn’t mean you’re choosing to have a public relationship or something” (Spanos).

⁶ As Banks noted, journalists asked Styles questions about intimate relationships even while he was underage as a member of 1D. After quoting an exchange in *GQ* magazine, where the journalist repeatedly asked Styles how many people he had slept with, the author declared: “This is inappropriate journalism practice, especially considering that Styles was still a teenager, which makes this interrogation even more violating” (Banks 14).

Despite this statement, the journalist continued to speculate. Clearly, the press is persisting with stories of Styles's romantic life whether he agrees or not. Following this interview, the press continued to pursue Styles's potential relationship with Wilde, particularly when Styles and Wilde appeared at the Venice Film Festival premiere of *Don't Worry Darling*. The director and actor did not directly stand next to each other on the red carpet or during photo shoots, leaving the media without a story. In place of a "couple shot," the media focused on a piece of footage which appeared to show Styles spitting on co-star Chris Pine in an apparent retaliation for on-set tension. As the footage circulated around the world, Wilde and Pine dismissed the story and Styles joked onstage when he returned to his music tour shortly after, telling a sold out Maddison Square Garden audience, "I just popped very quickly to Venice to spit on Chris Pine" (Walsh). Again, Styles and his fans are aligned, and even "in on the joke," of the absurdity of media attention.

Music videos have been important for Styles during his career, and, indeed, continue to be important for the music industry more generally. Following the relative boom of the industry in the 1980s, a relative decline in revenue followed in the 1990s and 2000s, and while some were concerned that music videos as a format would cease to be made, music videos have returned to prominence online, with streams via YouTube, in particular, being a vital way for artists and audiences to connect (Gigmit). Over Styles's career so far there has been a thematic continuity in the music videos, first as part of 1D and then as a solo artist. Most often Styles is presented "as himself," and as a relatively active person apparently with his own agency. Several of these have been critically and popularly acclaimed. The video for 1D's "What Makes You Beautiful" (directed by John Urbano) won an MTV Award and, despite the lack of similar recognition at the time of its release, 1D's 2015 clip "Drag Me Down" (directed by Ben and Gabe Turner) has passed 1 billion views on YouTube. In each of these clips Styles and the band are shown miming to the camera while intercut with a basic narrative; in the first a beach holiday romance, and the second at a NASA base where the band are moonlighting as astronauts. Each video is quite unremarkable stylistically, but clearly successful as examples of the mainstream pop genre with a broad audience appeal audience.

Styles's videos for his solo work have shown him as triumphant on his own. The video for his solo single "Sign of the Times" (directed by Yoann Lemoine), which won the 2018 Brit Award for British Video of the Year, shows him walking alone on an island, apparently singing into the wind until he is whisked up and taken away by it. He is positioned as a solo adventurer and long shots of him in the sky are intercut with medium-close ups of his face singing to camera, drawing the gaze of the viewer.

Although he is still “a pretty face,” this is no longer the only way Styles is portrayed. The song’s sound and the clip’s imagery signal music and artistry on a grander scale than what Styles had attempted before. Film clips for his singles “Adore You” (directed by Dave Meyers) and “Watermelon Sugar” (directed by Bradley & Pablo) each featured at the 2021 Grammys. The first was nominated for Best Music Video, and the second for Best Pop Performance (which Styles won). In each of these clips Styles is again courting his audience in different ways to depictions of him in the music press. “Adore You,” the video for a basic love song that could easily have been styled like an early 1D “beach holiday” video, sees Styles instead placed in the fictional world of Eroda (“Adore” spelt in reverse), where he is shown serenading a rapidly growing sea creature. The scenario is deliberately ridiculous and Styles’s appeal is played with as he approaches various townsfolk in the clip with a toothy grin that literally sparkles. He is shown as beautiful, kind, and pure—another departure from the press’s obsession with his real life relationships. The other extreme is shown in “Watermelon Sugar,” which is sonically bright and upbeat. The lyrics are playful but clearly euphemistic—an element that Styles brings to life in the clip as he is seen eating watermelon slices while being caressed by bikini-clad women and, significantly, men, on the beach. With a prelude written in yellow text over a black background saying, “This Video is Dedicated to Touching, May 18 2020,” innocent glances and stolen looks give way to him alone at a table, and later as part of a large group on a rug, suggestively eating fruit. The theme of watermelon sugar—a euphemism for oral sex (Parsons)—is played on further as Styles is part of the group but often lost in the mass, no longer the focus of sexual attention but just part of the larger celebration. Within the context of COVID lockdowns (the video appearing in May 2020), the clip is Styles inviting his audience to be together again, in whatever configuration(s) they want.

“Music for a Sushi Restaurant,” the third single from his third album *Harry’s House*, draws the history sketched above but gives it a new inflection. After another year when Styles’s (and by extension, his fans’) sexuality was scrutinized at the expense of discussions of his music, the music video can be read as a deliberate attempt to challenge how he has been portrayed in the press. Instead of being a celebration of the superstar Harry Styles, the clip represents him as a “star in the making” in a fantasy world. This process of discovery and development also shows his gruesome ultimate demise. The video’s theme is dark but it is also one of the few places where Styles has been shown as relatively unattractive and sonically flawed. The video is also the only clip from the album where he is shown on stage performing (albeit in role as a cecaelia—a squid-human hybrid), with other *Harry’s House* tracks’ videos showing him in the abstract, in

a hyperreal world, spinning around into the air in “As It Was” (directed by Tanu Muino) or as part of a lavish multidimensional slumber party in “Late Night Talking” (directed by Bradley and Pablo). “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” also shows him to be ultimately unwanted—in a stark contrast to previous depictions in his own media and by the music industry generally. As we will show, this departure is a significant creative statement for/about him, as well as a commentary on the media as a type of business that can shift its product support swiftly, and brutally, if it feels it has exhausted one commodity or found another. The use of the cecaelia, and media-lore more generally, is striking because of its visual distinctiveness but also for its play on the song’s theme of “music for a sushi restaurant.” Without this clip, the music suggests itself as a soundtrack to someone eating a meal, but in the context of the video Styles provides both the soundtrack and the main course.

CECAELIAS AND MEDIA-LORE

The notion of media-lore was first proposed by the Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics in 2014⁷ to refer to distinct modes of development of folklore within modern forms of screen-based media (cinema, TV, the Internet, etc.). Harry Styles’s appearance as a cecaelia merits discussion both in its own right and as the latest manifestation of a media-loric creature with comparatively recent origins. Unlike many of the fantastic creatures that appear in film productions such as the *Harry Potter* series or in various online media contexts—which are modernized versions of traditional entities (such as dragons, unicorns, ogres, mermaids, etc.)—the cecaelia is distinct by being a product of popular culture that has tenuous links to prior mythological creatures. Indeed Hayward (*Making* 37) identifies the creature as first appearing (in female form) in Cuti and Mas’s 1972 graphic story “Cilia,” where the eponymous female protagonist is described as a “cilophyte” (an invented term that did not subsequently gain traction). While the graphic story remains obscure, a version of her name (which was initially spelled as *cecælia* before being modified to *cecaelia*) came to refer to a tentacled human, with the bodily divide occurring at a similar area of the midriff to the mermaid’s human/fish point of transition. Allison has provided valuable research on the development of the term *cecaelia* that shows it first being promulgated via a dedicated Wikipedia page in 2007 (which is now offline) before being

⁷ In the Laboratory’s summary statement for their 2014 conference “Mechanisms of Cultural Memory: From Folk-lore to Media-lore.”

deployed to refer to tentacled humans more generally in online graphic art and in computer games. The increasing currency of the name was reflected by Disney’s retrospective use of it to refer to Ursula, the sea-witch from their animated film *The Little Mermaid* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1989). While there is no evidence that anyone involved with the design and production of Disney’s film was familiar with Cuti and Mas’s story, there is a significant resemblance between the two figures in that both have six octopus-like tentacles (two fewer than actual octopuses, complicating any description of them as octo-human [or suchlike]). The main contrast is in their upper human form, Cilia having the long hair, facial beauty and slim form typical of representations of mermaids in contemporary popular culture, while Ursula is intentionally represented as older and non-stereotypically attractive (with her face and torso modelled on the well-known, grotesque drag performer known professionally as Divine⁸). Both figures are portrayed with muscular tentacles but whereas Cilia’s primarily represent her alterity, Ursula’s embody her threatening power. Ursula’s role and narrative fate within *The Little Mermaid* film (where she is eventually killed) was subsequently revisited and modified in the music video for T. S. Madison’s “Feeling My Fish” (2014), which substantially modifies Ariel’s signature song “Part of Your World” from the Disney film. Appearing in a black dress with six tentacle-like fabric tails, T. S. Madison ends up in a position of power, instructing the mermaids to bow down before her.

While there do not appear to have been subsequent manifestations of female cecaelia in mainstream media, male versions have appeared in two high-profile audiovisual productions: Stephen Chow’s Chinese comedy feature film *The Mermaid* (2016) and the music video for Ricky Martin’s single “She Bangs” (2000, directed by Wayne Isham).⁹ These representations are similar—and markedly different from Styles’s video—in that their tentacled, semi-humans are represented as powerful male figures. In “She Bangs,” two cecaelias guard the entrance to the underwater nightclub where Martin performs his song. Their muscular arms are crossed and their solid torsos remain immobile while their powerful elongated tentacles range around them.¹⁰ The (single) cecaelia that appears in Chow’s film is given a personality and appears in various key scenes. Significantly for this

⁸ As discussed in the 2003 “making of” video *Broadway Comes to Burbank*, produced for the 2006 DVD release of *The Little Mermaid*.

⁹ While a tentacled-faced, monstrous incarnation of the mythic figure Davy Jones appears in two of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series of films—*Dead Man’s Chest* (2006) and *At World’s End* (2007)—this is not a cecaelia as his lower body and torso are human in form.

¹⁰ Although it is difficult to precisely identify in the scene, they appear to have six tentacles each.

article, the actor playing the role is former Taiwanese boy band member and subsequent solo pop singer Show Lo. Lo plays a character named Uncle Octopus who associates with a pod of (mixed gender) merfolk whose environment is threatened by an industrial development. Lo's cecaelia is handsome, with blonde, cornrow hair, and is shown with eight muscular tentacles. He is represented as a confident, assertive anti-human/anti-industrial activist who conspires to kill Liu Xuan, the industrialist whose planned development will pollute the merfolk's home. In a comic scene that anticipates elements of Styles's video, Uncle Octopus encounters a group of thugs in a field. While tall grass conceals his lower torso, his tentacles protrude and he has to explain them away as those of an octopus he has just caught and also has to dissuade the thugs from variously biting on, slicing off and applying a blow-torch to them in order to snack on them.

In common with mermaids and mermen, the substitution of the lower portion of the human torso and legs with piscine elements both compromises the overall humanity of the creatures and removes their human genitalia, raising issues about their ability to procreate and the presence, nature and/or position of the physical organs required. The substitution of human lower halves with piscine or cephalopodic ones thereby problematizes anatomical definitions of gender. In the case of mermaids and female cecaelias, their representation with human breasts and (usually) long hair marks them as female whereas facial hair and/or upper body muscularity are the prime markers of older mermen's masculinity (and with the absence of these leading to a more androgynous aspect). In the terms of Freudian discourse, such substitutions can be seen to bestow a degree of neo-phallic power/agency to the mermaid (Zimmerman qtd. in Hayward, "Rhapsodies" 17), whereas the absence of male genitalia on the merman's tale serves to undermine that aspect of masculinity (or, rather, of masculinity as defined by anatomy). Similarly, Silber's analysis of Mycenaean and Minoan octopus imagery is pertinent for interpretation of cecaelia in that he asserts the "polyphallic appearance" of the former creatures (162); a perspective that was echoed by Triton in his characterization of Ursula the sea-witch's tentacles as phalluses (150). The assertive masculinity of both the nightclub guards in Martin's video and Uncle Octopus in Chow's film support such a characterization. Differing from these precedents, one of the innovative aspects of Styles's video is that the lower half of his cecaelia is modelled on a squid's thin tentacles, rather than meatier octopus ones, with their appearance (out of water) being flaccid. The associations accruing to this aspect are discussed in the following section.

THE SONG AND VIDEO

Styles has stated that the song “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” was inspired by hearing a track from his previous album *Fine Line* (2019) in a sushi restaurant in Los Angeles and his thinking that it was odd music for such an establishment (Pham). The song’s lyrics are simple and contain jazz-style scat singing along with skeletal lyrics about green tea and Japanese food and a lyrical reiteration of the song’s title (with nothing suggesting fantastic marine hybrids). Styles’s vocal line is high-set and clear-toned, and its extensive use of vocables suggests crooned jazz styles, such as those deployed by Jacob Collier on tracks such as his version of Stevie Wonder’s “Don’t You Worry ‘Bout a Thing” (2015). Musically, the track has a pronounced retro, jazz-funk feel, set to a solid electric bass riff, pulsing kick drum and light electric and acoustic percussion rhythms, with Styles’s vocals floating above them in pitch. The chorus features a heavier descending synth bass line, distorted electric guitar lines and a busy syncopated horn part reminiscent of 1970s’ soul/disco acts such as Earth, Wind & Fire or Stevie Wonder, also with a clear influence from Quincy Jones (Jones is also credited as a songwriter on a song later on the album, “Daydreaming,” which samples “Ain’t We Funkin’ Now” by The Brothers Johnson).

Music videos have varying relations to the genre of music represented, the specific track, its lyric and/or the established persona(e) of the musical performer(s) (Railton and Watson). In some cases, the video appears illustrative of some or all of these aspects and, in others, appears to operate largely autonomously. Lip-synching of vocals and instrumental miming offer some of the most obvious points of correspondence but may also occur in contexts that modify or inflect the associations cued by lyrics or music tracks. The lyrics for “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” offer a cue for the culinary theme and restaurant setting of the video but their easy going references to food, love and “staying cool” do not suggest the plight that Styles—or, rather, Styles-as-a-cecaelia—finds him(it)self in. The video’s scenario is relatively straightforward. It opens, to a soft musical introduction featuring vocables, showing a man finding an unconscious, bearded cecaelia on the beach and phoning the manager of a fish restaurant who comes and collects him in a van. In synch with the introduction of the song’s rhythm part, the screen shows a montage of images of the cecaelia in the kitchen, including one of the manager and three staff members holding him horizontally, emphasizing his long, limp (prosthetic) tentacles. Now awake, the cecaelia sees crabs and fish being cracked, chopped and cooked and intuits that the same fate awaits him. At this point he begins singing (or, rather, lip-synching to a vocal sequence that has already commenced).

This changes the momentum of the narrative as the manager appreciates his catch's singing abilities and recognizes the potential of exploiting these. After being fed with fresh fish, having his tail scrubbed, having a shave and being dressed in a necklace and sprinkled with glitter, the singing cecaelia is presented as the restaurant's key attraction. This is revealed in a brief shot of a new sign going up outside the restaurant. Identified as "Gill's Lounge" (punning on cephalopodic gills) and as hosting a "live show," the sign's central image is of a cecaelia represented in a very mermaid-like manner, with a long, fish-like tail that only breaks into tentacles at its end. Following the introduction of this sign, the video shows the singing cecaelia becoming increasingly diva-like, requiring manicures, massages and facials. These sequences are followed by scenes of the restaurant packed with customers, with the cecaelia singing on a rock on stage accompanied by a live band. As the number peaks, the cecaelia's voice breaks and falters. The video immediately returns to images of seafood being prepared and then alternates these with sequences of the cecaelia's resumed singing before ending with further images of food preparation. The restaurant sign then reappears in a significantly modified form. Instead of "Gill's Lounge," it is re-presented as "Gill's Sushi" and the (still mermaid-like) image of the cecaelia is presented in sliced-up, sushi-like form.

Despite these dark themes there is a persistent humour in this clip, drawn from a knowingness about the context of performance and objectification in music performance (like the one Styles expressed with the Chris Pine incident in Venice). Styles, and his fans, are aware of the intense media scrutiny he receives, and are able to use tools like sarcasm and parody to deal with this attention. Once Styles's cecaelia is shaved and cleaned up, he goes from being a scared singer to a stereotypical diva, wearing lavish jewels and demanding green tea (synched to the song's lyric). As the restaurant owners tend to his needs and massage his tentacles, he is seen arguing with, and later dismissing them, all the while wearing extravagant, seashell-themed sunglasses in the underground backstage dressing room. Onstage, Styles is backed by a band of prawn-headed musicians—thereby substantially upping the surrealist quotient of the video, in line with much of director Perrie's previous work.¹¹ At one stage his performance is momentarily interrupted as the music stops and a male audience member approaches him to ask "Can I touch your tail?" The silence is broken with the sound of one of his tentacles slapping the

¹¹ As Demetrius Romeo identified for us, the Styles's band's appearance resembles three of the four members of The Residents who are depicted with prawn heads on the front cover of the 1977 re-release of their 1974 album *Meet the Residents*—see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meet_the_Residents#/media/File:MeetTheResidents2.jpg

man across the face, before the song continues. Styles the stage singer is feminized, or othered, at this moment as he is objectified by the dominant male perspective of the punter wanting to grope him. These exchanges are so exaggerated through the setting and the film clip’s diegesis that they are comic but their dark comedy does also allude to his being an outsider. As a highly successful musician, but also one that champions women in the industry, welcomes LGBTQIA+ audiences and refuses to be part of media speculation about sexuality, Styles is an outsider in terms of the mainstream music industry.

The video offers a significant departure from the imagery featured in Styles’s previous videos and, indeed, more clearly conforms to the oeuvre of its director, Aube Perrie. After directing music videos for Francophone artists such as Angèle and Petit Biscuit in the late 2010s, Perrie attracted attention for his inventive videos for Marc Kinchen’s “Chemical” and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Thot Shit” (both 2021). The latter two were notable for incorporating surrealist elements. Unlike the style known as MTV Surrealism in the 1980s, which made extensive use of chroma-key effects¹² or the contemporaneous music video style often characterized as surrealist animation,¹³ Perrie’s surrealism derives from inserting bizarre elements into otherwise realist scenarios, such as featuring a dog-headed human in the “Chemical” video or transforming a misogynist senator’s mouth into a vulva at the end of “Thot Shit.” These elements work as motifs in differing ways. The realist, mechatronic-prosthetic, dog-headed human in “Chemical” is the chief protagonist in the pathos-laden scenario about desire set to an up-tempo house rhythm, with the canine element reinforcing the song lyrical themes. By contrast, the vulva image in “Thot Shit” occurs at the end of a video in which assertive women dance and flaunt their self-assurance over an up-tempo, bass accentuated groove and Megan Thee Stallion’s rap-singing in the face of a sexist and hypocritical senator (representing males more generally); the force of their female energy eventually transforming his mouth into iconic female anatomy.

Styles appearance in “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” is significant for multiple reasons. One is his prior association with mermaid culture. This aspect is already well established, with him having revealed a mermaid tattoo on his lower arm in 2014, which has since been clearly displayed as he performs. This image has a notably unconventional aspect. Instead of the

¹² Typified by David Mallet’s video for David Bowie’s “Ashes to Ashes” (1980) and Charlie Levi and Jeff Stein’s video for the Cars’ “You Might Think” (1984)—see Lynch for discussion.

¹³ Typified by Jim Blashfield’s video for the Talking Heads’ “There She Was” (1985) and Stephen Johnson and Nick Park’s video for Peter Gabriel’s “Sledgehammer” (1986)—see Richardson for discussion.

mermaid's transition to fishtail commencing around her midriff, Styles's tattoo shows a mermaid with a human pubis (and implied vulva) above her tail, which commences below the swell of her hips.¹⁴ She thereby "has her cake and eats it" in terms of physical options. Styles was also in contention for the role of Prince Eric, the human lead in Disney's live action remake of its animated 1989 *Little Mermaid* film, before withdrawing from the project (Taylor). This association also extended to Styles appearing in cosplay as Ariel from Disney's *Little Mermaid* for a photo shoot for the US TV show *Saturday Night Live* in 2019 that surfaced in 2021. Although he has never publicly commented on his interest in mermaids, Benozillo reported that when Styles was asked to explain his tattoo he answered ("with a cheeky smile"), "I am a mermaid." The association with fantasy culture and gender fluidity is important. The emphasis on *mermaid* rather than *merman* aligns with Styles's existing media persona—a willingness to move beyond traditional gendered expectations in terms of dress and presentation. Styles's readiness to accept female gendered roles also aligns with his musical performances as well, often keeping the original pronouns for songs even if he has changed the gender as the lead; for example, singing "come get your man" while covering Lizzo's "Juice" and singing "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" with Shania Twain.

It is important to acknowledge that the music video of Styles singing "Music for a Sushi Restaurant" was not the first audiovisual presentation of the track, with it having been used in an advertising campaign for Apple AirPods with Spatial Audio in June 2022. As described in *Billboard*, "the playful spot . . . is a bit of a throwback to some of the classic 2003 Apple 'Silhouettes' ads of yore, featuring pink, red and blue dancers grooving to the bass-slapping tune along with Styles scatting along as his color-blocked body cycles" (Kaufman). By recontextualizing the song with its unusual music video, Styles could be understood to be reclaiming it from the music industry and its expectations—removing the emphasis of the ad and Apple on him as a type of "silhouette," and replacing this with the complex figure of an objectified singing cecaelia. The relationship between the song and the artist can be compared in two ways. In the first version, Styles's singing and dancing is used to attract revenue as part of an established music industry pattern (via Apple as playback, as well as Apple as media distributor); the second—the Perrie music video—cuts ties to this established expectation by his initial appearance as dirty and unkempt, then revealing him to be a cecaelia, notably without human genitals but eventually with a voice, before the latter and, indeed, his general viability, decline.

¹⁴ See the tattoo as reproduced in Minton.

The complexity of the cecaelia as a creature, and the scenario in which he/it finds itself, leaves it open to multiple interpretations. One concerns the manner in which we can perceive Styles-as-cecaelia as “bait” (squid being a frequent form of bait for offshore fisherman). He is initially seen as an oddity as he is retrieved from the sea, dirty and with a full beard, apparently just as something to amuse the staff at Gill’s as they prepare their normal haul of fish and crabs for customers. Once he shows he can sing, Styles becomes a different type of attraction—a novelty that is cleaned and dressed up to attract customers as a sea-themed cabaret performer as they eat. When his voice fails he becomes less of a novelty and instead just fodder for the venue to either dispose of or capitalize on. They choose the later, and Gill’s becomes a sushi restaurant (as indicated in the song’s title) as Styles’s cecaelia tail is cut up and served. Could this be a metaphor for the music industry too? One, that has so far cleaned him up and presented him as a prize, but that might eat him should he fail to perform, as they want him to. But, like anything in popular culture—let alone anything so polyvalent as a human-squid figure—the video persona of Styles-as-cecaelia is open to diverse interpretation and engagement by fans. It has been actively embraced by some on Twitter (see Veitch) —albeit with comments such as “easily the most insane character arc I have ever witnessed” (mattxiv)—and some dedicated fans have even softened the radical alterity of the media-logic monstrosity by producing inventive fabric renditions of the figure that Styles has physically embraced on-stage (picshrry).

The position of Styles as bait can also be read on a visual play on a label that had been circulated in some media relating to Styles. Specifically, Styles has been accused of “queerbaiting,” a term used to suggest teasing or appropriating queer identities and audiences without coming out as queer himself.¹⁵ A few days after the release of the “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” clip, for instance, Patrick Lenton argued that the label “queerbaiting” had come to be used as “a kind of weapon to use against celebrities,” saying:

[B]y policing whether or not Harry Styles is “allowed” to wear a green feather boa on stage, or Billie Eilish can include sapphic themes in her music videos, or Kit Connor can play a bi teenager without explicitly confirming that he himself is a bi teenager, we create a hierarchy of queerness—a right or a wrong way to actually be queer.

This process of inclusion and exclusion—implying that only under certain conditions can expressions of love and identity be expressed—has significant consequences for individual artists and fans. Further to

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of this in relation to Styles see McCann and Southerton (151–52).

this, Lenton adds that demands for celebrities to disclose their own sexual identities, as this relates to possible claims of queerbaiting, is not progressive, but the opposite: “Being out and proud is a choice that many people make, but shouldn’t be seen as being more valid or worthwhile than anyone who doesn’t choose that path.” Although beyond the scope of our article here, this issue and its consequences for artists and fans have also been explored by Roach, and McCann and Southerton, with the latter suggesting discussions of industry discourse offer a “specific challenge . . . [to be] rethinking expectations around desire and sexuality, and indeed how we might imagine collective queer activism in a digital age through the practices of this fandom” (152).¹⁶ In the case of this video, the challenge is one to the viewer and the industry. Why should Styles, and by extension his fans, be placed under such intense scrutiny for their identity? Especially when this scrutiny happens as a distraction from the music itself—or as in the clip—a literal disruption, as the track stops and starts.

CONCLUSION

Styles and Perrie’s music video for “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” offers a challenge to existing media representations of Harry Styles—in particular to the industry’s preoccupation with his sexual orientation and love life. While focusing on these aspects of Styles, the press in particular is distracted away from his actual art—and are also often making value judgements about its worth and the worthiness of the types of fans who are attracted to it. Styles’s willingness to role-play media-loric figures such as a Disney mermaid and a cecaelia in high-profile public contexts, and the appreciation of fans, commentators and critics of these, illustrates that such figures continue to have considerable potential as motifs for the exploration of personal identity and broader socio-cultural issues. In Styles’s case, the latter involve aspects of star performance, interpretation and typecasting in popular music culture and of the potential for artistic agency within a carefully managed cultural industry. There is an inventive reworking of a key motif of Andersen’s story and Disney’s adaptation in the video apposite for a pop star in that Styles-as-cecaelia finds his voice once on-land, rather than having to relinquish it in order to exit the ocean (as Ariel has to) and rather than having to steal it from the little mermaid, as Ursula gleefully does. Styles-as-cecaelia both finds his voice and loses it shortly after in what seems a clear representation of the fleeting nature of fame and adulation. But there is a substantial degree

¹⁶ See also Factora, who explores queerbaiting and its changing application and consequences from a nuanced non-gendered perspective.

of theatricality to this in that Styles (the performer) is very much alive and thriving as a popular music performer and his representation of himself as the limp tentacled squid-cecaelia is as much “ironic parody” (Bényei) as it is biting satire. And all in 3 minutes 29 seconds, re-emphasizing the enduring potential of music video as a form.

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Abjection of the Other in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: The Subject's Deterrence Strategy for Becoming the Abject

ABSTRACT

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is about the volatile relationship between Robert Neville—the sole survivor of the human race—and vampires as the members of a brave new world order. While many critics tend to read the relationship between Robert and the vampires as the colonizer and the colonized, this article sees the need to devise a paradigm to acknowledge the critical merits of all these postcolonial and racial readings without overemphasizing the validity of any of the mentioned readings at the expense of the other. The paradigm shows the journey of a subject who initially thought that he is in absolute control, but later is made to realize that, in his insistence on this position, he is actually being swayed towards marginalization and abjection. At the same time, the initially abject and marginalized vampires assume the position of dominance and normalcy at the end of the novel. In order to reach this understanding, the study draws on Julia Kristeva's theoretical conceptualization of abjection.

Keywords: legend, Matheson, vampires, Kristeva, abject.

INTRODUCTION

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) portrays a unique relationship between the protagonist Robert Neville and vampires in a post-apocalyptic world. In this world, the spread of a bacterial pandemic has turned almost the entire population into vampires or caused their deaths.

In the midst of this disease-stricken world, Robert is the sole survivor of the human race. Although he initially thinks of himself as a representative of the human race and normalcy, he later realizes that it is he—and the race which he represents—that is the anomaly in a world in which a mutated kind of vampirism¹ is going to be the new normal. Ultimately, it is he who will be regarded as the monstrous anomaly of whom every sentient vampire should be afraid. This realization shows the journey of a subject who initially thought that he was in absolute control, but later is made to realize that in his insistence on this position, he is truly being swayed towards marginalization and abjection. At the same time, the initially abject and marginalized vampires assume the position of dominance and normalcy at the end of the novel.

Considering this interesting and full circle relationship between Robert's seemingly autonomous subject position and the vampires' abjection, many critics tended to read the text in the light of postcolonial and racial critical perspectives. Nicola Bowring (2015) and Kathy Patterson (2005) are the authors of two of the prominent studies with purely colonial and racial emphasis on the relationship between Neville as the symbolic representative of European white colonizers and the vampires as the representatives of people of color and colonized beings in general. This perspective is also present in Amy J. Ransom's book (2018). Even in Louise Nuttall's text (2015), which discusses the aspects of focalization in the novel's third person narratological perspective, the narratological technique is justified on the basis of Robert's central and colonial subject position; the kind of Orientalist position which is also mentioned in Bowring's article.

Alongside such racial and postcolonial readings are valid class-based interpretations of the text as well. In critical readings such as Simchi Cohen's (2014), the author plays with class-based interpretations of the differences between more advanced and human-like vampires and the zombie-like vampires, and how both of these groups have little to do with

¹ Roughly speaking, one could divide the kinds of vampires in this novel into two groups: One group has a baser, more beast-like and more zombie-like features; the other is more advanced, mutated into having sentience, and possesses more human-like characteristics. In the present study, we would be referring to these two groups through using zombie-like and human-like vampires.

the aristocratic and Gothic solitude of the figure of Stoker's *Dracula* as the forefather novel of vampirism. This reading is coupled with some critical observations pertaining to class divisions in Ransom's book (2018). Ransom believes that while regarding Neville and the vampires as respective representatives of aristocracy and bourgeoisie (or vice-versa) cannot be fully supported—especially due to Neville's working class history and background—such an interpretation may have merits, especially after reviewing the class-based concerns in the formation of Stoker's *Dracula* as the literary origin of vampirism in literature.

Apart from the two interpretive readings mentioned earlier, critics such as Laura Diehl (2013) represent many other commentators who acknowledge the depiction of the militarized anxieties of a nation regarding the repercussions of a nuclear holocaust; a holocaust which they consider to be one of the possible outcomes of the Cold War. In this sense, worldwide death and people's mutation into vampires in the novel can be read as having symbolic significance regarding such an anxiety.

I see the merits in the mentioned critical readings and will utilize points from these insightful interpretations wherever necessary. What this article seeks to contribute relates to the presentation of a paradigm in which the dynamic relationship between the subject in control (initially Neville, and then the vampires) and the marginalized figures (the vampires at first, and then Neville) can be analyzed. Such a paradigm does not emphasize the validity of any of the mentioned studies above or at the expense of the other. In this sense, the analysis offered here will not be limited to one fixed kind of critical rendition, whether racial and colonial interpretations or class-based and militarized readings.

The study turns to Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject/abjection to first recognize the conventionality of the subject positions of Neville and the vampires as the respective representatives of the subject and the abject, and then to analyze the semiotically dynamic and slippery nature of each of these positions.² It follows its reading of the dynamism between the subject and the abject in four parts. First, Neville's phobia of the unknown nature of the vampires and this brave new post-apocalyptic world will be recognized as the subject's initial impetus to define his position through abjecting the unknown. The article then turns to Robert's miscalculations and misrecognitions about his position in relation to the vampires and the

² This reading will be different from Chris Koenig-Woodyard (2018). His rhizomatic interpretation concerning Neville's subject position is thought provoking, but it does not manage to show the process in which both Neville and the vampires experience their conventional positions in the symbolic order of language first, and then realize the uncontainable semiotic aspects—which are truly disruptive and in a sense rhizomatic—of their subject positions.

overall post-apocalyptic landscape. In the third part, the essay discusses the disruption of this convenient dichotomy between the respective subject positions of Robert and the vampires. This disruption brings us to Robert's own abjection as the new anomaly in the novel's post-apocalyptic world. In this final part, the essay observes how Robert remains in the always-shifting play of subject and object positions by accepting his new object role.

As mentioned earlier, the study's overarching Kristevan paradigm includes the pertinent merits of all the valid critical readings—racial, postcolonial, class-based, and militaristic—and at the same time, does not give precedence to any of them.

PHOBIA OF THE SEEMINGLY UNKNOWN: THE FIRST DRIVE BEHIND SUBJECT/OBJECT FORMATION

In Matheson's novel, Robert Neville initially regards himself as the protector of the human race against vampiric contamination. As Diehl puts it, Robert, being "repulsed by the threat of vampiric penetration and its miscegenate implications, wages biological warfare against them" (104). He also looks for ways to "contain both the physical and symbolic threats" of the seemingly abnormal and the infectious against the normality of the past (Cohen 54). In this sense, Neville sees the vampires' literal infectiousness and their symbolic abnormality as the twofold justification for exterminating them. In his eyes, they are the entities that cause the highest degree of physical and symbolic phobia in him, and therefore, they need to be objectified. Defined literally, "abjection is the act of throwing away" (McCabe and Holmes 77). However, Kristeva's conceptualization of abjection and object moments in identity formation refers to "an unconscious defense mechanism used to protect the self against threats" (McCabe and Holmes 77). For Robert, the vampires are precisely such "threats." They "incite abjection [in him since they can] disturb identity, system, and order. [They] do not respect borders, positions, and rules" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 4).

In the novel, Robert's phobia of the object is expressed in the plot as well as the narrative structure and language. When it comes to the plot, from the very beginning of the novel readers find Robert protecting his renditions of "order and the system" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 4). He contains the vampires who have no regard for his demarcated "borders and rules" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 4). Using Foucauldian terminology, Cohen sees Robert's efforts to contain the contagious vampires of

the novel as the signs of “the ensuing inspection, partition, quarantine, purification, and, above all, order that arises the modern act of discipline, which derives from *the fear* of the uncontained” (50, emphasis mine). This act of ordering and disciplining should not be regarded solely as the phobia experienced by a member of a so-called superior race or class against the abject; rather, it also reflects Robert’s procrastination regarding the ultimate acknowledgement of his identity’s hollowness and alienation in a world filled with vampires.

Apart from the plot, narrative techniques reflect Robert’s abhorrence of the vampires. He abhors the vampires’ presence so much because he regards them as unspecified and unknown entities. This attitude is materialized through the focalization of the text from Robert’s perspective. Due to focalization, “a lack of specificity can be seen in the vampires’ overall construal” (Nuttal 29). Nuttal believes that in the novel, the vampires are first referred to as “they,” which, lacking an antecedent, cues an indistinct, undetailed conceptualization of these characters in readers. This tendency gradually changes as the chapter progresses and expressions such as “filthy bastards” (Matheson 11), “the women” (12), “men” (16) are used, before “they” are finally described as “vampires” in chapter two (21). Before chapter two, Neville always refers to them impersonally as “they” (13, 17, 65); “them” (14, 19, 26), even as “that” (29), or as “bastards” (17, 20, 30). According to Amy J. Ransom, Robert’s “former neighbor has become completely alien to him now. Compared to dogs and wolves, they are subhuman animals” (30). Using Harrington’s insight, one could deduce that in his emphasis on not even naming vampires, Neville is showcasing how the subject who is seemingly in control “becomes the object of the abject vampires himself” (Harrington 146). Using Kristeva’s formulations on abjection, Harrington postulates that

the object of this phobia is such that it cannot be spoken of as what it is—the most near—the self. It can be spoken only in a kind of ceaseless wordplay that does not mention *fear*, because recognizing the thing one is afraid of would call into being the very loss that is repressed. (146, emphasis mine)

Robert refrains from allowing the vampires to enter the symbolic structure of language by not naming them directly. Such verbal obfuscation perpetuates the dominance of phobia: the concept which he unconsciously thinks would protect him from truly facing the void and emptiness all around him. Like other hegemonic subjects in a colonizing context—whose subject positions are always under the threat of utter destruction by the other—Robert utilizes linguistic ambiguity as a form of survival

strategy; therefore, these vague wordplays and instances of vague pronoun-referencing should be regarded as Neville's survival strategy.

If one reads Robert's language—his reluctance to name the vampires, and even after naming them, referring to them as a homogeneously abject entity—as a sign of his phobia of the vampires' ambivalent position between life and death and his fear of total annihilation and death, one can see how, as noted by Kristeva,

[f]ear having been bracketed [will make] discourse seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness of both the repellent and repelled nature of the abject. The fundamental *fear*, the dissolving of the subject in the face of arbitrary signification, is, once glossed by the play of fears, lost to memory. The founding denial contained in the metaphor of want glosses that void of being, of meaning, that is death. (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 6, emphasis mine)

Robert's procrastination regarding naming the vampires reflects his "fundamental fear [of] dissolving in the face of arbitrary signification" of language (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 6). In this sense, it is either him who needs to be remembered vaguely and abjectly or the vampires. Although he may not regard this fight in the symbolic manner that this study does, he is subconsciously aware that by losing to the vampires in both the physical and symbolic acts of containment, he may as well embrace his own "void of being" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 6) and accepts his total annihilation both in the physical and symbolic worlds of language and signification. Robert's wordplay and vague pronoun-referencing is his way of "playing" the fears which he has—treating them in a ludic, unserious manner—and, in Kristeva's terms, his desperate attempt to lose this fear to memory. Like any incumbent of the dominant subject position, abject procrastination and oblivion constitute the phobic strategies for glossing over true recognition of the other.

By emphasizing the necessity of containing and controlling his perimeter and its order from the very beginning and creating such a delay in naming the vampires, Robert—as the novel's only focalization point—"reduces the vampires in toto, to carriers of a disease poised to eradicate the last remaining bastion of civilization" (Diehl 104). This reductionist attitude towards the vampires shows his phobic failure in "spit[ting] out, reject[ing], [and] almost violently exclud[ing]" the vampires (McAfee 46). This failure is due to the impossibility to contain—either in actuality or in words—the threatening nature of a species which is "not quite living and not quite dead" (Cohen 52). The living dead defy categorization, slipping over the edges, borders and boundaries designed precisely to contain

fears and monsters. By delaying their naming, Robert hopes that in the continuance of his journey in the novel's post-apocalyptic world, he can manage to find a successful strategy for the vampires' annihilation.

As mentioned earlier, Robert's radical emphasis on the vampires' exclusion in actuality and in language's symbolic structures is due to the simultaneity of the vampires' uncanny familiarly and unfamiliarity (being human-like, and at the same time being zombie-like figures), necessitating their abjection. According to Kristeva, abjection is the most radical modality of exclusion. Utilizing McAfee's interpretation, one could see that according to Kristeva,

[w]hat is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood. What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self. The abject is what does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject. (McAfee 46)

Robert's unconscious procrastination regarding the very use of the word vampires indicates the profundity of his phobia of this newly emerged species in the post-apocalyptic world. Unconsciously, he is aware of the fact that his efforts to contain them in language or not to speak of them will not result in their repression, and can only help him to assume his subject position of normalcy quite contingently and in a tenuous manner.

Robert, incapable of containing the vampires, starts to experience phobia on another level. The phobia—which can be translated as a kind of tragedy, according to Cohen—is described as follows: “To die, he thought, never knowing the fierce joy and attendant comfort of a loved one's embrace. To sink into that hideous coma, to sink then into death and perhaps, to return to sterile, awful wanderings. All without knowing what it was to love and be loved” (Matheson 64). According to Cohen, tragedy here is a

notion inextricably linked to love: a love not defined by a past set of norms or by a man and a woman or a man and a fantasy or a man and a companion; a love not colored by a domesticity couched in a costume of sheer masculinity; a love that might entail touching or perhaps even embracing the realm of the perceived abnormal, the realm of the vampire. (54)

Like any other incumbent of the seemingly autonomous subject position Robert is unconsciously incapable of categorically excluding what he finds to be radically abhorrent since they (here vampires) have strong

resemblances (look like humans) and at the same time differences (zombie-like attitudes) compared to his own human-like characteristics. Yet he cannot yearn—at least on an unconscious level—for their complete annihilation since, without their presence, he does not know how to justify the phobic nature of his own lonely existence. Robert needs something to identify against; how can one define oneself other than in opposition to the otherized abject? Robert is aware that he needs the vampires to be able to see himself as a human. He knows that, without them, he turns into what Kristeva calls a “straying” entity: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 8). Knowing that without the vampires’ presence, he cannot justify his phobia and consequently his normalcy, Robert symbolically shows his attachment to the very thing that he abhors so much when he talks about love.

Phobia is the drive that keeps Robert in a contingently-formed subject position. As with most kinds of phobia, the phobic subject starts to have quite a paradoxical regard towards his abject object of fear. Using McAfee’s interpretation, one could uphold the Kristevan claim that the subject (here Robert) always “finds the abject both repellant and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained. They are threatened because the abject is alluring enough to destroy the borders of self; they are maintained because the fear of such a collapse keeps the subject vigilant” (McAfee 49–50). As argued above, for Robert, the vampires are simultaneously repellant and seductive for two reasons: they look like cadavers, but even in their zombie-like state, they have a strong resemblance to him as the sole survivor of humanity. This paradoxical status of the vampires seriously challenges or even “crumbles the borders” (McAfee 49) which he desires to create for himself physically and symbolically in language. The other reason refers to the dependence of his phobia on the vampires’ existence. Although knowing that like any object of phobia, the vampires will “hover upon [his] identity’s periphery” (McAfee 46), and even on occasions encourage him to yearn for a horrendous union with them, he also knows that they are necessary for his oppositional identification against something abject and categorically otherized.

Robert’s misrecognition and miscalculations are the second means through which he desperately tries to hold on to his exclusivist and reductionist attitudes towards the vampires as abject entities. Like his phobic endeavors to contain them both in the real world and in the symbolic structures of language, these misrecognitions try to preserve his seemingly autonomous subject position. This drive will be discussed in the next section of the article.

MISRECOGNITION AND MISCALCULATION: THE PERPETUATING DRIVE BEHIND SUBJECT/ OBJECT FORMATION

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In the novel, Robert persists in his phobic containment strategies by administering them routinely, and also by pretending to have a naturalistic and disinterested attitude towards the vampires. Neville embraces “the monotony of his daily tasks: the carrying away of bodies, the repairing of the house’s exterior, the hanging of garlic” (Matheson 50) so that he can perpetuate the phobic containment strategies with which he has managed to hold on to his tenuously formed subject position. As Cohen notes, “lists, partitions, and maps help Robert sort morning from evening, daylight from nighttime, breakfast from dinner, vampire from human” (56). This detailed outlining of his domestic routine—what Adryan Glasgow refers to as “vampire maintenance—and the insistence on a ritualized structuring of the daylight hours recur as consistent leitmotif in the novel” (Ransom 22). Ransom believes that Robert’s routinized containment strategies also help him keep at bay the deep sense of alienation, both spiritual and physical, that he experiences (22).

Robert’s routinization of containment and home safeguarding strategies should not be taken as a sign of the utter freedom of a colonizer or a member of a so-called superior race who is absolutely in command, but rather as the desperation of the incumbent of such a position to remain sane and preserve the phobic core of his identity. As Ransom believes, Robert’s commitment to routinized activities should not be read as the symbolic representation of “salvation from all responsibilities” (47).³ He needs to justify the monotony in accordance with preserving a greater good: namely, the preservation of his sanity and subject position as the sole survivor of civilization. At first, he finds “monotony to be the great obstacle,” but later “he learn[s] to accept the dungeon he existed in, neither seeking to escape with sudden derring-do nor beating his pate bloody on its walls” (Matheson 111).

Robert’s acceptance of the monotony of his fixed position in his house and all of his daily containment strategies make him adhere to a particular kind of obstinate fixity. In the uncertain landscape of a post-apocalyptic world, this adherence results in one of his first miscalculations. Even when Ruth—one of the vampires in the story—warns him of danger well in advance, he refuses to leave his containment habits and house, stating, “I . . . couldn’t . . . I almost went several times. Once I even packed

³ For more references to the superficially optimistic readings from Robert’s lonely rummaging in Los Angeles’ derelict post-apocalyptic landscape, see Ransom (47).

and . . . started out. But I couldn't, I couldn't . . . go. I was too used to the . . . the house. It was a habit, just . . . just like the habit of living. I got . . . used to it" (Matheson 165). As Kathy Davis Patterson puts it, "in this unstable post-apocalyptic landscape, it is Neville who has become stagnant, 'passé,' a persistent stereotype" (26). One can read Robert's miscalculation in perpetuating his obstinacy and fixity through Kristeva's conceptualizations of abjection. She believes that the subject's "fearful feeling of lack and loss does not necessarily result in the abject nature of the subject's development. It results in misrecognition" (Harrington 145). Robert's adherence to the monotony is his misrecognized strategy to deal with his shaky dominant subject position in the novel's post-apocalyptic world; the strategy which would not result in his ultimate survival and perpetuation in this world.

Trying to study and treat the vampires as a naturalist scientist/hunter/observer is another misrecognition with which Robert desperately tries to perpetuate the façade of being in control. Robert's use of vague pronouns such as "they" in order to defer the very act of naming the vampires has already been discussed. Apart from this symbolic strategy in language, describing them as "crouching on their haunches like dogs, eyes glittering at the house, teeth slowly grating together; back and forth, back and forth" (Matheson 22), or presenting readers with the menacing image that "outside they howled and pummeled the door, shouting his name in a paroxysm of demented fury" (Matheson 46), give him the authority to treat them with the kind of naturalist violence that hunters and scientists treat their preys and laboratory subjects later in the novel. He views them as having no human social interaction—or, in Ransom's words, as "subhuman animals" (30). That is why in one section of the novel, the narrator, focalized through Robert's perspective, describes them as follows:

He turned on the water there and went back in. When he reached the peephole, he saw another man and a woman on the lawn. None of the three was speaking to either of the others. They never did. They walked and walked about on restless feet, circling each other like wolves, never looking at each other once, having hungry eyes only for the house and their prey inside the house. (Matheson 65)

Ironically, he considers himself to be the prey of these animalistic creatures, or these ambulatory "corpses" (Matheson 65). As such, he feels justified in killing as many of them as possible, like a hunter. He believes that "[i]f I didn't kill them, sooner or later they'd come after me. I have no choice; no choice at all" (Matheson 146). As Bowring also attests, "Robert ultimately defends his destruction of the vampires as justified, and we are encouraged

toward seeing them as monsters, inhuman, partly through animalistic comparisons—as an example: both women were the color of fish out of water (Matheson 8)—as well as Neville’s experiments on them as subjects” (Bowring 133). It is interesting how he also gives a moralistic twist to his containment strategies by conveniently refusing to discern between the two groups of vampires out there. For him, their holistic containment under a singular abject category is the ideal choice with which he can thwart the realization that it is he who is the abnormal one in this vampiric world.

Morally justifying his violence against these homogenized animals takes a scientific turn as well. In this excerpt from the novel, Nuttall believes “attentional focusing of body parts and the reduced mind attribution it invites for both Neville and the vampires” show Neville to be an experimental scientist who takes no pleasure in examining the body of a female vampire (32):

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Her hands closed over his wrists and her body began to twist and flop on the rug. Her eyes were still closed, but she gasped and muttered and her body kept trying to writhe out of his grip. Her dark nails dug into his flesh . . . Usually he felt a twinge of guilt when he realized that, but for some affliction he didn’t understand these people were the same as he. But now an experimental fervor had seized him and he could think of nothing else. (Matheson 34)

Here, through “metonymic references” to his body parts and to the vampires’ body parts (Nuttall 32), and through the emphasis that he is taking no pleasure in doing such things, he is acquitted of having any moral responsibilities. In the case of the female vampires, “readers’ sense of these characters’ ability to experience emotions and pain and thus hold rights as moral patients is also likely to be less prominent” (Nuttall 32). By refusing to acknowledge his strong desire to embrace—even sexually—the vampires as the abject figures of his world, and in his insistence to regard them as expendable abject figures, “all [that] is most near [to him] is rejected in the subject’s misrecognition, and a territory is created edged by the abject” (Harrington 146). Robert needs to reject this homogenously-formed group of vampires as the only thing that is “most near” to him so that he can implement his containing strategies successfully. By doing this, he can manage—at least transiently and contingently—to preserve a slippery territory for him at the edge of this dejected/abject group of vampires. In the novel, this territory is symbolized through Robert’s efforts to protect his home and to preserve his sole right to name these creatures, and consequently control the discourse. In these acts of dominance and preservation, one should not see Robert solely as a colonizing figure, or

as a member of so-called superior race or class, but rather as a desperate subject who wishes to perpetuate his survival in a world where most of the symbolic means of handling the other have failed to contain this world's semiotic and uncontainable abject elements.

Robert sticks to his routine containment strategies and his fixed physical locality even in the face of total annihilation since he fails to genuinely acknowledge his absolute alienation. He cannot commit himself to an accurate recognition of his surroundings, and only upholds a series of hollow and meaningless containment strategies. He needs to find a grander, more honorable justification for these strategies, since, as Kristeva believes, "if [the subject's] identification of desire with external objects fails, the subject turns inward and, in the act of discovering the impossible within would result in failure to recognize his kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (Kristeva, *Power of Horror* 5). Robert knows that survival is the only way to suppress the awareness of the lack of anything familiar or homely around him: the fact that will sully even his "memory" of a normal past, and that will inevitably make him realize that it is he who is the representative of the new abnormalcy in a world whose new normal is the initially-abject vampires.

Robert's ultimate viability to find anything meaningful within himself and beyond the phobic strategies of containment brings us to the semiotic return (or as Kristeva believes its eruption) of the abject vampires in the signifying structure of the novel.

THE SEMIOTIC ERUPTION OF THE ABJECT: THE DISRUPTION IN DRIVES BEHIND SUBJECT/ ABJECT FORMATION

The ultimate failure of Robert's containment strategies—which consist of militaristic, symbolic and naturalistic strategies—bespeaks the semiotic nature of some aspects of his subject position and that of the vampires. In the novel, Robert's violence against the vampires, and his inability to see the liminality of his subject position and that of the vampires, are rife with semiotic elements. Due to these elements, their lives—especially Robert's life—would be under the threat of "infection of death" (McAfee 46). In order to suppress and contain this infection, Robert tries to contain any sign of death around him (later the vampires do the same against Robert). However, as discussed earlier, what he manages to do is to commit himself to a number of failing containment strategies regarding his own status and the status of the vampires. In this commitment, he exposes more than ever his violence and the liminality of his subject position and that of the vampires: the sense

of liminality he has wanted to repress both literally in the actual world and metaphorically in the symbolic world of language. In the novel, Ruth, as one of vampires under attack, bolts when she sees the seemingly monstrous Neville rushing toward her. At first, he does not “realize how frightening he looked; six foot three in his boots, a gigantic bearded man with an intent look” (Matheson 112). He chases, catches up with, and, in time, gains the woman’s weary trust, even though he speaks with “the harsh, sterile voice of a man who had lost all touch with humanity” (Matheson 113). Koenig-Woodyard believes that if one considers the vampires’ potential for violence as an excuse for their abjection (both in the actual world and in language) by Robert, one can also say that “Neville slays numerous vampires, and in the mathematics of rhizomatic monstrosity in the novel, he is as lethal a Gothic killer of the vampires as they are of humans” (83).

After his first meaningful encounter with one of the more human-like vampires, and his observation of her recoil at his formidable appearance, he starts to accept his monstrosity, which he had found irrepresentable at the beginning. Until this point, he has tried to stick to his dichotomizing schemes of the subject and the object, but now, seeing that all those schemes cannot fully contain his own monstrosity, he acknowledges that “the vampirically fuelled biological regression of the earth now includes him despite having arduously evaded the vampires for nine months” (Koenig-Woodyard 85). That is why he says, “I’m an animal! . . . I’m a dumb, stupid animal” (Matheson 81). Neville is bestial because his unique zoological status shapes an existence that revolves around the corporeal and instinctual rather than the emotional and social interactions and pleasures of the dead world of the past that he once shared with other humans. In another section of the novel, Robert’s compassionless attitude is also represented to us. Having survived yet another onslaught, Robert sprawls exhausted on the floor and “sat wondering why he didn’t feel more compassion for her [Ruth]” (Matheson 131). It is compassion that should really set him apart from the vampires. Like the vampires’ macabre state, the narrator of the novel informs us that Robert’s status is infected and macabre too. Regarding Robert’s macabre status, the narrator notes that “emotion [would be] a difficult thing to summon from the dead” (Matheson 131). Robert’s inability to express any emotion, coupled with Ruth’s fearful mirroring of Robert’s violence and monstrosity, shows that Matheson “monstrifies the vampire slayer who becomes a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera whose monstrousness derived precisely from the multiplicity of animals that comprise it” (Koenig-Woodyard 86). On the one hand, Robert sees his violence and emotionless response towards the vampires as justified—a part of his survival strategy—but on the other hand, readers manage to learn through Ruth’s perspective of “his erratic, scientific, militarized, emotional,

and psychological ambivalence” towards his own violence (Koenig-Woodyard 87). The presence of such valid but contradictory interpretations of Robert’s abject-making violence against the vampires “attests to the crisis of social structures, and the ideological and coercive manifestations” of the dead world of his past (Kristeva, “Revolution” 452), and turns his violence into a semiotic element of signification which cannot be contained within his militaristic, symbolic or naturalistic orders. It is at such moments that Neville starts flirting with suicidal ideation directly and wonders in one of his internal monologues: “Why not go out? It was a sure way to be free of them. Be one of them” (Matheson 18). “To escape the threat of the abject, he could willingly let go of the ‘self’ and the symbolic order” (Morelock 72). Neville’s daydreaming when he starts letting go of his selfhood and decides to practice abjection in order to survive will be explored more deeply in the last section of the article.

His horror at his own violence is depicted as being at its highest when he sees the new order of the vampires killing other vampires as violently and cruelly as he did at the beginning of the novel. Bringing Christopher Brooks’s insight into play, Amy J. Ransom believes that by witnessing this horrendous episode, Robert realizes his “inhuman isolation” is just “a state ironically self-justified as the will to survival for the human race, of which he believes himself to be the last remaining individual” (37). Realizing this bitter irony, Robert “comes to view himself as anything but a hero while seeing his own violent past being played out before him, watching as the skillful killers of the new society of the vampires execute the remaining old vampires” (Ransom 37). The encounter is one of the eruptive points of suppressed semiotic into Robert’s shakily constructed symbolic order of containment and signification.

Apart from his violence, Robert’s initial attempts to understand vampirism scientifically hinder him from understanding the vampires’ liminality between life and death, and ultimately his own liminality between the dead world of the past and the present. As Morelock comments, “Ruth is abject, threatening borders twice over: First, she has the virus, which means technically she is a vampire, and vampirism transcends the border between life and death. Second, through medication she transcends the border between healthy and infected” (73). When Robert is faced with this fact he feels “as if all the security of reason were ebbing away from him. The framework of his life was collapsing and it frightened him” (Matheson 145). This in turn results in the bleeding of the eruptive semiotic into the normalizing symbolic.

However, Neville does not easily eschew his rationalistic and scientific endeavors and beliefs. He attempts further scientific mastery over superstition in solving the mystery of vampirism. He says: “There, on the slide, was the cause of the vampire. All the centuries of fearful superstition

had been felled in the moment he had seen the germ” (Matheson 80). Yet the power of superstition and legend will assert itself again by the end of the novel through Neville himself, in his role as monster, and “this anxiety about the ability of science to completely solve the mysteries of superstition pervades throughout the novel” (Bowring 136). This is due to the uncontainable nature of vampirism—whether one regards it as superstition, the stuff of legend, or as an utterly monstrous concept—through symbolic means of significance of science. Vampirism fails to be contained in such symbolic structures due to its semiotic inklings between life and death. It is these inklings that ultimately form a chink in Robert’s seemingly well-ordered and safe containment armor.

Realizing the impossibility of explaining away the true nature of vampirism through science or any of his containment strategies, he becomes a Kristevan subject whose

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borders of self are put on trial. [Such subjects] begin to lose the ability to discern between inside and outside, self and other, strange and familiar. This phenomenon pushes the reader back to a stage prior to the ability to make judgments about objects, even to judge whether something is an object and not oneself. (McAfee 53)

The loss of his discernment becomes so intense that Neville starts to assert that “the vampire was real. It was only that their true story had never been told” (Matheson 81). He goes so far as to read vampirism into historical events such as the black plague and the fall of Athens, again suggesting a new truth to history. Robert realizes that his liminal subject position cannot give him the right to pass firm and exclusivist “judgments” about the world of the past.

Koenig-Woodyard believes that Robert’s newly formed ambivalence towards the past and the historical origins of this world shows how the semiotic nature of the relationship between science and vampirism—which Koenig-Woodyard believes to be rhizomatic—and ultimately Robert (subject) and the vampires (object) “forms a metaphorical figure eight [like the infinity sign] that adumbrates a kind of epistemological mobius strip; the rhizome [semiotic nature] of vampirism seemingly spirals and loops back on itself, continuously frustrating Neville’s efforts to understand it” (84). When the seemingly subject in control forms such a dynamic relationship with the creatures which he has formerly abjected as the signs of radical otherness, the subject cannot have any defense mechanism against the object. He would be “seized at that fragile spot of subjectivity where [his] collapsed defenses reveal, beneath the appearances of a fortified castle, a flayed skin; neither inside nor outside, the wounding

exterior turning into an abominable interior” (McAfee 53). Robert sees no point in protecting the order of the past world anymore since metaphorically speaking, it is not something which belongs to the inside. By acknowledging that the historical origins of some occurrences in the past can be vampiric, he forgoes the possibility of explaining everything through symbolic structures, and accepts the semiotic nature of our existence; the fact that bespeaks the liminality of his and the vampires’ subject positions, and places both of them as the exterior/interior parts of this “flayed, mobius-strip-like skin” (Koenig-Woodyard 84).

It is in such encounters with violence and liminality that Robert realizes his initial containment and abjection of the vampires and their potential violence constituted his “ultimate coding of [his] crises; of [his] most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (McAfee 50). Putting off the acknowledgement of this instinctive and raw violence is Robert’s way of refusing to see one of his crisis-filled moments. Semiotically speaking, he is more similar to the creatures whom he has abjected in the first place. Like them, he is a liminal figure posed between two worlds; one is dead, but still haunting and erupting into the dead/alive world of his present time.

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COMMITMENT TO PRACTICE: THE SUBJECT’S ULTIMATE SURVIVAL STRATEGY

After realizing his weak and marginalized position in the world of the vampires, and losing all his material and immaterial possessions, Robert manages to experience the true meaning of alienation of abjection. This experience results in three main outcomes. First, Robert realizes the motile and constructed nature of the subject and abject positions. Having acknowledged the changeable nature of the way in which the normal slips into the abnormal so easily, Neville now attests to the most phobic and ambivalent concept which he has sought to repress for eternity: that it is he who is the abnormal and monstrous legend:

Robert Neville looked out over the new people of the earth. He knew he did not belong to them; he knew that, like the vampires, he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed. And, abruptly, the concept came, amusing to him even in his pain.

A coughing chuckle filled his throat. He turned and leaned against the wall while he swallowed the pills. Full circle. A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever.

I am legend. (Matheson 170)

By pondering upon the circular (“full circle”) process of the formation of the normal subject, and the superstitious, terrorizing and monstrous abject, Robert experiences true meaning of alienation or what Kristeva believes to be the exile of the subject into abjection. When this exile happens, not only does it make the subject realize the circular and slippery dynamism between subject and abject positions; it also causes the undermining of the “subject’s absolute narcissism and positivity” (Harrington 143). This undermining results in the second outcome of Robert’s alienation/exile, which is his understanding of what he, as the seemingly dominant subject, was not at the beginning—or thought that he was not: a subject in practice. Using the Kristevan point of view, Harrington comments on this practice as follows:

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Practice is the only manner in which the subject can appear where he is absent. Furthermore, this appearance maintains a curious temporality as an anterior future. In the space of temporal flux, of anticipation, the “contradiction that is the subject” and “that brings about practice” shows the subject as the always absent element in the practice that reveals him. The subject only ever is as process as the crest where meaning emerges only to disappear in a future space that is anticipated and already passed. (144)

At the end of the novel, Robert realizes that acknowledging his marginality and abnormalcy in this post-apocalyptic world is the only way in which he can truly understand how “the new people of earth felt” (Matheson 133). He comes to realize this fact after going through or, in a Kristevan manner, practicing all the contradictions, fluxes and anticipations that have constituted him as the seemingly in control subject. It is this Kristevan reading of the temporary incumbencies of both the subject and abject positions—and their contradictions and fluxes—that can truly attest to the slippery and semiotic nature of survival instinct in the novel’s post-apocalyptic world; the instinct which does not belong to any colonial or colonized entity in the society. This instinct could not see its full-fledged status in either subject or abject positions, but cannot be easily extinguished through abjection and the subject’s phobic misrecognitions.

Apart from the mentioned outcomes, the third outcome of Robert’s alienation and exile is his realization—eventually shared by us as the novel’s readers—that he has never been the controlling subject from the very beginning. Robert’s understanding of “what they felt” (Matheson 160) comes after the categorical “pulverization and musication” of his “primary narcissistic unity” as the subject after becoming truly exiled, alienated and abject (Harrington 143). Cohen comments that, having spent his life generating order through

lists and maps, through the partitions and definitions between humans and the vampires, Neville now embraces disorder:

Disordered, he relinquishes his lists, his partitions, and muddles the distinctions between normal and abnormal, between changeable and unassailable, between death and the birth of a new terror. He envisions his current state as circular, "full circle," a sphere with no clear break. As the vampire becomes the norm and the human becomes the infection, Neville recognizes the violence implicit in his—in all—ordering, acquiesces to the disorder inherent in the plague, and accepts his legend. (Cohen 60)

This disorder makes him realize the futility of his violence, and the fact that it can never negate the presence of the abject entities in this brave new world, no matter how much he tries to contain his environment physically, symbolically, or naturalistically. That is why he states "so long as the end did not come with violence, so long as it did not have to be a butchery before their eyes" (Matheson 170). At the end, he comes to realize that the violence of the various kinds of containment strategies which he used has only amounted to a series of mystical strategies for "mastering the subject: all that exists is the field of practice where, through his expenditure, the subject can be anticipated in an always anterior future; Nothing will have taken place but the place" (Harrington 143). For Robert, this place is the abject and always-threatening place/position of becoming a superstitious legend. At the end, he manages to experience what he was not. He realizes that he has had no distinct agency from the very beginning of his presence in this brave new world. Now at the end, he is the abject and abnormal entity which he thought he was not and would never be. Now, due to the abject and semiotic nature of his legend—which connotes utter disorder, and therefore, cannot be signified, at least holistically—he will always be threatening the normalized and symbolic order of the vampires, and will truly survive. To put it differently, the more one becomes abject, the higher the chances of survival are in the novel's post-apocalyptic world since the abject cannot become totally mapped and contained through the symbolic due to its semiotic nature.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* is the story of the survival efforts of both the controlling subject and the abject. This opinion has a tangential commonality with Matheson's own remark about the novel. He stated: "I don't think the book means anything more than it is: the story of a man trying to survive in a world of vampires" (qtd. in Bowring 142)

After using Kristeva's theoretical formulations, the ambivalence in Robert's phobia towards the vampires as his reaction towards abject entities was justified. In order to suppress this ambivalence, Robert committed his understating of the vampires to a number of degrading, animalistic conceptualizations, or what this study has called misrecognition strategies.

Due to his failure to maintain these strategies and contain the semiotic aspects of the abject vampires, the return of the abject was identified. Through the utilization of Kristevan terminology, the article has shown that this return caused the semiotic eruption of the abject vampires into Robert's symbolic vestiges of contained orders in both the real world and in language.

In accepting his total annihilation⁴ and losing his position as the controlling subject, Neville, though surrendering himself to be remembered through a number of superstitious and monstrous renditions, gained relative permanence and productive agency. Due to the abject subject position of this agency, it would always threaten the new vampire normalcy, as the formerly abnormal and abject vampires threaten Neville.

I Am Legend is a post-apocalyptic story about survival against all adversarial possibilities in the future, some of which would be new and unfathomable right now, and others which would be the direct or indirect continuations of the menacing possibilities of the past and the present.

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⁴ Morelock sees jouissance in Neville's acceptance of his death. For seeing this reading and whether one could create a connection between jouissance and practicing abjection, please refer to Morelock (88).

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Periodicals and Nation-Building: The Public Sphere, Modernity, and Modernism in *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes selections from *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, to study the complex act of nation-building taking place in India during the first half of the twentieth century. Through these periodicals, it discusses three interconnected occurrences that contributed to the envisioning of new India: firstly, the construction of a politically aware public sphere through nationalistic sentiments and anti-imperial internationalism; secondly, India's localization of modernity as oscillating between the colonial subjects' reactionary modernity and the colonially administered modernity of domination; and thirdly, the emergence of a modernism that was more immersed in restructuring social and political systems of power than being restricted to formal and aesthetic novelty. Thus, drawing on writings published in *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, the paper assesses the degree to which the two periodicals realized the identity of new India.

Keywords: *Modern Review*, *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, colonialism, public sphere, modernity, modernism.

INTRODUCTION

The circulation of public opinion becomes significant to the realization of any public sphere. In his study of the emergence of the European public sphere through public opinion, Habermas draws particular attention to how it contributed towards bringing the state closer to society's needs (31). Similarly, the years before India's independence become crucial in studying the formation of the public sphere in the country and its role in the freedom struggle. Print became an important medium for the circulation and discussion of issues, as is evident from the wide range of periodicals and magazines which were operating during the first half of the twentieth century in India. Between the year 1901 and India's gaining of independence, the total number of print newspapers and periodicals in circulation increased by roughly four times (Steinberg 145). Two periodicals circulating in the Bengal region during these years become important—*Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*. This essay studies the two periodicals in order to understand how they deployed an emergent modernity to strengthen the Indian public sphere. The proposed relationship between modernity and the public sphere is grounded in the nationalist construction of India. Nation-building, both as a sentiment and an act, was crucial to the foundation of new India's identity. It is the combination of the two vectors of modernity, the public sphere and nation-building, that reveals the significance of these periodicals.

The first reason why these two particular periodicals may be considered in this regard over others is because they promoted a new kind of internationalism which deliberately rejected imperial involvement (Manjapra 349). Their international contributors were mostly of non-British origins and belonged to countries which were competitors in the race to claim the global seat of power. Second, these periodicals did not show preferences towards any specific political party or ideology. Third, they also did not serve as mouthpieces for any society or association, unlike other prominent examples such as *Dawn* run by the Dawn Society, *Art and Letters* run by the Royal India and Pakistan Society, or *Indian Magazine and Review* run by National Indian Association. This allowed for the inclusion of a broader range of opinions. Fourth, these periodicals joined the colonial print culture during a later phase when the pool of a literate and bilingual readership had already developed in India. These factors confirm the interconnectedness of modernity, the public sphere, and nation-building in these periodicals. Nation-building formed the bedrock of editorial and publishing activities carried out by the two periodicals. The selection of reviews, invitation to contributors, funding and pricing of these periodicals, were all independent of imperial

ties which brought forth a sense of belonging and hope towards the new nation under construction. Modernity emerging through these periodicals could be understood as a response to imperial domination, which refused to accept Western notions of development as the true modernizing spirit. Instead, this form of modernity looked back into the existing systems and social structures, and subsequently revised them. The public sphere that could be seen emerging was one constituted by Indians who were experts in various fields, and their target readership was limited to an Indian population well-versed in the English language. The public sphere, owing to internationalism, was also extended to readers and writers from different countries who wished to voice their opinions as part of the larger anti-colonial movement.

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PERIODICALS AND THE CREATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The history of colonial print culture dates back to the publication of Hicky's *Bengal Gazette* in 1780 which published commercial advertisements to the extent of including trade advertisements regarding slaves (Ray and Gupta 246). Within a brief span of time, other periodicals in English as well as in Indian languages began circulating but a majority of them were owned by British colonizers. There were a total of 1146 newspapers and periodicals in circulation in the year 1901 (Paxton 143), a number which had grown to over 4712 by the year 1948 (Steinberg 145). The surge in numbers could be due to multiple factors, of which two seem highly probable: first, the need to create a people's collective that took interest in matters concerning politics and administration in colonial India; and, second, the urgency to internationalize the domestic affairs of India under the British Raj in order to expose the empire's growing ineptitude in managing the colony.

Both *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly* operated from Bengal. *Modern Review*'s first edition was printed in 1907 by Ramananda Chatterjee as its editor who held the position until his death in 1943. Thereafter, the mantle of editorship was taken over by Kedar Nath Chatterjee. The first volume of *Modern Review* was published in Allahabad by the Indian Press (Sabin 38). However, in 1908 following a row with the government, Chatterjee was asked to either terminate the periodical's publication or leave Allahabad (40). Consequently, the periodical's office moved to Kolkata where it remained until its final publication in 1995. Its inception in 1907 was not a coincidental follow-up to the Bengal partition of 1905. Lord Curzon's decision to divide Bengal stemmed from the strategy of curbing seditious activities in the politically-charged

region. The partition decision invited anger and widespread protests from colonial subjects who registered their resentment by giving a call for locally (*swadeshi* in Hindi) produced goods and a simultaneous rejection of British products. The Swadeshi movement was significant because it was the first mass movement of twentieth-century colonial India.

Modern Review strengthened this call for swadeshi since its publication process was not dependent on any British aid. During the first fifteen years the issues of *Modern Review* were published at other Indian presses but fully realizing the vitality of independence and also the threat of sedition to journalistic endeavors in a colony, Chatterjee soon bought his own press (K. Chatterjee 45). Chatterjee's connections with intellectual circles of those times, added to the popularity of *Modern Review*. Besides, he also invited dignitaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhash Chandra Bose, to contribute articles.

Chatterjee worked closely with Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to receive the Nobel in 1913 and the founder of Visva Bharati University. The friendship between the two may be traced back to the initial years of *Prabasi* which Chatterjee started in 1901. Tagore frequently contributed articles to it and then to *Modern Review*. The two were ardent believers in swadeshi, which was also a factor that contributed to the deep friendship between them. Chatterjee, in his multiple accounts of Tagore, had written about living with Tagore in Shantiniketan, and his six-month long trip to Europe with him.

Tagore founded Visva Bharati University in 1921 and soon after in 1923 started its flagship periodical, *Visva Bharati Quarterly*. Integral to the founding of the university and the periodical was Tagore's endorsement of universalism over a restricted cultivation of revolutionary nationalism to achieve independence. Nationalism was one of the rare topics on which Tagore and Chatterjee differed. While Chatterjee was an anti-colonialist and nationalist whose journalism aimed at India's political deliverance from British Raj, Tagore believed it was important to achieve freedom of mind in order to be truly free.¹ He was critical of nationalism because he viewed it only as an enabler of political freedom, which in no way guaranteed

¹ Tagore in his collection of essays on nationalism argues that political ends should not be met at the expense of moral freedom (*Nationalism* 147). He writes that treating political freedom as the utmost form of liberation corrupts the mind, and he takes the examples of other countries to substantiate how they succumbed to such temptations and consequently came under the clutches of exploitative economic systems (153). One could argue that Tagore's view on nationalism is neither concerned with the binary of modernity-tradition, nor is in alignment with the creation of a unified homogeneous whole. Yet, it is concerned with the question of the true identity of India, which he believed to be revolving around the agrarian, rural set-ups that shaped the society into a harmonious community.

the freedom of mind (Tagore, *Nationalism* 145). To spread this message and also in hope of raising funds to set up Visva Bharati University, he delivered lectures in Burma, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States (Hay 452).

These lectures were based on universal humanism which he sought to promote through the spiritual civilizational confluence between East and West. It may also be added here that his views on universal humanism were influenced by his close association with Brahmo Samaj, of which he became the leader in 1911² (Kopf 299). Owing to his association with the movement, he was critical of material, developmental and organizational gain. These ideas, which also formed the basis of the reform movement in Bengal, were reflected in the university and in the periodical founded by Tagore. *Visva Bharati Quarterly* was edited by P. C. Mahalanobis and K. R. Kripalani in the first few years of its founding. While Mahalanobis, a well-known statistician served as its editor from 1923–31, Kripalani held the position when publication resumed in 1935 after a four year discontinuation. *Visva Bharati Quarterly* still operates as one of the most esteemed periodicals of the university, though its production has remained erratic since the mid-twentieth century.

Many articles that appeared in the two periodicals were contributed by leaders involved in the freedom struggle, but a significant number of articles were also written by educators, researchers, writers, and artists. The internationalism of *Modern Review* and the universal humanism of *Visva Bharati Quarterly* not only encouraged authors from other non-hegemonic nations to contribute their articles, but also created a larger shared bond by publishing articles on issues and ills prevailing in those countries. These articles led to the formation of a public sphere which engaged with the broadening of the scope of decolonization while simultaneously focusing on the creation of an informed national identity. Samarpita Mitra in *Periodicals, Readers and the Making of a Modern Literary Culture* discusses the creation of the public sphere in the light of the production and circulation of periodicals (28). Relying on Habermas's discussion of the public sphere's emergence in Europe, Mitra argues that Indian modernity was peculiarly characterized since it was representative of the middle class

² In his book, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Kopf discusses how the setting up of the Brahmo Samaj by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1823 with the close aide of Devendranath Tagore (Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather) laid the stepping stones for modern religious thought in India with its nuanced ways of implementing socio-religious reforms by keeping the spirit of political consciousness alive (144). Rabindranath Tagore was a third-generation believer of Brahmoism, who according to Kopf always maintained the compatibility between his "Hindu identity and socio-political universalism" (307).

in Bengal. Here, she notes that the class character constituting the public sphere in Bengal was not limited to the question of production alone. It was equally dependent on creating a bilingual reading intelligentsia that was as much interested in public affairs as in the discovery of self. The activity of reading, Mitra further argues, bolstered constant negotiation between the outer public and the inner self (9). Articles published in these periodicals were reflective of this negotiation as occurring through the medium of print journalism.

This may be further illustrated by borrowing from Gramsci's concept of "integral journalism" which, he remarks, "seeks not only to satisfy all the needs of its public, but also to create and develop these needs, to arouse its public and progressively enlarge it" (408). Even an article discussing political matters carefully balanced the self of the individual against the larger public sphere. For instance, lessons were drawn from the inter-regional political tension prevailing in Europe due to WWI and WWII, and the unsustainable alliances formed consequently. A notable example is that of a scholar based out of the United States, Eleanor Hough's "Confidence Between Communities" in which she discusses collective trust as a building block for nations on the path to liberation (Hough 189). Hough also wrote her thesis on the Indian economy and the cooperative movement, publishing it under the title *The Co-operative Movement in India* in 1932. The foreword was written by Hiralal Kaji, an academic then affiliated with and teaching at the University of Bombay. Similarly, in "Social Illiteracy" Alex Aronson, a German Jewish refugee who taught at Visva Bharati, highlights the mounting problem of the evolution of uneducated illiterates into educated illiterates (285). He wrote multiple opinion pieces, on inclusion as one of the basic tenets of a nation under construction. Both Hough and Aronson are examples of academics who took interest in Indian politics and often wrote about the importance of a powerful public sphere in India at that juncture of time.

During the 1910s and 1920s, there was a considerable inclusion of articles on the public sphere from varied perspectives. The editor, Chatterjee, himself twice wrote on the topic under the *Notes* section of the periodical. His authored notes, "The Force of Public Opinion in Ancient India" (R. Chatterjee, *Modern Review* 1921 257) and "Degeneration of English Public Life" (R. Chatterjee, *Modern Review* 1926 225), strike a chord with another article written by Tagore, published in *Modern Review* in 1924 (Tagore, *Modern Review* 1924 2). The two notes by Chatterjee discuss the importance of upholding righteousness in public sphere, without allowing exceptions for any privileged party or politician. Tagore, who had by now launched *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, may be seen writing in "The Problem" about the relevance of reason and true relations

amongst the wider public if true freedom is to be achieved. A note from the same volume as Tagore's 1924 publication titled "The Purity of Public Opinion" opens with reference to French writer Hilaire Belloc and debates the separation between political affairs and religion in the public sphere (Tagore, *Modern Review* 1924 642).

In 1935 K. R. Kripalani, *Visva Bharati Quarterly's* editor, published an article, "The Intellectual," in which he argued that an intellectual should be able to relate their studies to their "everyday faith, thought, feeling, and activity" (Kripalani 102). His article is a testament to the notion that an intellectual always belongs to the society and therefore their works are also similarly guided by its requirements. These multiple examples cited above on the topic of the public sphere bring forth a distinctive feature that united progressive nation-building with conscious internationalism, while also being mindful of protecting the idea of self from vanishing in the prolonged creation of the public sphere. In creating the public sphere during the first half of the twentieth century, *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly* brought together a radically new mode of internationalism and an inclusive form of nation-building. This was a new kind of experimental initiative undertaken by these periodicals, one anchored in modernity.

BETWEEN MODERNITY AND MODERNISM

Modernity in an Indian context has been understood in two related but contradictory forms. The first is as a response of colonial subjects towards colonization. As previously discussed, an example of this kind would be the various regional reform movements in India that aimed at updating and recontextualizing religious traditions. The founding of the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj and the popularization of the practice of Adhikari Bheda were all part of modern reforms in late nineteenth century India.³

The second form of modernity is one that is administered by the colonizers into the colony. In this regard, Dipesh Chakrabarty's and

³ Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj were established in 1828 and 1875, respectively. Both believed in the idea of monotheism and a more personalized form of transcendental worshipping of divine by the individual. These newer discussions around religious beliefs discarded the superficial acts of image-based worshipping and holding elaborate customs. Adhikari Bheda was a practice that gained popularity during the revivalism of Hindutva (as discussed by Sumit Sarkar in "Identity and Difference: Caste in the Formation of the Ideologies of Nationalism and Hindutva"), especially with Swami Vivekananda coming to prominence. Adhikari Bheda created incentivization for everybody in the caste system by guaranteeing them differential rights to practice rituals. This differentiation was based on hierarchy of the caste system, and individuals belonging to any caste level in the system were prohibited from practicing rituals entitled to individuals in other caste levels.

Partha Chatterjee's views regarding colonial modernity may be helpful. While Chakrabarty argues that excessive use of bodies in capacity of their corporeal function to create a public life in India constituted colonial modernity (Chakrabarty 55), Chatterjee investigates how this modernity also made use of intellect to maintain colonial domination (P. Chatterjee 29). Both of these forms of modernity, reactionary as well as colonially administered, have been carefully linked by Sudipta Kaviraj in *The Invention of Private Life*. Here he argues that modernity in India may be understood as the transformation of a society which was earlier governed by religious order to one governed by the state (Kaviraj 25). According to Kaviraj, this transformation is driven by the quest of seeking transparency and clarification. Along with the change of order, Kaviraj writes, modernity also simultaneously attempts the reform of social and economic structures (9).

This drive to implement transparency of governance at each step, and to prevent an irresponsible state from gaining public support, founded the modernity of *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*. Another important observation from Kaviraj's work is his analysis of the changes that alter ideals such as ethics and morality when this transformation of order takes place. He demystifies the superficial presumption that the onset of modernity compromises ethics and morality since it rejects old traditions and ways of living (30). It may be added at this point that modernity is not necessarily a break with the past and old traditions. To borrow from Kaviraj, modernity is a peculiar phenomenon because it does not replace one institution or model with another (9). Instead, those structures remain, and through constant self-transformation continue to be updated.

If the examples of articles cited previously from the two periodicals are revisited, one shared feature would be their eventual return to the question of morality and ethics, irrespective of the fact that the central topic being discussed falls into the category of politics and current affairs. Apart from articles on politics, if one reads those written directly on questions of morality, ethics, or other similar concepts, the unwavering importance of these ideals is evident. For instance, Surendranath Tagore's "Judgement" published in *Visva Bharati Quarterly*'s 1925 edition criticizes the unevaluated assimilation of any western ideal in the garb of embracing modernity. Here the author clearly argues that modernity is not of a singular kind which works towards creating a unified nation and organizing its population militarily. Modernity also includes developing a tendency towards truth and love, without compromising the core moral values that define humanity (S. Tagore 207).

In "Indian Culture and External Influence," Aurobindo Ghose, an important philosopher of colonial India, writes in favour of claiming the concept of modernity vis-à-vis the assertion of true Asiatic and Indian spirit.

This assertion, according to Ghose, can only be accomplished if Indians truly acknowledge their flaws and strive towards improvement without relying on the hollow narratives of the glorious erstwhile Indian civilization (513). Yet another attempt at contextualizing modernity in India is carried out by Charles Freer Andrews (who was affectionately given the title “Deenbandhu” by M. K. Gandhi for his contributions to the Indian freedom struggle) in “The Body of Humanity” which was reprinted multiple times in both the periodicals. Here Andrews, similar to Tagore, criticizes Western modernity and its newfound interest in nationalism. However, he credits nationalism with empowering the masses with individual freedom (Andrews 324).

The repeated discussion on individual freedom in both the periodicals may be better approached through the question of the construction of self which appeared closely entwined with the awareness and creation of the public sphere, as discussed in the previous section. The growing acceptance of the space and freedom of an individual as part of Indian modernity was also reflected in discussions on art and aesthetics. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar’s *Alternative Modernities*, in which he proposes that cultural modernity in India could be found geared towards “cultivation and care of the self” may be considered to verify this (Gaonkar 2). He further stresses that a considerable significance during the exploration of self was given to “spontaneous expression” and “authentic experience.” This particularity of expression and experience in any zone or time of modernity qualifies as modernism. Susan Stanford Friedman in “Periodizing Modernism” makes use of Gaonkar’s definition to re-establish how modernism may be understood as a cultural expression of modernity instead of merely being viewed as a set of experimental aesthetic forms (432). In other words, her article proposes a definitional framework of modernism which is dependent on the corresponding modernity of any region, and at any time.

Using such a framework introduces flexibility and inclusion into the predominantly Euro-/American approach towards modernism which is otherwise found to be limited to elite literary circles. This was true in relation to both modernity and modernism emerging in the first half of the twentieth century in India. An article written by Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, a Ceylonese historian and philosopher of Indian art, titled “Art and Ethics” refers to the freedom of experiencing and expressing art without the impending fear of it being categorized as immoral. He explains this through the example of the censorship of nude art-works, and elaborates that if any scope of immorality resides, it is not in the piece of art but in how the subject of art is treated (Coomaraswamy 330). Coomaraswamy’s article is significant in relation to the discussion of modernity in India, which, as revealed in the previous paragraphs, is not divorced from questions of ethics or morality.

Another article by a Japanese art critic and scholar, Okakura Kakuzō,⁴ appears in *Visva Bharati Quarterly* under the title “A Japanese View of Modern Art.” Here Kakuzō is critical of the Western popularization of modern art as “art for art’s sake” (327). He argues that such a perception of art disconnects the artist from the society, thereby destabilizing the relationship not merely between art and the artist but also between art and society. On the question of the disjuncture caused between art and the artist due to the perception of art for its own sake, an article appeared in *Modern Review* under the heading, “Aesthetics vs Ethics.” It argued that the belief that the truest pursuit of art necessitates a compromise with ethics is flawed (R. Chatterjee, *Modern Review* 1917 71). The article initially appeared in another Indian periodical, *Arya*, and was reprinted in the 1917 issue of *Modern Review*.

These articles on the artistic expression of modernity in the East and particularly in India, make a strong case for art that is political and is not divorced from its immediate environment. These published articles contribute to a reinterpretation of modernism, which is grounded in resistance against Western colonization.

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RESISTANCE THROUGH MODERNISM AND WORLDING

Modernism as promoted by these periodicals was in correspondence with the modernity to which the two periodicals contributed. This happened through the act of nation-building vis-à-vis the creation of the public sphere. Borrowing from Supriya Chaudhuri, it may be proposed that the modernism experienced in India was not “time-lagged” (Chaudhuri, “Modernisms in India” 943). Chaudhuri’s refutation of “time-lagged” modernism in India is a response to Homi Bhabha’s argument which seeks to establish that modernism emerged later in India as compared to other countries in the West. Contrary to this, Chaudhuri argues that it began in the initial decades of the twentieth century and was rooted in India’s social, historical, and political circumstances which converged at the tip of aspirations towards a national identity (943). Along similar lines, Geeta Kapur in *When Was Modernism* also argues that modernism’s entry in India was made possible by modernity which was intricately

⁴ Kakuzō’s article becomes quite significant due to his collaborations with Tagore. He was introduced to Tagore by Sister Nivedita, who wrote the Introduction to Kakuzō’s most popular work, *Ideals of the East*, in which he projects support in favour of the China-India-Japan triad formation. On Tagore’s invitation, Kakuzō even spent a few days at Shantiniketan.

connected with the task of nation-building. To Kapur, this is significant since it distinguishes Indian modernism from that which emerged in the West (Bhabha 297). Thus, Indian modernism with its origins in Indian modernity was conditioned by the country's social and political context. The entwining of Indian modernism and modernity with nation-building is evident in articles published in *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*. These articles may be divided into two categories—articles on modernism as a movement, and articles on the stylistics adopted by modernist writers.

Articles on modernism that appeared in the two periodicals were not typically based on the observations of modernist techniques alone, but were exhaustively read with a focus on its implications and application to India's ongoing crisis. For instance, in "Modernism: An Oriental Interpretation" the author articulates modernism as a release of life from subjugation and as an "expression of life's own truth in its own ways" (Gupta, *Modern Review* 1938 1188). The "subjugation" which is being resisted and the orientalism that is being underlined, situate the article against the backdrop of anti-colonial struggle. This struggle was not directed to merely achieve physical or administrative freedom but also, at a much more spiritual level, freedom of mind. In another article, "Aspects of Modernism," the same author, Nolini Gupta, an Indian poet and philosopher, describes modernism as an immanent force that does not dwell on the depth of the matter but on the wide array and richness of the same. His justification of this claim is of extreme significance to Chaudhuri's and Kapur's proposition of the co-existence of modernism and nationalism in India. He states how the internationalism of those times had created a rebound movement towards intra-nationalism or regionalism, or what we may also refer to as nationalism (Gupta, *Modern Review* 1934 322).

Literary critic Amiya Chakravarty's "The Earlier Phase of Modernist Verse" is quite similar to Gupta's "Aspects of Modernism" in terms of argumentation. That which Gupta observed in modernism as horizontality and immanence, Chakravarty understands as grounded in its exhibition of a "chromatic effect" (*Modern Review* 1938 584) over clarity. In another article by him titled, "The Growth of Modern Analytical Poetry," he draws a connection between modernists and thinkers of the analytical tradition in which he praises the modernists for their rejection of futurism and the unsocial characteristics of their works (Chakravarty, *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 1937 231). In "The Modern Poetry," while discussing contemporary modern Bengali literature, Chakravarty delves into a discussion of cynicism in modern poetry which is often mistaken for social conscience (Chakravarty, *Modern Review* 1941 581). Here, he puts emphasis on the aesthetic aspect

of modernism which he perceives as a set of cultural values and uncouples it from the prejudiced high-brow scepticism.

The harmonious relation between an individual and their society has been lauded by many critics in the two periodicals. In “Modernist Poetry” Nolini Gupta discusses the need to strike the correct balance between aesthetic and political realms in modernism, and posits that it may only be achieved when the writer becomes aware of their place in the society and the responsibility they have towards it. It is only then that they create “out of the fullness of the inner experience” (Gupta, *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 1941 44). The emphasis on inner experience is not isolated from its occurrence in a temporal location. This problematizes the celebrated breaking of tradition as declaring the onset of modernism, which even Eliot underscores in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” through the medium of “historical sense” (4). In “Tradition and Modern Poetic Thought” Sunil Sarkar argues in favour of a more holistic perception of tradition: that which transcends the limited scope of historicity. He writes that traditions which guide modernity are “patterns of thought and feeling (which) are recognizable behind all human civilizations, cultures, and cults; patterns that are permanent and universal . . . tradition of the human race as a whole” (Sarkar 346).

The collective idea that may be derived from these few articles on modernism as published by the two periodicals, brings forth a careful calibration of modernism in the Indian social, cultural, and political urgency to arrive at a national identity. It may be suggested that these articles play a significant role in the construction of new India. Modernism becomes the medium through which the idea of new India is posited both performatively and pedagogically: the former because these pieces have been contributed by authors who are quite subject to the process of narration of the nation; the latter because through their writing they also simultaneously demonstrate the object of pedagogy to the target readership. The performative and the pedagogical together generate consciousness amongst the readership (Bhabha 297). These articles fulfil what contemporary modernist studies offer as suggestions for a more inclusive and varied form of modernism. Andreas Huyssen, in “Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World,” suggests that modernist studies must abandon the high-low distinction. It must revamp and reintroduce the aesthetic component by contextualizing it better. It must reconsider the complex cultural hierarchies over blanket superficial dichotomies of East/West and North/South (Huyssen 204). The articles by Gupta, Chakravarty and Sunil Sarkar discussed above demonstrate a similar realignment of modernism, but nearly half a century prior to contemporary modernist studies.

The second category of articles about modernist stylistics were either mainly situated against the backdrop of war-time literature or were criticisms of the canonical writers of Western modernism. On the futility and changes brought about by wars, Samuel Chao's "China's Wartime Literature and Literary Trend" discusses three observations: first, an inevitable surge in nationalist sentiments; second, more literary works being translated into Mandarin; and third, an overall tone of melancholy in literature (20). In 1948 Wallace Fowle, the American writer and professor, wrote a seventeen page article titled "The French Literary Mind" as part of a project launched by UNESCO, wherein he captured the essence of French writers and their works. He posits that the everyday pessimism with its origins in peace that French society has lost but needs to regain is what constitutes the pride of the French writers (82).

Another important article titled "Modern (Post-War) Hindi Poetry" was written by S. H. Vatsyayan, popularly known by his pen name Agyeya. His article discusses the vitality of political consciousness which he could observe surfacing in modern Hindi poetry. However, he writes that this political consciousness is yet to be harmoniously fused with modern literary techniques (237). Agyeya's contribution is significant to Indian modernism since he is hailed as one of the precursors of high modernism in Hindi through his most celebrated edited anthology *Taar Saptak*. The three above-cited examples of articles on modernism as well as a few others published by the two periodicals establish that modernism as an aesthetic expression is not always necessarily an anti-bourgeois response to modernity introduced by industrialism. It may be helpful here to refer to Raymond Williams's *Politics of Modernism* in which he illustrates how, in expanding its market, modernism lost its singular definition of authority that defined it as a movement of formal and aesthetic novelty (34). In conjunction with Williams's analysis, it may be observed how modernism has journeyed from one continent to another, and also from industrial capitalism to colonization. There remains no singular way of defining modernism. The more it travels, the more its dependency on the modernity of that region or time becomes specific, and consequently the streak of rebellion that characterizes it also changes.

In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward W. Said accuses the dominant Western analyses of modernism of either downplaying or completely rejecting the contribution of resistance and decolonization in shaping it (243). These periodicals, in a way, may be viewed as responding to such prolonged neglect. As has been discussed in this paper, their newly outlined feature of internationalism was selective, mainly anti-imperial. Other than that, there was a deliberate attempt not to deeply engage with works of high modernism from West, and yet to mention those works. Francesca

Orsini and Laetitia Zecchini, in a two-volume special issue of the *Journal of World Literature* titled “The Locations of (World) Literature,” engage with the overall periodical culture in 20th-century colonial India. They understand this technique of name-dropping and acquaintance-generating with works of modernism from outside India as “worlding.”

This worlding, which may be understood as passive-aggressive, since it constitutes neither a complete rejection nor a complete acceptance of Western notions of modernism, was another technique that was used by these periodicals to familiarize Indian readers with the plurality of work that was available. In the long run it also brought some clarity regarding how India differed from or subscribed to such work. According to Zecchini, this practice may be understood as “world-as-bricolage” (Zecchini 104) or “world-as-assemblage” (104) wherein one is attempting to not directly challenge or revolt merely for the sake of it but is simply staging their presence. Despite choosing to not engage deeply with the written literature, this practice very much accounts for East-West literary transactions because “the world and one’s place in it is being constantly remade” (104). In the same issue, Orsini studies different kinds of articles published in *Modern Review* and observes how the periodical “did not invest specifically in world literature, its general thrust was to decenter colonial English and open to the wider world. Name dropping, brief mentions, and short notes all created familiarity without direct contact” (66).

In this context, one may analyze the articles written on the three great modernist writers of the West—Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats. For instance, in a two-page article “The Poetry of Ezra Pound,” the author accuses Pound’s writing style of distancing him from the audience and finally reaching a stage where his works become “bafflingly obscure” (Miranda 367). Similarly, in “Enter Mr. Eliot” Amiya Chakravarty makes a near collage of multiple excerpts from Eliot’s poetry to praise the symbolism used by the writer. However, he is clear about Eliot’s technique of rejecting historicity to create a parallel continuum of time, of which Chakravarty is quite critical (Chakravarty, *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 1938 17). Another article “T. S. Eliot” written by Purushottama Lal, founder of the Writers Workshop publishing house, credits Eliot for his extensive mastery with symbolisms but does not include much on how Eliot’s works may be made more familiar in the Indian context (329). Distinctive from Eliot and Pound, articles on Yeats appearing in these two periodicals were much more engaging and better contextualized. One of the possible reasons could be the colonial connection between Ireland and India which made the two countries contemporaries in their respective independence struggles. In “W. B. Yeats and the Irish Moment” (Newson 18) and in

“The Letters of Yeats” (Bose 239), Yeats’s political awareness and his use of modernism to expose imperial atrocities in Ireland made him more relatable as a modernist writer than Eliot or Pound.

In contrast to the literary criticism of Western modernist writers, the engagement with emergent Indian modernism was more vibrant in the Indian periodical culture. Two important examples of this from the Bengal region would be of the *Parichay* and *Kallol* literary groups. Literary publications by *Kallol* and *Parichay* writers belonged to high modernism which had its own drawbacks. For instance, it became too involved with aesthetic forms and focused more on drawing connections with global modernisms, reducing the political consciousness of those writings. In “Modernist Literary Communities in 1930s Calcutta” Supriya Chaudhuri undertakes a comparative study of *Kallol* and *Parichay*, wherein she observes the privileged roots of *Parichay*, comparing them to the Bloomsbury group and positing the problems of retaining such high forms of modernism in the absence of the social histories with which they could have been associated (12). The very point which Orsini and Zecchini discuss about the two periodicals, in terms of superficially dropping names and literary titles, added to the mass appeal of *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly*.

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CONCLUSION

Modern Review and *Visva Bharati Quarterly* provided a collective forum for the bilingual intelligentsia of Bengal to construct a politically and socially aware India. The radical, anti-imperial internationalism of *Modern Review* and the universal humanism of *Visva Bharati Quarterly* respectively, made these periodicals distinctive from the many others circulating in the Bengal region during this period. The realization of these two specific features respectively may be verified through three interconnected occurrences. Firstly, there was the experimental creation of a public sphere that struck a balance between progressive and inclusive forms of nation-building on the one hand, and a conscious, anti-imperial internationalism on the other. Another interesting aspect of this public sphere formation in Bengal was that the idea of a collective public was not formed at the expense of the disavowal of the self.

Secondly, these periodicals eased the arrival of an honest understanding of modernity and its practice. The question of modernity has mostly found itself anchored in the colonizer/colonized binary. To not be co-opted by either of the dominant approaches towards modernity was a task that both the periodicals accomplished successfully. They did not

promote religious restructuring as modernity, nor did they mimic Western notions of developmental modernity. Taking a balanced approach, the two periodicals attempted a re-evaluation of social and political structures of power by advocating clarity and transparency in matters that concerned the wider public. As promoted by the two periodicals, Indian modernity was embarking on new ideas through the assessment of old systems and structures but its insistence on the ideals of ethics and morality remained as strong as ever.

Thirdly, the periodicals successfully illustrated the usage of modernism as a cultural expression of modernity. This did not merely involve a discussion of literary and aesthetic techniques, or raise philosophical questions relating to the essence of life. Instead, its centrality lay in politicizing modernism, otherwise primarily understood as novelty of aesthetics and form. Another important aspect of modernism practiced by the two periodicals was through the technique of worlding, wherein the authors created a superficial level of familiarity with the international modernist canon in order to promote plurality.

These three elements combined make *Modern Review* and *Visva Bharati Quarterly* two most powerful public mouthpieces in the region of Bengal during the first half of the twentieth century. The responsible editorship and journalistic roles performed by those involved with the two periodicals exemplify the power of dialogue and discussion. These periodicals were not only limited to contributing to the identity of the new India but were equally significant in introducing this new India to the wider world outside.

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REVIEWS

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“All of history a rehearsal for its own extinction”: A Review of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Passenger* (Knopf, 2022)

It has been a decade and a half since Cormac McCarthy last published a novel—his highly acclaimed *The Road*—so it came as something of a surprise when he published not one but two new novels in the autumn of 2022: first, *The Passenger* and one month later, *Stella Maris*. Together, the two books form a sort of duet of incestuous devastation, although each can stand on its own. The protagonist of *The Passenger* is one Bobby Western, originally from Wartburg, Tennessee, and now working as a salvage diver and living in New Orleans in 1980—except that Western also studied advanced mathematics and physics, raced Formula 2 in Europe, and is the son of one of the physicists who worked on the Manhattan Project. So it is fair to say that he has a complicated history and some attendant baggage.

Western and his friend Oiler are called to dive a plane crash at night, ostensibly a search and rescue for survivors, but the two men harbor no illusions. Once Oiler—the character’s name perhaps an echo of the character from Stephen Crane’s “Open Boat”—opens the hatch, they find nine passengers inside, “[t]heir mouths open, eyes devoid of speculation” (19). Western and Oiler quickly take inventory of what else is inside the plane, and perhaps more importantly, what is missing: the flight recorder. Once topside, they gather their gear and discuss various details that do not add up: how the plane seems almost perfectly intact; that the passengers had been dead for a few days already; the sense that somebody had been there before them and the unnerving fact that the flight recorder had clearly been removed. Where Oiler and Western differ perhaps is that Oiler (rightly) intuits that nothing good will come of any further inquiry into the plane or what transpired, while Western seems haunted by a desire to puzzle it out.

Afterwards, Western strolls down Bourbon Street, runs into old friends—“Familiars out of another life. How many tales begin just so?” (24)—and takes a seat amidst the banter and booze where Long John

Sheddan is holding court. The atmosphere is reminiscent of some scenes in McCarthy's *Suttree*, and Sheddan—a sort of snobbish miscreant who refers to Western only as “Squire”—delivers his opinions on various subjects as humorous drunken proverbs: “The French favor white [wines] that can double as window cleaner” (137) or “Bloated oafs dine in gym clothes. . . . I've seen entire families here that can best be described as hallucinations” (136). Sheddan rhapsodizes about Western's past—his father's link to the atomic bomb as well as his love for his dead sister—and he calls Western a “chickenfucker,” an unsubtle dig at his roots in Tennessee hill country. Such literary gestures circle back to some of McCarthy's earliest books such as *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*, set in harsh Tennessee environs seeped in aberrant behaviors and peculiar forms of resiliency. In fact, much about *The Passenger* feels familiar, from the setting of the American South in the 1980s to the barroom banter to McCarthy's signature limited punctuation. In some respects, Bobby Western could even be seen as the braiding of Llewelyn Moss and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell from *No Country For Old Men*, a world-weary man with dangers closing in around him who tries to outsmart the inevitable. But *The Passenger* is familiarity renovated by the interiority of its characters, like visiting a childhood home decades after it has been redecorated and lived in by others, and unlike many of McCarthy's characters in previous novels, we get a more layered look into the emotional and intellectual lives of both Bobby and Alicia.

Those who have read any number of McCarthy's previous books have come to expect that some scenes or events will be profoundly disturbing, although such episodes are often contained after the plots and characters have been firmly established. In this respect, *The Passenger* is different too: a desolate sonata that opens with the harrowing suicide of Alicia, Western's brilliant and beautiful sister. The book subsequently toggles between Western's current circumstances and flashback interludes of Alicia's troubling hallucinations, most notably perhaps the recurring visits from a figure who would not be out of place in a David Lynch film, the Thalidomide Kid (or “the Kid” for short). And while the name the Kid might remind readers of McCarthy's masterpiece *Blood Meridian*, this Kid is cut from a different cloth: the wise-cracking, rhyming leader of a vaudeville troupe who “looked like he'd been brought into the world with icetongs” (6) and whose appendages “[w]erent really hands. Just flippers” (5).

Not long after diving the plane crash, murky governmental types appear outside of Western's apartment to question him about the plane. It is clear that they have already been inside his place and it is there that we learn that a passenger from the plane is missing. And although Western assumes a kind of studied nonchalance, goes about his normal routines of work

and meetings with friends, from that point onward his situation becomes increasingly tenuous. That said, even amidst mounting pressures, Western's interiority is developed not only through his own introspection—of which there is plenty—but through the variety of remarkable people who orbit his life; they reflect that he is somebody around whom many people feel comfortable, safe. For instance, his friend Red, a Vietnam veteran, admits to have liked killing during the war, though confesses his deep shame for blowing up elephants for sport: “They hadnt done anything. And who were they going to see about it? . . . That’s what I regret” (42). Sheddan is quite open with Western about his stints in jail, a psychiatric ward, and whether or not he loves a woman enough to genuinely commit. One of Western's oldest friends is Debussy Fields, a stunning singer and trans woman, who he meets a few times throughout the novel and who he turns to when most vulnerable. Upon a lunch meeting, Western observes that “[e]verything was pushed just to the edge including the cleavage at the front of her dress but she was very beautiful” (62). Fields recounts her painful childhood for Western, how she was rejected by her mother and her father was so cruel that he paid school kids to beat her. Yet she now dons a white gold Patek Philippe Calatrava watch, a gleaming symbol of *haute horologie*, the pinnacle of luxury, and a clear signal she has achieved extraordinary success. Throughout the lunch, Western (and most of the other restaurant's guests) marvel at Field's beauty and attention to detail. As he watches her leave the restaurant at the conclusion of lunch, Western appreciatively observes “that God's goodness appeared in strange places. Dont close your eyes” (71).

McCarthy's bona fides as a contemporary master of American Gothic and an inheritor of Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft are well established by now. In his essay “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe writes that “the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” Indeed, the subject is one of the defining features of Poe's work. When Western hires a private detective named Kline in an attempt to uncover who is pursuing him, the private eye quickly remarks: “Your sister was something of a beauty” (220). When Western wonders how he would know that, Kline offers: “Because beauty has power to call forth a grief that is beyond the reach of other tragedies. The loss of a great beauty can bring an entire nation to its knees. Nothing else can do that” (220). McCarthy could very well be channeling Poe; however, he elevates the spectral presence of Alicia's death to be the centrifugal force that keeps her brother Bobby's atoms from flying apart and her absence subsumes everything else. Put simply, Western measures time in one unit—grief—and all those who know or encounter him can recognize it.

But Alicia is much more than just a ghostly figure because we are privy to her thoughts on mathematics and various aspects of life as well as her experiences and conversations with the Kid and various other hallucinations. In this way, *The Passenger* can be seen as a dialectic between what McCarthy calls pure number (Alicia) and physics (Bobby); or pure vs. applied mathematics. What is more, the spectral is not confined to one body, as the Kid once visits Bobby when he is living in a rundown shack near a beach. When Western asks the Kid what Alicia knew, the Kid replies: “She knew that in the end you really cant know. You cant get hold of the world. You can only draw a picture. Whether it’s a bull on the wall or a partial differential equation it’s all the same thing” (279).

As Western’s life becomes pared down, monastic even, he returns to mathematics, searching for answers or explanation:

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He sent to Paris for a collection of Grothendieck’s papers and he sat by lamplight working the problems. After a while they began to make sense, but that wasnt the issue. Nor the French. The issue was the deep core of the world as number. He tried to trace his way back. Find a logical beginning. Riemann’s dark geometry. His christawful symbols [Alicia] had called them. Gödel’s boxes of notes in Gabelsberger. (380)

Western’s exploration—just as the book as a whole—serves as a circular meditation on transience and mourning—that we are all, in fact, passengers riding somebody else’s heels. Sheddan has a characteristically different gloss: “And what are we? Ten percent biology and ninety percent nightrumor” (378). Taken as a whole, *The Passenger* is an extraordinary achievement, synthesizing McCarthy’s work from different periods to innovate and create a narrative with deep empathy, openness, and a generous dose of dark humor, a world where in one moment a drunken friend of Western’s can insist that “he seen a dude in India drink a glass of milk with his dick” (225), and in another, an elderly patient committed to the same psychiatry hospital as Alicia reminds Western, “Everyone is born with the faculty to see the miraculous. You have to choose not to” (324). Since *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are likely to be McCarthy’s last books given his recent passing, it is difficult to envision a more astounding coda to his singular body of work.

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Grande Dame Guignol at 60: A Review of *Crazy Old Ladies: The Story of Hag Horror* by Caroline Young (BearManor Media, 2022)

The year 2022 marked an important date in the history of Gothic cinema: namely, the 60th anniversary of the premiere of Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, starring two Hollywood legends in the shape of Joan Crawford and Bette Davis—a film that, according to Luke Buckmaster, still “packs a punch.” Its October 1962 release and subsequent success gave birth to a cinematic genre that would remain popular for at least a decade. Film critics quickly adopted several names to refer to *Baby Jane* and its numerous follow-ups—Grande Dame Guignol, hag horror, psycho-biddy—with only the first one remaining fairly neutral and unbiased. The films were an uncanny mixture of thriller, horror, camp aesthetics and glamour. Grande Dame Guignol productions would usually involve aging actresses of Hollywood's yesteryear playing emotionally and mentally disturbed women dealing with numerous past and present traumas. As The Terror Trap website accurately observes,

[w]hether the horror projects were well-written thrillers, shameless exploitation, or outright splatterfests, these stormtroopers from Hollywood's golden era of the 1930s and 1940s seized the opportunity for steady work. And what work it was! These newfound films provided them with a diverse range of juicy roles, from that of the scheming heiress, to the beleaguered victim, to that of a murderess hag.

In his seminal work on the genre, the 2009 *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror from “Baby Jane” to “Mother,”* Peter Shelley reminds readers that the genre “is an amalgamation of two key

and seemingly contradictory concepts—the grande dame and Grande [sic] Guignol” (1), the latter signifying a French theatre specializing in gory, macabre performances that never shied away from scenes of explicit violence. Shelley seems to agree with The Terror Trap’s view on the genre’s eclecticism, calling GDG “a subgenre of the larger film genres of crime, drama, film noir, horror, mystery, and thriller, often appearing with elements of melodrama, comedy, fantasy, and musicals” (2). Sadly, a few years after the *Baby Jane* premiere, the cinematic fad would fade into oblivion, including in the academic world, with few exceptions, such as Charles Derry’s 1977 *Dark Dreams: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film (The Horror Film from “Psycho” to “Jaws”)*, where he termed *Baby Jane* and its imitations horrors of personality. However, over approximately the last 15 years there has been a steady revival of interest in the hagsploitation movement,¹ triggered first and foremost by the publication of Shelley’s aforementioned magnum opus, which was followed by a range of contributions scattered in different edited volumes or journals (see, for example, Fisiak; Harrington; Pagnoni Berns et al.; a chapter in Shary and McVittie; Walker; selected essays in a collection edited by Bowdoin Van Riper and Miller; an updated 2009 version of Derry’s *Dark Dreams*). Hence, it should not be surprising that the 60th anniversary of *Baby Jane*’s cinematic debut would inspire new publications devoted not only to this film but also to the genre it inspired. Apart from online articles (including Buckmaster’s celebratory commemorative piece in *The Guardian*), what merits attention is a new book discussing the highs and lows not only in the genre’s development but also in their stars’ careers. Titled *Crazy Old Ladies: The Story of Hag Horror*, it is simultaneously a captivating narrative of Hollywood’s golden years and a poignant analysis of how it is to be a woman, especially a middle-aged one, in an industry “where the lifespan of an actress is usually five years” (Shelley 2).

The book’s author, Caroline Young, explains that she intentionally picked such an eye-catching title, as “a twist on some of the unflattering terms women are called when they reach what’s euphemistically known as ‘a certain age’” (5). Young asserts that her goal is “not to insult or degrade” but rather to “examin[e] the way older women are depicted in cinema, by delving behind the scenes of the making of some of the classics in the genre, exploring the societal context of the period” (5). Judging by the author’s previous works, including *Hitchcock’s Heroines*, *Roman Holiday: The Secret*

¹ The recent fascination with *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was also fuelled by the FX television docudrama *Feud: Bette and Joan* (created by Ryan Murphy, Jaffe Cohen and Michael Zam, 2017) that revolved around the real-life conflict between *Baby Jane* co-stars. The series itself drew a lot of inspiration from Shaun Considine’s biographical *Bette and Joan: The Divine Feud* (1989).

Life of Hollywood in Rome or *Classic Hollywood Style*,² one might rest assured that GDG as a genre is analyzed in a much wider context.

Indeed, *Crazy Old Ladies* proves that its author is truly invested in her narrative, paying attention to many details that significantly differentiate her book from Shelley's work, these two texts being in fact the only ones devoted exclusively to Grande Dame Guignol. Contrary to Shelley, who introduces the fairly rigid structure of an extensive introductory part and a succession of chapters discussing 45 selected films, Young opts for a more liberal form, choosing only a handful of the films that Shelley wrote about,³ her narration smoothly moving between film descriptions, background information regarding the actresses, the set, the filming process, etc. Although Young's narrative might suffer from occasional lapses of coherence, it remains riveting, especially when the author interlaces film descriptions with background details concerning the cast members' on-set antics or juicy biographical details, and thus demonstrates her unabashed enthusiasm towards the book's subject matter. Young's personal investment is further enhanced by the inclusion of brief interviews with actors who once starred in hag horrors, such as Mark Lester, a child actor who appeared alongside Shelley Winters in *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (dir. Curtis Harrington, 1971), or the legendary Piper Laurie, who played Margaret White in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). What also merits praise is a section featuring a selection of rare photographs from the films' sets and stills from the productions themselves. Their order is rather surprising, though, not keeping any chronology and giving a slight impression of disorganization. Moreover, the captions require proofreading as there are a few spelling errors and film titles are not italicized. Occasional issues with italicization, hyphenation or punctuation throughout the book indicate the need for more careful editing overall. What might also be corrected in future editions is a small number of factual errors such as confused names or dates ("Olivia Spencer" instead of "Octavia," p. 4; "Margaret Sullivan" instead of "Sullavan," p. 203; "Raquel Welsh" instead of "Welch," p. 229; "1966" as the year of *Rosemary's Baby* cinematic release, p. 17).

² On her website, Young describes herself as "a freelance writer and author specialising in fashion, pop culture and classic cinema," her books confirming a consistent authorial vision.

³ It is worth noting that Young discusses films that Shelley deliberately excluded from his analysis, e.g., *Valley of the Dolls* (dir. Mark Robson, 1967), *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polański, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973). What is more, for Young, "[t]he 'Hag Horror' subgenre . . . may be . . . aligned with the sixties and seventies, but the themes of . . . tragic spinsters, damaging mothers and terrifying crones is [sic] one that has lived on in many different guises" (368). Hence, by the end of her work, the author makes an interesting connection between GDG productions and slasher films that would dominate the cinematic horror scene in the US in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Despite the minor flaws mentioned above, Young's book deserves attention. Partly academic (thanks to illuminating references to, for instance, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* and Jackie Byars's *All that Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama*), partly biographical, partly pure entertainment, *Crazy Old Ladies* is a worthy contribution to the studies of Grande Dame Guignol as a separate cinematic trend. "Above all," Young writes, "it's a celebration of some of the most iconic stars of the Golden Age of Hollywood" (5). As the reader quickly learns, this is not an unfounded claim.

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